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Hiding Dissent in Plain Sight: Political Participation of Microcelebrity Accounts on Turkish Twitter

by

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Abstract

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Microcelebrity involvement in politics has recently gained some attention in academic research but the emphasis is mainly on the microcelebrities that exist in settings where freedom of speech is protected. Whereas in settings like Turkey where explicit dissent is criminalised and denied public attention, digital spaces maintained by microcelebrities constitute an important site for dissident narratives gaining much needed visibility. At the same time, their visibility and reach put these accounts at a considerable risk of being detected and penalised by the authorities. In this thesis, I explore the ways Twitter microcelebrities partake in anti-government political talk on Turkish Twitter through an analysis of 97 microcelebrity accounts in the 3 months leading up to the 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections. This election period is particularly important as it took place under a state of emergency and during which the opposition parties were denied access to mass media, which meant that a large portion of political discourse was confined to online spaces.

I find that despite the staggering risks, Twitter microcelebrities consistently framed partaking in anti-government political talk during elections as a duty for all microcelebrity accounts due to their ability to command public attention. In doing so, they distanced themselves from specific political parties and created narratives that appeal to a politically diverse audience by placing the emphasis on their common aim of replacing the AKP government. In fulfilling this demanding task, to mitigate the risk of lending visibility to potentially incriminating content, these accounts disguised their criticisms behind a creative language relying on their internet culture literacy and the vernacular of the oppositional subcultures in Turkey. I argue that while microcelebrity accounts promote a politics of recognition among politically diverse audiences and create a space for strategic unity, these evasion strategies that increasingly inform the conventions of political talk in online spaces, inevitably create a divide by giving political agency exclusively to those who are “in on” these online conventions.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Naciye Ozlem Demirkol Tonnesen

Title of thesis: Hiding Dissent in Plain Sight: Political Participation of Microcelebrity Accounts on Turkish Twitter

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
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Demirkol Tonnesen, N. O., 2020. “Two Can Play at That Game”: Communicating Dissent as A Micro-Celebrity in A Restricted National Twittersphere. AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research, 2020.

Signature: ..... Date: ……..

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the strongest woman I know.

Mom, thanks for getting me here against all odds.

Acknowledgements

When I was 9, I promised myself that if I am ever on TV, receiving an award for some spectacular thing I achieved, I would thank this girl in my 3rd grade class who gave me a brochure and changed my life. This is not nearly as spectacular but here it goes, Busra, thank you for giving me that brochure.

I have a lot of people to thank for a lot of things, it would be an understatement to say that it took a village to get me here. In my country, people from my socio-economical background rarely finish a decent university, let alone write theses in English. I am here thanks to the kindness of people who believed in levelling the playing field. It all started with that brochure which was about a unique boarding school that ran by donations and provided free world-class education to underprivileged kids who lost a parent. Every year, the school would hold an exam and thousands of qualifying kids who finished 3rd grade would take their one shot at getting in. In 2001, I was one of those kids. So, I thank everyone who donated to and taught in my school Darussafaka, without you, I would be in a long-forgotten corner of Turkey, not knowing what could have been.

This thesis was written in a personally and globally turbulent time, illnesses and deaths of loved ones, a plague, a war, a foray of incompetent politicians, raging late-stage capitalism to list a few. I thank my supervisors, Valentina Cardo and Jussi Parikka for their endless guidance, support and understanding which got me through these past years. I would like to thank my colleagues and students in Southampton, KCL, Westminster, Bournemouth and Kristiania who made teaching, marking, supervising and research assistant-ing a joy and made me grow as a teacher and a researcher. Special thanks to Anna Feigenbaum, who picked me among the crowd when I was just an MA student and became my mentor, boss, research partner, climbing buddy, and dear friend. Thanks to all the conferences I attended and their attendees who listened to this project in its various stages and especially to AOIR where I feel most at home and proud to serve as a PGR representative.

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I am incredibly fortunate to have you all.

Definitions and Abbreviations

AKP ..... Justice and Development Party. AKP has been the governing party in Turkey since 2002.

CHP ..... Republican People's Party. The main opposition party with the second largest voter base in Turkey.

