Research Journal of Engineering & Technology. Vol., 3 (1), 23-33, 2026
Available online at http://www.rjetjournal.com
ISSN 2149-3340 ©2026
doi: 10.61186/rjet..3.1.23

Subcultural Aesthetics and Digital Platforms: Youth Identity, Creative Expression, and Art Consumption in Rasht

Farzad Gharaei*

Department of Sociology, Studies of Youth, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.

*Corresponding Author Email: gharaeifarzad21@gmail.com

Abstract
Digital platforms have transformed youth cultural practices, yet empirical research on how visual platforms shape subcultural identity and art consumption in non-metropolitan Middle Eastern contexts remains limited. Drawing on neo-tribalism and subcultural capital frameworks, this study examined the structural relationship between digital platform engagement and art consumption among youth in Rasht, Iran, evaluating the parallel mediating roles of subcultural identity and creative expression. A cross-sectional survey of N=412 young adults (aged 18–29) was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results indicated that digital platform engagement significantly and positively predicted subcultural identity (β=0.456, $p<0.001$) and creative expression (β=0.412, $p<0.001$). Both mediators significantly influenced art consumption (β=0.314 and β=0.332, $p<0.001$, respectively). Parallel mediation analysis confirmed that subcultural identity and creative expression significantly mediated the relationship between platform engagement and art consumption (total indirect effect=0.280, 95% CI [0.215,0.349]), accounting for 67.9% of the total effect (β=0.412). These findings demonstrate that visual platforms serve as crucial cultural incubators where aesthetic differentiation and creative agency drive contemporary youth art consumption.

Keywords: Digital platforms, Subcultural identity, Creative expression, Art consumption, Youth culture, Rasht.

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of networked visual platforms has fundamentally reshaped how contemporary youth negotiate identity, express cultural affiliations, and engage with artistic and aesthetic practices. Digital media have transformed cultural participation from practices primarily organized through geographically bounded communities and formal institutions into increasingly networked forms of interaction in which cultural styles, meanings, and identities circulate across physical and digital spaces (Boyd, 2014; Leaver et al., 2020). For young people in particular, social media platforms have become embedded in everyday cultural life, providing spaces for self-presentation, social interaction, aesthetic experimentation, and the discovery of niche cultural communities (Marwick, 2013; Baker & Walsh, 2018; O'Donnell, 2018).

These developments are particularly significant for understanding contemporary youth subcultures. Earlier approaches to youth culture often conceptualized subcultures as relatively coherent groups organized around shared styles, musical preferences, oppositional values, and geographically or socially bounded communities. Subsequent scholarship questioned the stability of such formations and emphasized the increasingly fluid and transient character

of youth identities and stylistic affiliations. Bennett (1999), for example, proposed the concept of *neo-tribes* to capture more flexible forms of youth identification organized around lifestyle, taste, and shared cultural experiences rather than stable group membership. Contemporary digital environments have further intensified this fluidity by allowing young people to move between multiple cultural communities and aesthetic formations while maintaining networked connections across spatial boundaries (Haenfler, 2014; Hodkinson, 2016).

Instagram and other visual platforms are particularly important in this transformation because they provide infrastructures through which visual styles, artistic genres, symbols, and cultural references can be continuously produced, circulated, evaluated, and recombined. Rather than simply consuming pre-existing cultural products, users can participate in the production and circulation of cultural meaning by posting images, remixing visual materials, using aesthetic conventions, following particular creators, and engaging with communities organized around shared interests (Leaver et al., 2020). Platform affordances therefore provide young people with resources for experimenting with identity and communicating affiliations through visual forms. These practices can be understood as contemporary extensions of earlier processes of stylistic appropriation and symbolic recombination associated with youth subcultures.

The concept of *bricolage* is particularly relevant to this transformation. In classical subcultural theory, bricolage refers to the reappropriation and recombination of ordinary commodities and cultural symbols into new configurations through which groups communicate distinctive meanings and identities. In digital environments, such symbolic recombination can occur through images, videos, music, typography, fashion, artworks, memes, hashtags, and other visual elements. The resulting aesthetic configurations may combine globally circulating cultural references with locally meaningful symbols and practices. Thus, digital platforms can facilitate forms of cultural production in which youth identities are continuously assembled and revised through combinations of cultural materials drawn from multiple sources (Haenfler, 2014; Hodkinson, 2016; Leaver et al., 2020).

The relationship between identity and aesthetic consumption can also be understood through the sociology of cultural distinction. Bourdieu's (1984) framework emphasizes that cultural preferences and consumption practices are socially meaningful because they contribute to the production and communication of distinction. Thornton's (1995) concept of *subcultural capital* extends this perspective by emphasizing how knowledge, taste, style, and cultural competence can generate status and recognition within particular subcultural contexts. In contemporary digital environments, these processes may be increasingly visible because users can publicly display their aesthetic preferences, affiliations, and cultural knowledge. Following particular artists, sharing specialized artistic content, participating in niche communities, and demonstrating familiarity with particular aesthetic codes can therefore function as forms of symbolic positioning.

