

Personal Statement

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Growing up in Turkey, my journey has been profoundly influenced by various factors, propelling me to pursue a graduate degree at the University of Michigan. As the daughter of a working mother, I initially assumed that career aspirations for women were universal. It was only later, as I observed that most of my friends' mothers were unemployed, that I became acutely aware of the prevalent gender inequalities in my country. The revelation about my mother's profession as a medical doctor sparked curiosity in those around me, prompting me to question societal expectations and the reasons behind it. I began cultivating a sense of responsibility to address these disparities and become an example of a successful woman.

My decision to pursue an academic career became stronger upon enrolling at Middle East Technical University, which exposed me to a community of exceptionally talented faculty and students, highlighting the transformative impact of one's academic surroundings. Balancing my ambition to prove myself as a woman with the pursuit of perfection in my endeavors, I faced a critical juncture where my ambition threatened to overshadow my passion for learning.

The turning point came through my involvement with Dolunay, a platform dedicated to empowering women, which a classmate and I started in my first year at METU. With the career events we hosted in Dolunay, my motivation derived more from genuine excitement and passion for the subject matter. Reflecting on my experiences, I recognized that my true joy lay in learning, problem-solving, and collaborative endeavors. During that period, I commenced my role as a research assistant at Bilkent University under the guidance of Professor Tolga Cukur. Our research focuses on diagnosing Autism Spectrum Disorder through the analysis of functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) images. During this time, I discerned a profound connection between my inherent interest in research and my commitment to contributing to the betterment of others.

To pursue my academic interests, I transferred to CU Boulder. I was accepted as a research assistant, contributing to a lab focused on autonomous systems where women comprised over half of the team, which was an enriching and distinctive experience. The knowledge I acquired in that setting and the enriching academic environment have heightened my ambition to pursue a career as a professor. Inspired by the exemplary model of Professor Sankaranarayanan, who adeptly combines fostering a conducive learning environment for students with conducting impactful research, I am motivated to emulate and contribute to such academic excellence.

My decision to pursue a graduate degree at the University of Michigan is a natural progression of this journey. The university's commitment to academic excellence, diverse community, and inclusive atmosphere align seamlessly with my aspirations. I am eager to contribute my unique

perspective and experiences while furthering my academic and professional development at the University of Michigan. This next chapter represents an opportunity to continue challenging gender norms, pursuing my passion for learning, and making a meaningful impact in the academic sphere.

As a prospective Ph.D. candidate at University of Michigan, I am enthusiastic about engaging in the intellectual community that UMich cultivates. I was involved in a lot of volunteer activities and communities during my undergraduate. After an exam, one of my classmates and I talked about how being a minority as women in our environment affects our development and we realized how important it is for women in our society to be self-confident and well-rounded. We wanted to take a step and start a social project named Dolunay three years ago (Eng: Full Moon, see @dolunaycollective on instagram). The purpose of this community is to provide an independent platform for women who want to discover their potential and improve themselves. We, as Dolunay, hosted over two hundred career talks and workshops in different disciplines and we reached more than a thousand women as our members and inspired them to find their path. I was responsible for hosting our career talks and contacting a senior college student/ graduate in my network to request a talk and connect them with people who seek to learn about their profession and life experiences. My ability to connect people with diverse backgrounds leads to the formation and maintenance of the Dolunay community. Last year after the earthquake in Turkey, we formed voluntary study groups and tutored/mentored hundreds of high school students and supervised them with the help of our friends we met in college. I individually spent hours to tutor and mentor more than ten students with whom I maintain contact with until now and helped them get into colleges that they dreamed of. UMich's commitment to equity, as evidenced by Society of Women Engineers (SWE), aligns seamlessly with my experiences and perspective.

During my college years at Middle East Technical University, I have been a board member of METU Book Club for three years, and we have a project named Kitabus (literal translation: book-bus). We set up libraries in public schools in the underdeveloped communities that have poor facilities. The primary purpose of our project is to provide reading books for such schools with lacking libraries, encourage children to enjoy reading, and raise their awareness about the importance of intellectual reading for their future careers. As the Kitabus Organization' administrator, I was responsible for collecting the books via social media campaigns and posters around the campus before going to planned schools. I have given a strong effort and contributed to various projects to benefit others and raise awareness in society.

I also attended the peer mentoring program started among Computer Engineering students at METU and mentored two freshmen when I was in my junior year. This is yet another reason why I want to pursue a graduate degree. Those earlier works reflected my strong desire to help and teach other students and the community through mentoring, teaching, and community engagement. It adds to my excitement about contributing to and learning from UMich's community.