MHP ..... Nationalist Movement Party. A far-right ultranationalist party that is currently in an alliance with the AKP

HDP ..... Peoples' Democratic Party. A pro-minority party with a particular emphasis on Kurdish people's rights. They are known for their progressive and pluralist political stance.

Iyi Parti (IYIP)..... Good Party. A relatively new nationalist political party that is formed by MHP defectors who are against MHP's alliance with the AKP and embrace a more moderate form of nationalism than that of the MHP.

SP ..... Felicity Party. A far-right Islamist party.

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2013, I took part in the largest anti-government protest in Turkish history. This was also when I became an active Twitter user alongside many other protestors who opened their first Twitter account to partake in the Gezi Park protests (Tufekci, 2017). Twitter was the preferred channel of communication and I started following accounts that were active in the protest hashtags and slowly curated my own information network. We were together on the ground and together on Twitter. We were following things that were happening in other parts of the protest area or in other cities, we were sharing humorous tweets with each other for comic relief, and we were recommending each other accounts to follow who wrote good tweets and shared important information. Through these exchanges quite a few accounts became well-known, most people seemed to follow them on Twitter, you could see their tweets in graffities and banners; you could hear them being quoted in daily exchanges. Today, we call these ordinary social media users who accumulate a large online following through their content production and strategic self-branding, microcelebrities (Senft, 2008) and this thesis is about them. I explore how Twitter microcelebrities continue to take part in anti-government political talk in the increasingly restricted Turkish Twittersphere and the strategies they use in mitigating the dangers of their visibility.

There were a few reasons why Gezi Park protests provided ample opportunities for ordinary users to gain online fame. First was that the folk humour-based language of resistance that was forming on the ground (Aksan, 2017; Dagtas, 2016; Morva, 2016) synergised well with the Twitter culture where humour is considered as the language of the platform (Shifman, 2007; Freelon and Karpf, 2015). Secondly, the protests provided opportunities for accounts that engage with political topics to gain audiences outside of the silos created by party networks (Varnali and Gorgulu, 2015). Gezi Park protests brought together people with different political ideologies, which was unusual for Turkish society as it is often considered to be strictly divided into political factions formed around

political party affiliation (Kalaycioglu, 2010; Esmer, 2012). The humorous language became the catalyser of this newly emerging unity against the government; it was the way in which politically diverse participants of the protests could express their solidarity with new vocabularies (Morva, 2016). In fact, “Down with some things!” became a common slogan during the protests (Dagtas, 2016) because everyone was there for a reason but not for the same reason. During this time, the Twitter users who could respond to this trend by offering humorous and pluralistic political commentaries have gained significant popularity among those who were against the government. Today, the term Twitter microcelebrity in Turkey is used primarily for these accounts who gain attention and fame through a relatable, creative and humorous narration of everyday life, news and events in Turkey which often but not exclusively include politics (Bolukbas and Kirik, 2020) and many of these accounts attribute their current fame to the Gezi Park protests (Ozdemir, 2019).

These microcelebrities have a specific name in the Turkish Internet vernacular, we call them “Twitter Fenomeni” which translates to “Twitter Phenomenon”, but I intentionally avoid using this term in a thesis written in English as it doesn’t hold the same connotations in this language. It is common for microcelebrities to take on different names in different contexts, in Indonesian Twitter they are called “Selebtwits” (Rahmawan, 2014) or in China they are called “Wang Hong” (Tsoi, 2016). Indeed, the industry term ‘Influencers’ is perhaps the one that is most used in academic studies aiming to address the increasing corporate interest in these accounts’ ability to promote products through the adverts they incorporate into their strategic narration of personal lives (Gillin, 2007; Freberg et al. 2011; Abidin 2015; Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2016; Abidin, 2015a). Even though, Influencers, microcelebrities and in the Turkish context “phenomena” are used interchangeably in academic research, herein, I am referring to these accounts as Twitter microcelebrities. I do not use the term Influencer because during my research I came to realise that in Turkish Internet vernacular “influencer” is a loaded term that is often used for those microcelebrities that emerge from visual social media such as Instagram. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, Twitter microcelebrities distinguish themselves from the “Influencers” of other social media, often seeing them as

more frivolous, money-driven, and inauthentic. This is why, I chose Twitter microcelebrity as an appropriate term for these accounts.