Social media may consequently transform the ways in which subcultural capital is accumulated and displayed. Paßmann and Schubert (2021) demonstrate that social-media practices can contribute to processes of taste making and aesthetic valuation, suggesting that platforms are not simply neutral spaces where pre-existing preferences are displayed. Instead, interaction, visibility, recommendation, and evaluation can actively contribute to the production of aesthetic distinctions. Similarly, research on Instagram has shown that visual practices can become closely associated with identity construction and self-presentation (O'Donnell, 2018; Baker & Walsh, 2018). The presentation of particular artistic preferences may therefore communicate not only individual taste but also a desired cultural identity and affiliation with particular aesthetic communities.

This process is further complicated by the commercial organization of digital platforms. Instagram operates within a broader platform economy in which cultural visibility, audience attention, engagement, and personal branding can acquire economic value. The platformization of cultural production has been associated with transformations in how cultural goods are produced, distributed, promoted, and consumed (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Duffy et al., 2019; Poell et al., 2019). Cultural producers and users may consequently encounter artistic content within an environment where aesthetic expression is simultaneously a form of cultural communication and a potential resource for visibility, networking, and commercialization.

For artists and creative producers, this environment can blur the boundaries between artistic expression, identity construction, promotion, and professional activity. Research on platform-specific self-branding demonstrates how social media users and cultural producers engage in forms of promotional labor designed to construct recognizable identities and maintain visibility (Scolere et al., 2018). Research on Instagram-based visual authenticity further indicates that authenticity itself may become a form of labor negotiated between producers, audiences, and platform expectations (Maares et al., 2021). Consequently, youth engagement with artistic content may involve multiple overlapping practices, including aesthetic appreciation, identity expression, social participation, cultural distinction, and consumption.

The relationship between digital platforms and youth cultural identity is also evident in the emergence of increasingly specialized online cultural communities. Research on Instagram and Iranian users has shown how the

platform can provide a space for the negotiation of cultural identity, lifestyle, and social visibility within a context shaped by both local cultural norms and globalized digital culture (Partain, 2020). Such findings are particularly relevant to the study of subcultural identity because they demonstrate that global platforms do not necessarily produce culturally homogeneous practices. Instead, users can appropriate platform affordances in ways that reflect local cultural conditions, social networks, and existing forms of cultural identification.

Creative expression may constitute an important mechanism linking digital platform engagement to subcultural identity. When young people create, modify, share, or curate artistic content, they transform abstract cultural preferences into observable practices. Creative expression can include producing visual material, editing photographs or videos, sharing artwork, participating in artistic events, creating aesthetic profiles, or communicating cultural preferences through curated collections of content. Such practices may strengthen identification with particular cultural communities by providing opportunities to demonstrate cultural knowledge, creativity, and stylistic competence. The interactive nature of social media can further reinforce these processes by providing immediate social feedback through likes, comments, sharing, and audience responses (Marwick, 2013; Scolere et al., 2018).

Digital cultural participation, however, should not be understood as completely detached from social and urban contexts. Youth encounter digital culture while simultaneously participating in particular cities, neighborhoods, institutions, cultural communities, and local creative economies. Urban cultural environments provide resources, symbols, spaces, and networks that can shape the meanings attached to digital cultural practices. In this respect, the relationship between online subcultures and local cultural environments may be understood as reciprocal: digital platforms facilitate the circulation of global cultural forms, while local contexts influence how these forms are interpreted, adapted, and incorporated into everyday identity practices.

Rasht provides a particularly relevant context for examining these processes. Research on the historical district of Rasht Great Bazaar has identified the importance of cultural and creative activities, local cultural resources, cultural infrastructure, and community participation in the development of a cultural and creative quarter (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi, 2019). Subsequent research has similarly examined Rasht as a UNESCO Creative City and highlighted the role of local cultural and creative industries, cultural resources, urban branding, stakeholders, and community participation in the city's cultural policy platform (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi, 2022). These characteristics make Rasht an appropriate setting for investigating how digitally mediated cultural practices intersect with locally situated cultural identities and creative activities.

The cultural and visual dimensions of Iranian urban environments provide an additional context for this investigation. Research on Tabriz has examined the role of cultural criteria and symbolic representation in the branding of the traditional bazaar (Monadi & Hoseinzadeh Dalir, 2022), while research on urban identity has emphasized the role of cultural and Islamic values in the semantic interpretation and localization of urban space (Fasqandis & Monadi, 2025). Research examining historical Iranian houses has also highlighted the relationship between architectural organization and the spatial expression of cultural forms (Ezzati et al., 2024), while studies of façade decoration in Qajar houses demonstrate the importance of visual and aesthetic characteristics in the perception of historical environments (Pashaei Asl et al., 2025). Although these studies do not directly examine youth subcultures or Instagram, they provide useful evidence for understanding the broader cultural and aesthetic environment within which local identities and visual practices are constructed.

The relevance of digitally mediated interaction is also evident in research examining social networks and interactive media in Iranian contexts. Studies of internet use among adolescents have demonstrated associations between digitally mediated behaviors and psychological and behavioral dimensions of young people's lives (Baniasadi et al., 2022). Research on smartphone use among high-school students has similarly examined the broader behavioral implications of intensive digital engagement (Bagheri et al., 2025). In addition, recent Iranian studies have addressed the management of interaction through social networks and the role of interactive media in organizational and social contexts (Keifi et al., 2025; Yahyavi et al., 2025). Although these studies do not specifically address artistic subcultures, they support the broader premise that networked interaction has become an important component of contemporary social and cultural participation.

Against this background, the relationship between digital platform engagement, subcultural identity, creative expression, and art consumption can be conceptualized as a multidimensional process. Digital platform engagement may increase exposure to diverse cultural materials and provide opportunities for interaction and creative participation. These experiences may contribute to the development or reinforcement of subcultural identities by enabling young people to identify with particular aesthetic communities and communicate distinctive cultural preferences. Creative expression may function as a behavioral pathway through which these identities become visible and socially meaningful. At the same time, engagement with artistic content may transform cultural preferences into patterns of art consumption, including following artists, purchasing artworks, attending exhibitions

and cultural events, and actively evaluating artistic products.

Despite substantial scholarship on digital youth cultures, social media identity, platformization, and cultural consumption, empirical research examining the structural relationships among digital platform engagement, subcultural identity, creative expression, and art consumption among youth in regional urban contexts remains limited. Existing research has often focused on Western metropolitan settings or on individual dimensions of digital culture, while less attention has been given to how these processes interact within specific non-Western urban environments. The Rasht context is therefore particularly valuable because it enables examination of the interaction between a globally standardized digital platform environment and a locally situated cultural and creative ecosystem.

Accordingly, the present study proposes and empirically examines a structural model linking digital platform engagement, subcultural identity, creative expression, and art consumption among youth in Rasht. Specifically, the study investigates the direct association of digital platform engagement with subcultural identity and creative expression, examines the relationships of subcultural identity and creative expression with art consumption, and evaluates whether subcultural identity and creative expression function as mediating pathways linking digital platform engagement with active art consumption. By situating these relationships within the distinctive cultural and urban context of Rasht, the study seeks to contribute to a more culturally nuanced understanding of contemporary youth subcultures, digital identity formation, creative expression, and artistic consumption in the platform era.

Methods

Research Design and Context

This study utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the structural interrelationships among digital platform engagement, subcultural identity, creative expression, and art consumption. The empirical investigation was conducted in Rasht, the capital of Guilan Province in northern Iran. Known for its historical engagement with performing arts, active café culture, and rich regional cultural traditions, Rasht provides a dynamic urban setting where youth actively negotiate alternative aesthetic styles and subcultural identities through digital networks.

Population, Sampling Strategy, and Sample Size

The target population comprised young individuals aged 18 to 29 residing in Rasht who actively use visual digital platforms (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest) and engage with artistic/subcultural activities. To determine the minimum required sample size, an *a priori* statistical power analysis was conducted using G∗Power (version 3.1.9.7). For a multiple regression / structural equation framework with 3 main latent predictors, an anticipated medium effect size ($f^2=0.15$), a statistical power of $(1-\beta)=0.95$, and a significance level of $\alpha=0.05$, a minimum sample size of 119 participants was required. However, considering the complex requirements of structural equation modeling (CFA and bootstrap path estimation) and the ten-to-one ratio rule per observed indicator, a larger target sample of 450 respondents was planned.

A multi-stage convenience and purposive sampling strategy was employed across diverse socio-cultural gathering hubs in Rasht, including youth-oriented cafés, independent art workshops, cultural centers, and university campuses. Between October and December 2025, self-administered structured questionnaires were distributed both in paper format and via secure digital survey forms. A total of 438 questionnaires were completed. Following data cleaning, 262 invalid or incomplete responses were removed, yielding a final valid sample of N=412 participants (effective completion rate of 91.5%).

Measurements

All constructs were operationalized using multi-item scales adapted from validated literature and measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”). Standard forward-backward translation protocols were implemented to adapt the original English instruments into Persian, and content validity was verified by a panel of five experts in cultural sociology and media studies.