There has been very little interest in the social movements' potential of creating microcelebrities in the academic research and even fewer follow ups on what these accounts do once the protests dissipate. Existing studies mainly focus on accounts that are exclusively political such as activists and citizen journalists who gained fame through protests (Tufekci, 2013; Tunc and Gorgulu, 2015; Badran and De Angelis, 2015; Matias, 2019). Contributions of those ordinary participants of protests who are not necessarily political actors but gather attention because they are opinionated, articulate, and funny are often forgotten when the primary focus becomes the "usual political suspects" (Wright, Graham and Jackson, 2016). My interest in Turkish Twitter microcelebrities' current participation in the anti-government political talk arises from this need to explore political talk that happens outside of the explicitly political spaces coordinated by political accounts (Freelon and Karpf, 2015) or hashtags. After all, due to their links to the Gezi Park protests, this type of microcelebrity appeals to an audience that is loosely connected in their disdain towards the government rather than through party affiliation which creates an interesting post-movement space where like-minded audiences get together.

Even though Gezi as a breaking point in Turkish political culture is well accepted, the implications of this rupture need further attention and should be grounded in empirical research. In fact, the afterlife of the capacities, rituals and dynamics created during social movements, which I refer to as the post-movement space, are rarely explicitly discussed in academic research. Post-movement space is particularly important in repressive settings where resistance is not confined to occasional outbursts of collective grievances but is very much a part of the everyday existence of subordinated groups (Scott, 1990; Bayat 2010). In such settings, researching the societal shifts created by social movements is important as they change the context in which everyday resistance takes place. I refer to Twitter microcelebrities as one such product of a social movement that exist within the post-movement space and through their continuous production of everyday resistance, they engender sites to explore subcultural elements that survived the social movement

(in this case, Gezi Park protests). Another central argument to this thesis is that I consider the manifestation of vocabularies, styles and in-jokes created during social movements in later instances of resistance as indicative of an emergent subculture. This particularly applies to the afterlife of movements in repressive contexts as Hebdige (2011, p.2) defines subcultures as "the expressive forms and rituals of those subordinate groups [...] who are alternately dismissed, denounced, and canonized". In this context, researching Turkish Twitter microcelebrities is to research the interplay between digital cultures and movement subcultures that engender a language of resistance that is familiar to Twitter-literate subcultural insiders.

This thesis is also a response to the developments in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests that have made expressing and researching online dissent within explicitly political spaces increasingly more difficult. The government used the protests to further villainise its opponents and further consolidate power in their hands. In their crusade against dissent, what was left of the free/opposition media practically disappeared; the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government and pro-government businesses now control 90% of mainstream media in Turkey (Ahval, 2018). On the other hand, Twitter, which has been one of the last remaining outlets for free speech (Dogu and Mat, 2019; Basaran, 2020), is now a space in which dissent is closely monitored and reported to authorities by government supported trolls and other pro-government accounts (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017; Saka, 2017). Due to this, studies point to a significant increase in self-censorship and a decrease in political hashtag use due to the fear of prosecution (PEN International, 2015; Tanash et al., 2017). In this landscape, even though online visibility is more important than ever to mitigate the erasure of anti-government viewpoints from other media, it also simultaneously makes those who use their visibility to amplify these viewpoints vulnerable to surveillance mechanisms (Tufekci, 2017). This makes maintaining an activist or exclusively political account risky and difficult for those who oppose the government, so is engaging with meaningful political talk by using explicitly anti-government hashtags.

Therefore, in this research, I move beyond the overwhelming focus on the explicitly political content that contains hashtags or other markers of affiliation with political parties in the existing academic research into the ways people engage with politics on Turkish Twitter (Furman and Tunc, 2019; Kutlu et al., 2019; Ozaydin and Nishida, 2021). I rather focus on the alternative ways of engagement with political issues on Twitter, which cannot be captured through the assumption that all attention-worthy political talk would use certain keywords or hashtags. Especially in repressive settings where explicit markers of political talk increase vulnerability to surveillance mechanisms, we need a better understanding of how people express political grievances in more discreet and indirect forms rather than as a part of a larger coordinated rhetoric afforded by hashtags or by political party affiliation. In response to these gaps, I ask: How do microcelebrities partake in anti-government political talk on Turkish Twitter? What are the strategies they use to remain under the radar?

I argue that, in this climate, the digital spaces maintained by popular accounts that are not exclusively political generate ample opportunities for researchers seeking to understand how political grievances are communicated within repressive settings. First, unlike the popular activist or political accounts who attract a niche audience that is particularly politically engaged, by appealing to a larger group with varying levels of interest in politics, these accounts reach hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions of followers. Therefore, their significant visibility and lack of apparent ties to political organisations make them intriguing sites to explore how criticisms of the government are communicated despite the government monitoring and penalising online dissent. Secondly, as Myers West (2017) shows even in repressive settings, coded or allusive engagement with politics doesn't work for activist accounts because they see it as counter intuitive for their advocacy work. Therefore, by not being exclusively political accounts, these microcelebrities also gain a significant advantage against the increasingly hostile surveillance mechanisms as the frivolity of their usual content provides flexibility to disguise political criticisms. By researching Twitter microcelebrities who intermittently partake in anti-government political talk, I explore how this tension between self-preservation and self-expression is resolved.

This research responds to the growing interest in the activism and political involvement of microcelebrities in recent years (Cheng, 2021; Riedl et al., 2021; Venkataramakrishnan, 2020; Kiran, 2020; Goodwin, Joseff and Woolley, 2020; Abidin and Rob, 2018; Tufekci, 2013 among others). I situate the importance of microcelebrities' expressive political participation by tracing its connections to celebrity politics and the studies that explore the increasingly important place microcelebrities hold in online political talk by focusing public attention to marginalised viewpoints (Tufekci, 2013), creating alternative narratives to mass media (Lewis, 2018; Badran and De Angelis, 2015) and creating third spaces for political engagement (Suuronen et al., 2021). I contribute to this growing body of scholarship by focusing on microcelebrities in a non-Western setting where freedom of speech is not protected. In doing so, I explore how microcelebrities engage in impression management to negotiate and justify their political involvement to their audiences, in a setting where political dissent creates fear and anxiety. I then delineate the ways familiarity and relationships microcelebrities build with their audiences are weaponised to hide criticisms of the government behind a language that is understood by those who are 'in on' these conventions. Secondly, I explore how microcelebrities' unique voice, digital skills and command of platform culture play a role in creating veiled criticisms. To situate these in wider discussions in the field, I draw from the literature on playful resistance to authoritarian governments, particularly James Scott's (1990) work on infrapolitics, which refers to the space that exist between explicit political contention and total compliance.

In conducting this research, I employed interpretive content analysis to explore the content shared by 97 Twitter microcelebrity accounts over the three months leading up to the 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections in Turkey. I chose to focus on a large sample of micro-celebrity accounts to identify patterns and commonalities in the language they used and topics they discussed during this period. Throughout the election period, I have followed these accounts by using a Twitter list I created and scraped their tweets to an Excel spreadsheet on a daily basis. I have then conducted an interpretive content analysis which allowed me to explore latent meanings reflexively and

qualitatively by operationalising my insider knowledge into the conventions of anti-government political talk on Turkish Twitter. During this time, I have also tracked important events, rallies and speeches that took place to provide the necessary context for these tweets for later analysis.

My initial aim was to explore microcelebrities' everyday political talk by selecting a longer time period that didn't involve any major political events. However, as I was contemplating how long of a time period would suffice to gather enough information on the ways Twitter microcelebrities articulated anti-government viewpoints, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced early elections. Upon this news, I immediately applied for ethics approval because election times are periods of increased political engagement on Twitter (Tumasjan et al., 2011) which provide "a microcosm of various practices and trends" (Highfield, 2018, p. 138) that emerge from everyday political talk on social media. This way I was able to ensure that I gathered enough data and by focusing on a highly consequential political event I was able to explore further dynamics in the ways microcelebrities' visibility on Twitter was leveraged to amplify anti-government viewpoints that are underrepresented in other media. In the next section, I will briefly introduce the 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections to provide the necessary context for this time period.