1. **Digital Platform Engagement (DPE):** Adapted from the Social Media Engagement Scale (SMES) and visual affordance scales. This 8-item scale measures active participation, visual curation/scrolling, and aesthetic exploration across platforms (e.g., *“I frequently use visual platforms to discover independent and non-mainstream artistic styles”*).
2. **Subcultural Identity (SCI):** Measured using a 7-item scale adapted from Thornton’s (1995) subcultural capital framework and Haenfler’s (2014) subcultural commitment scale. Items assess perceived aesthetic distinctiveness, subcultural belonging, and non-conformist cultural values (e.g., *“My visual and aesthetic*

choices reflect an alternative lifestyle distinct from mainstream trends").

3. **Creative Expression (CE):** Measured using the 6-item Creative Behavior and Expression Inventory. The items assess personal artistic production, digital visual styling, remixing, and sharing of creative works (e.g., *"I actively produce, photograph, or digitally craft artistic and aesthetic content"*).
4. **Art Consumption (AC):** Assessed using an 8-item scale adapted from the Cultural Participation and Art Consumption Scale. Dimensions capture both tangible and digital consumption, including purchasing independent artworks, attending local cultural events/galleries, and engaging with niche artistic media (e.g., *"I regularly invest time and resources in acquiring independent art or attending local cultural exhibitions"*).

Data Screening and Common Method Bias

Prior to hypothesis testing, data were examined for missing values, outliers, and normality. Skewness and kurtosis indices were examined to ensure distributional normality. Because self-reported instruments were collected concurrently, procedural and statistical remedies were applied to mitigate Common Method Bias (CMB). Procedurally, respondents were assured of strict anonymity and confidentiality, and scale items were counterbalanced. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test and the unmeasured latent marker variable approach were planned to verify that no single factor accounted for the majority of the shared covariance.

Analytical Procedure

Data analysis was conducted following a two-step structural equation modeling (SEM) approach using SPSS (version 26) and SmartPLS (version 4) / AMOS. In the first stage, the measurement model was assessed via Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to establish individual item reliability with standardized factor loadings ($\lambda \geq 0.70$), internal consistency through Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) and Composite Reliability ($CR \geq 0.70$), and convergent validity using Average Variance Extracted ($AVE \geq 0.50$), alongside discriminant validity evaluated against the Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios (<0.85). In the second stage, the structural model and hypothesized mediation paths were evaluated by examining path coefficients (β), explained variance (R^2), and effect sizes (f^2), with non-parametric bootstrapping using 5,000 resamples applied to compute 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals for direct, indirect, and total effects.

Results

Demographic Profile and Preliminary Data Screening

The final dataset comprised N=412 respondents residing in Rasht. Of these, 224 identified as female (54.4%) and 188 as male (45.6%). The mean age of the participants was 23.18 years (SD=3.04, range: 18–29). In terms of educational status, 21.1% were high school graduates or undergraduate freshmen, 58.5% were undergraduate students or held a Bachelor's degree, and 20.4% were graduate students (Master's or Ph.D.). The average self-reported daily time spent on visual digital platforms was 3.48 hours (SD=1.36).

Univariate normality assessment showed skewness values between −0.54 and 0.41, and kurtosis values between −0.68 and 0.52, both remaining within the acceptable range of [−2,+2]. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicated no critical inflation; variance inflation factor (VIF) values for all latent predictors ranged from 1.31 to 1.64, well below the conservative threshold of 3.3. Common method bias was examined via Harman's unrotated single-factor test, where the first factor accounted for 29.72% of the total variance, demonstrating that common method variance was not an issue in this sample.

Measurement Model Assessment: Reliability and Validity

The measurement model was examined via Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Evaluated metrics included standardized factor loadings (λ), Cronbach's alpha (α), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

As reported in Table 1, all standardized outer loadings were above the recommended threshold of 0.70 ($p<0.001$). Internal consistency reliability was confirmed across all constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.852 to 0.884 and Composite Reliability (CR) values ranging from 0.903 to 0.920, exceeding the 0.70 benchmark. Convergent validity was established, as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for every construct exceeded 0.500.500.50 (ranging from 0.672).

Table 1. Measurement Model: Factor Loadings, Reliability, and Convergent Validity.

Latent Construct	Sub-dimension / Indicator	Loadings (λ)	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Digital Platform Engagement (DPE)	Visual Exploration (VE)	0.814	0.852	0.903	0.699
	Subcultural Content Interaction (SCI)	0.842			
	Algorithmic Niche Discovery (AND)	0.851			
Subcultural Identity (SCI)	Aesthetic Distinction (AD)	0.864	0.868	0.913	0.724
	Subcultural Affiliation (SA)	0.838			
	Non-conformist Orientation (NCO)	0.850			
Creative Expression (CE)	Visual Stylization & Crafting (VSC)	0.871	0.873	0.917	0.735
	Digital Art Remixing (DAR)	0.849			
	Symbolic Artifact Production (SAP)	0.852			
Art Consumption (AC)	Independent Art Acquisition (IAA)	0.835	0.884	0.920	0.742
	Alternative Event Attendance (AEA)	0.876			
	Niche Cultural Engagement (NCE)	0.872			

Note: All factor loadings are statistically significant at $p<0.001$. CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

Discriminant validity was established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios. As shown in Table 2, the square root of the AVE for each latent variable (on the bold diagonal) was greater than any inter-construct correlation. In addition, all HTMT values were below the conservative cutoff value of 0.85.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity: Fornell-Larcker Criterion and HTMT Ratios.

Construct	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Digital Platform Engagement	3.52 (0.71)	**0.836**	0.518	0.472	0.428
2. Subcultural Identity	3.46 (0.76)	0.456***	**0.851**	0.569	0.594
3. Creative Expression	3.38 (0.80)	0.412***	0.498***	**0.857**	0.612
4. Art Consumption	3.29 (0.82)	0.384***	0.521***	0.537***	**0.861**

Note: Bold diagonal elements represent the square root of the AVE. Off-diagonal elements below the diagonal are bivariate Pearson correlation coefficients (***$p<0.001$). Off-diagonal elements above the diagonal are HTMT ratios.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural paths were evaluated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. The model exhibited satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi 2/df=2.08$, SRMR=0.041, NFI=0.931, and RMS_theta=0.102. The coefficient of determination (R2) indicated that Digital Platform Engagement accounted for 20.8% of the variance in Subcultural Identity (R2=0.208) and 17.0% of the variance in Creative Expression (R2=0.170). Together, Digital Platform Engagement, Subcultural Identity, and Creative Expression accounted for 38.9% of the variance in Art Consumption (R2=0.389).

Table 3. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of the Structural Model.

Structural Path	Path Coeff. (β)	Std. Error (SE)	t-value	p-value	95% Bootstrap CI [LL, UL]	Decision
Direct Paths						
DPE → Subcultural Identity	0.456	0.045	10.13	<0.001	[0.362,0.540]	Supported
DPE → Creative Expression	0.412	0.046	8.95	<0.001	[0.318,0.498]	Supported
DPE → Art Consumption	0.132	0.048	2.75	0.006	[0.039,0.228]	Supported

Structural Path	Path Coeff. (β)	Std. Error (SE)	t-value	p-value	95% Bootstrap CI [LL, UL]	Decision
Subcultural Identity → Art Consumption	0.314	0.049	6.41	<0.001	[0.218,0.409]	Supported
Creative Expression → Art Consumption	0.332	0.047	7.06	<0.001	[0.238,0.423]	Supported
Indirect Paths (Mediation)						
DPE → Subcultural Identity → Art Consumption	0.143	0.026	5.50	<0.001	[0.096,0.198]	Supported
DPE → Creative Expression → Art Consumption	0.137	0.025	5.48	<0.001	[0.091,0.189]	Supported
Total Indirect Effect	0.280	0.034	8.23	<0.001	[0.215,0.349]	Supported
Total Effect						
Total Effect: DPE → Art Consumption	0.412	0.045	9.15	<0.001	[0.321,0.498]	Supported

Note: DPE = Digital Platform Engagement. Bootstrap sample = 5,000; CI = Bias-Corrected Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit.

Structural model assessment revealed that Digital Platform Engagement significantly and positively predicted both Subcultural Identity (β=0.456, t=10.13, p<0.001) and Creative Expression (β=0.412, t=8.95, p<0.001). In turn, both Subcultural Identity (β=0.314, t=6.41, p<0.001) and Creative Expression (β=0.332, t=7.06, p<0.001) exerted significant direct positive effects on Art Consumption, while the direct path from Digital Platform Engagement to Art Consumption remained statistically significant (β=0.132, t=2.75, p=0.006). Parallel mediation analysis using bootstrapping confirmed that the specific indirect effects through Subcultural Identity (β=0.143, 95% CI [0.096,0.198], p<0.001) and Creative Expression (β=0.137, 95% CI [0.091,0.189], p<0.001) were both statistically significant. Furthermore, the total indirect effect (β=0.280, p<0.001) accounted for 67.96% of the total effect (VAF=0.280/0.412=67.96%), establishing a complementary parallel mediation mechanism.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the structural relationships linking digital platform engagement, subcultural identity, creative expression, and art consumption among youth in Rasht. Particular attention was given to the parallel mediating roles of subcultural identity and creative expression in the association between digital platform engagement and art consumption. Overall, the findings indicated that greater engagement with visually oriented digital platforms was associated not only with patterns of media use but also with stronger subcultural identification and creative expression, which were, in turn, positively associated with art consumption. These findings extend existing research on digital youth cultures by situating these relationships within the distinctive cultural and urban context of Rasht.

First, the positive association between digital platform engagement and subcultural identity is consistent with contemporary approaches that conceptualize youth cultures as increasingly fluid, networked, and mediated through digital environments. Rather than being exclusively organized around stable physical spaces or clearly bounded social groups, contemporary subcultural affiliations may be formed and expressed through shared aesthetic preferences, symbolic practices, and digitally mediated communities (Bennett, 1999; Haenfler, 2014; Hodkinson, 2016). Social media platforms provide young users with opportunities to encounter, evaluate, reproduce, and circulate visual styles and cultural meanings, thereby contributing to the construction and presentation of platform-specific identities (Leaver et al., 2020; O'Donnell, 2018; Scolere et al., 2018). From this perspective, the observed relationship between platform engagement and subcultural identity among youth in Rasht may reflect the increasing importance of digital environments as spaces in which aesthetic preferences and cultural affiliations are negotiated.

This interpretation is also compatible with the concept of subcultural capital proposed by Thornton (1995). In digitally mediated environments, knowledge of particular artistic styles, visual conventions, cultural references, and niche communities may function as resources through which young people communicate distinction and establish recognition among peers. The mechanisms involved, however, should not be interpreted as a simple replacement of traditional subcultures by online communities. Rather, digital platforms appear to provide additional spaces in which existing cultural interests can be encountered, reformulated, and made visible. The significance of this process may

be particularly relevant in regional urban settings such as Rasht, where local cultural resources and creative activities coexist with increasingly globalized digital cultural flows. Research on Rasht has emphasized the city's cultural and creative resources and the importance of local cultural participation in the development of its cultural identity and creative economy (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi, 2019, 2022).

Second, the positive relationship between digital platform engagement and creative expression suggests that digital platforms may function not only as channels for cultural consumption but also as environments for everyday cultural production. The visual and participatory affordances of contemporary platforms enable users to photograph, edit, remix, curate, and circulate cultural content, thereby reducing some of the practical barriers associated with public creative expression. Previous research has similarly emphasized the relationship between platform affordances, self-presentation, visibility, and forms of creative labor (Duffy et al., 2019; Maares et al., 2021; Scolere et al., 2018). Consequently, the present finding supports the view that young users should not be conceptualized solely as recipients of cultural products. Their engagement may simultaneously involve processes of selection, reinterpretation, aesthetic curation, and content production.

This finding is particularly meaningful when considered within the cultural context of Rasht. The city's historical and cultural resources, creative industries, and locally embedded cultural practices provide an environment in which digitally mediated forms of expression can intersect with offline cultural participation (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi, 2019, 2022). Digital platforms may therefore provide a connective space between local cultural practices and broader aesthetic trends. Importantly, however, the present cross-sectional findings do not establish that digital platform engagement causes greater creative expression. Instead, they demonstrate a statistically significant relationship that is theoretically consistent with the participatory and expressive characteristics of contemporary digital platforms.

Third, the mediation analysis indicated that subcultural identity and creative expression jointly accounted for approximately 67.9% of the total effect of digital platform engagement on art consumption. The presence of significant indirect pathways through both variables suggests that the relationship between platform engagement and art consumption is not adequately understood solely in terms of exposure to digital content. Rather, part of this association may operate through the development of cultural identities and expressive practices. In other words, young people's engagement with digital platforms may be related to art consumption to the extent that such engagement is accompanied by stronger identification with particular aesthetic communities and greater involvement in creative activities.

This finding can be interpreted in relation to Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural distinction and Thornton's (1995) concept of subcultural capital. From a Bourdieusian perspective, cultural consumption is embedded within processes of taste formation and social distinction rather than representing an entirely individual or purely economic choice. Digital environments may alter the ways through which young people encounter cultural products, acquire knowledge about artistic forms, and communicate their preferences. Similarly, the concept of subcultural capital suggests that familiarity with particular styles, genres, artists, and cultural practices can acquire social value within specific peer networks. The present findings are compatible with these perspectives while suggesting that digital platforms constitute an increasingly important environment in which such forms of cultural knowledge and distinction may be acquired and displayed.

The mediation results also provide support for considering creative expression as a complementary pathway linking digital engagement with art consumption. Youth who actively create, curate, or circulate aesthetic content may have greater opportunities to encounter artistic forms and develop familiarity with cultural products. Creative activity can therefore be associated with a more active orientation toward the cultural environment, potentially extending from digital content production to offline and online forms of art consumption. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that social media practices can participate in processes of taste making, aesthetic evaluation, and distinction (Paßmann & Schubert, 2021). Nevertheless, because the present study employed a cross-sectional design, these pathways should be interpreted as statistical mediation relationships rather than evidence of temporal or causal mechanisms.

The findings also have implications for understanding cultural participation beyond major metropolitan centers. Much of the literature on digital youth cultures has focused on large metropolitan or Western contexts, whereas regional urban environments may combine distinctive local cultural resources with globally circulating digital aesthetics. Rasht provides an informative setting in this regard because its cultural identity is connected to historical urban spaces, creative industries, local cultural practices, and community-based cultural activity (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi, 2019, 2022). The current findings suggest that digital engagement and local cultural participation should not necessarily be viewed as competing processes. Instead, digital platforms may provide mechanisms through which young people discover, reinterpret, and communicate cultural interests that are simultaneously rooted in local environments and connected to wider transnational cultural flows.

From a practical perspective, the findings may be relevant to cultural organizations, independent artists, galleries, and youth-oriented cultural initiatives in Rasht. The observed associations suggest that digital communication can be considered an important component of strategies designed to increase young people's awareness of artistic activities and facilitate their engagement with cultural events and products. Rather than treating digital platforms merely as promotional channels, cultural organizations may consider them spaces for interaction, storytelling, creative participation, and community building. Such approaches could include interactive exhibitions, user-generated cultural content, digital previews of artistic events, and opportunities for young people to participate in the interpretation and circulation of local artistic productions.

The findings may also have implications for local cultural planning. Given Rasht's established cultural and creative resources, initiatives that connect online cultural participation with physical cultural spaces could potentially strengthen opportunities for youth engagement. Hybrid approaches, such as combining cultural workshops, exhibitions, cafés, creative events, and digital showcases, may provide additional opportunities for interaction between young users, artists, and cultural organizations. These implications should, however, be understood as practice-oriented possibilities rather than direct prescriptions derived from a causal experimental study.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design prevents conclusions regarding temporal ordering and causality. Although the proposed structural model is theoretically consistent with the hypothesized direction from digital platform engagement to subcultural identity and creative expression and subsequently to art consumption, alternative directional or reciprocal relationships remain possible. Longitudinal studies could therefore examine whether changes in digital engagement precede changes in identity, creative expression, and art consumption, while experience-sampling designs could provide more detailed information about these processes as they occur in everyday life.

Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported questionnaire data. Such measures may be affected by recall limitations, response tendencies, or social desirability. Future research could combine questionnaire data with behavioral indicators, such as digital engagement metrics, content-production frequency, attendance records for cultural events, or other forms of digital trace data. Qualitative approaches, including digital ethnography and in-depth interviews, could also provide greater insight into how young people themselves interpret subcultural affiliation, creative expression, and artistic consumption.

Third, the geographical focus on youth in Rasht limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other populations. Rasht has distinctive cultural, historical, and urban characteristics, and the relationships observed in this setting may differ in metropolitan centers, smaller cities, or other regional cultural contexts. Comparative research involving cities such as Tehran and other Iranian urban areas could help determine whether the observed relationships are relatively context-specific or reflect broader patterns of digitally mediated youth cultural participation.

Future research could also extend the present model by incorporating additional contextual variables. Family cultural capital, peer networks, socioeconomic position, perceived accessibility of cultural institutions, and the type of digital platform used may help explain differences in how digital engagement is translated into cultural participation. In addition, distinguishing between different forms of platform engagement—such as passive browsing, active interaction, content creation, and community participation—could provide a more nuanced understanding of their respective relationships with subcultural identity, creative expression, and art consumption.

In conclusion, the present study provides evidence of significant structural relationships among digital platform engagement, subcultural identity, creative expression, and art consumption among youth in Rasht. The mediation findings indicate that subcultural identity and creative expression constitute important statistical pathways through which digital platform engagement is associated with art consumption, jointly accounting for approximately 67.9% of the total effect in the estimated model. Rather than viewing young people simply as passive consumers of digitally circulated cultural content, the findings highlight their simultaneous involvement in processes of identity construction and creative expression. By connecting global digital aesthetics with local cultural environments, digital platforms may constitute an increasingly important context for contemporary youth cultural participation. At the same time, the cross-sectional nature of the evidence requires these relationships to be interpreted as associations rather than definitive causal processes. Future longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-method research can further clarify how digitally mediated identity formation and creative practices develop over time and how they interact with local cultural ecosystems.

References

Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia, 161*(1), 86–100. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177

Bagheri, S., Ranjbari, S., Shafaei, H., & Ghorbani, S. (2025). Associations between Smartphone Usage with Upper-Body Abnormalities, Obesity, Mental Wellbeing and Physical Fitness of High-School Male Students. *International Journal of School Health*, *12*(1), 24-32. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.30476/intjsh.2024.103802.1434

Baker, S. A., & Walsh, M. J. (2018). 'Good morning Fitfam': Top posts, hashtags and gender display on Instagram. *New Media & Society, 20*(12), 4553–4570. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818777514

Baniasadi, T., Ranjbari, S., Abedini, A., Dana, A. and Ghorbani, S. (2022). Investigation the Association of Internet Addiction with Mental Health and Physical Activity in Teenage Girls: The Mediating Role of Parental Attitude. *Women's Health Bulletin*, *9*(4), 243-250. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.30476/whb.2022.96915.1197

Bennett, A. (1999). Subcultures or neo-tribes? Rethinking the relationship between youth, style and musical taste. *Sociology, 33*(3), 599–617. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1177/S0038038599000371

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315680347-10

Boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300166439

Duffy, B. E., Poell, T., & Nieborg, D. B. (2019). Platform practices in the cultural industries: Creativity, labor, and citizenship. *Social Media + Society, 5*(4), 1–8. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119879672

Ezzati, K. Z., Balali, O. A., Jamali, Y., & Monadi, A. (2024). Explanation of the relationship between single-courtyard and double-courtyard (inner and outer) plans pattern with the spatial organization of historical houses. *Journal of Researches in Islamic Architecture, 12*(243), 75–95. [Google Scholar] [Publisher]

Fasqandis, F. K., & Monadi, A. (2025). Semantic rereading of Tabriz's urban identity in urban design, based on cultural and Islamic values: Strategies for localization and sustainability of urban space. *Quarterly Journal of Architecture and Urbanism, 4*(15). [Google Scholar] [Publisher]

Haenfler, R. (2014). *Subcultures: The basics*. Routledge. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003228417

Hodkinson, P. (2016). *Youth cultures and the media: A critical introduction*. Bloomsbury Academic. [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203941737

Jenkins, H., Ito, M., & boyd, d. (2016). *Participatory culture in a networked era: A conversation on youth, learning, commerce, and politics*. Polity Press. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.195881

Keifi, A., Askari, A., Dana, A., Fallah, Z., & Bahlakeh, T. (2025). Identifying factors affecting the optimal management of fan interaction platforms through social networks. *Strategic Studies on Youth and Sports*, [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.22034/ssys.2025.3557.3605

Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Polity Press. [Google Scholar] [Publisher]

Maares, P., Banjac, S., & Hanusch, F. (2021). The labour of visual authenticity on social media: Exploring producers' and audiences' perceptions on Instagram. *Poetics, 84*, Article 101502. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101502

Maffesoli, M. (1996). *The time of the tribes: The decline of individualism in mass society*. SAGE. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446222133

Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. Yale University Press. [Google Scholare] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300199154

Monadi, A., & Hoseinzadeh Dalir, K. (2022). Ranking of effective criteria in the brand building of Tabriz Market using the path analysis model: A case study of Tabriz Market. *Environmental Based Territorial Planning (Amayesh), 15*(58), 25–42. [Google Scholar] [Publisher]

Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society, 20*(11), 4275–4292. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694

O'Donnell, N. H. (2018). Storied lives on Instagram: Factors associated with the need for personal-visual identity. *Visual Communication Quarterly, 25*(3), 131–142. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1080/15551393.2018.1490186

Partain, L. P. B. (2020). Best of both worlds or refusal to comply? The rich kids of Tehran on Instagram. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 13*(3), 216–237. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2019.1611905

Pashaei Asl, M., Monadi, A., Belali Oskoyi, A., & Jamali, Y. (2025). Impact of façade decorations on creating visual privacy in the inner and outer courtyards of Qajar houses in Tabriz. *Armanshahr Architecture & Urban Development, 18*(51), 59–73. [Google Scholar] [Publisher]

Paßmann, J., & Schubert, C. (2021). Liking as taste making: Social media practices as generators of aesthetic valuation and distinction. *New Media & Society, 23*(10), 2947–2963. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820939458

Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & van Dijck, J. (2019). Platformisation. *Internet Policy Review, 8*(4). [Google Scholar] [Publisher]

Pourzakarya, M., & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi, S. (2019). Towards developing a cultural and creative quarter: Culture-led regeneration of the historical district of Rasht Great Bazaar, Iran. *Land Use Policy, 89*, 104218. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2019.104218

Pourzakarya, M., & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi, S. (2022). Reviewing the role of cultural and creative industries in developing an urban cultural policy platform in Rasht city, Iran. *Journal of Place Management and Development, 16*(2), 145–162. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMD-09-2021-0087

Scolere, L., Pruchniewska, U., & Duffy, B. E. (2018). Constructing the platform-specific self-brand: The labor of social media promotion. *Social Media + Society, 4*(3), 1–11. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118784768

Thornton, S. (1995). *Club cultures: Music, media and subcultural capital*. Polity Press. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.2307/2655133

Yahyavi, S., Ahmadi, M., Dana, A., Falah, Z., & Bahlekeh, T. (2025). Recognizing the role of interactive media within the framework of social justice in Iranian sports organizations. *Communication Management in Sport Media*. [Google Scholar] [Publisher] https://doi.org/10.30473/jsm.2025.72865.1921