1.1 2018 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections

The 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections were one of the most important elections in Turkish history (Shaheen, 2018). Elections were originally due to be held in November 2019, however, on 18 April 2018, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that the elections would be pulled forward and take place on 24 June 2018 instead. The decision was criticised widely for being unconstitutional as it gave all parties an unusually short period (3 months) for campaigning and appointing presidential candidates. There

were several factors that made the 2018 elections unique and highly consequential for Turkish citizens.

First, the 2018 elections marked the transition of Turkey to an executive presidency, replacing the existing parliamentary system. The change was approved during the 2017 constitutional referendum, and it was decided that the new system would be established with the election of the new president in the November 2019 elections. Under the new executive presidency system, the president was to have extended powers with the ability to appoint the members of the judiciary and to bypass legislative processes and rule by decree on topics that are not regulated by existing laws (Yildirim and Carkoglu, 2018). This essentially solidified Turkey's slow shift to authoritarianism as it eradicated the checks and balances, which increased the urgency to replace the current government through these elections before the changes took place (Cross, 2018).

2018 parliamentary and presidential elections were also the first one in which political parties were allowed to form official alliances due to a newly passed legislation. After the AKP's announcement of their newly formed "People's alliance" with MHP (an ultra-nationalist right-wing party), four of the opposition parties also decided to form an alliance in order to counter the AKP's votes. The new alliance between the politically diverse opposition parties included the main opposition CHP (Social Democrats), newly formed Iyi Parti (Nationalists), DP (Centre-right) and SP (Far-right Islamists). The only political party with a parliamentary presence that refused to join in the alliances was HDP (Pro-minority/Kurdish Progressivists). These alliances meant that votes were evaluated in aggregate when determining the seats won in the parliamentary elections. Parties were free to join presidential elections with their own candidates and they did. The alliance between these politically distant parties was unprecedented and it was seen as a testament to the importance of these elections (Shaheen, 2018).

Finally, 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections took place at a turbulent time. At the time the early elections were announced, the country had been going through a very

long period of state of emergency and the elections being held while the state of emergency was still in effect raised questions about the fairness of this decision. The state of emergency was put in place following an attempted coup on 15 July 2016, and it allowed the government to bypass parliamentary processes and rule by decree which led to further curtailing of civil liberties. During this time, the AKP government has imposed further restrictions on the press and shut down several media organisations, which meant the rallies and campaigning efforts of the opposition parties could not be freely broadcasted (Lowen, 2018).

This election period has been a grand scale demonstration of the place social media holds for those who oppose the government in Turkey. During elections, citizens depend on the media to make informed decisions on the governance of the country and the political parties depend on the visibility on media channels to communicate their campaign promises. However, the unequal access to mass media deemed this impossible for many opposition parties. During this time, Turkey's national public broadcaster TRT gave 181 hours of screen time to Recep Tayyip Erdogan as the governing party's candidate for presidency, the main opposition candidate Muharrem Ince was given only 15 hours of screen time, while the candidate that received the third most screen time was the HDP candidate Selahattin Demirtas who was given 32 seconds (Shaheen, 2018a). In response, both the opposition parties and the citizens turned to social media, especially Twitter, in order to negotiate and discuss different viewpoints, as well as to organise and recruit supporters (Lerner, 2018).

This was particularly the case for Selahattin Demirtas (the HDP candidate) who had to campaign from prison, which further attested to the unevenness of the playing field for those who oppose the government (Heinrich, 2018). Demirtas had to manage his entire campaign through Twitter, where he has gathered a significant following and can be considered as Turkey's first microcelebrity politician. In addition to this, the main opposition's candidate for presidency Muharrem Ince used Periscope to broadcast his campaign rallies in order to circumvent the mass media blackout and repeatedly referred to social media as the 'people's media'. He called his supporters to disseminate his rallies

on social media to show the government that controlling mass media will not stop the truth to be heard. As can be seen in these examples, the extent to which those opposing the government depended on social media and the Internet during the 2018 elections makes this a fitting period to observe the use of these platforms for anti-government political talk in Turkey.

1.2 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised as follows. In order to better position the role of social media in Turkey, **Chapter 2** discusses the recent changes in the media landscape as well as the current political environment to provide the necessary contextual background. **Chapter 3** presents the literature review for this thesis, and it is divided into two parts. In the first part, I situate my research within the broader discussions around microcelebrity politics. I discuss the characteristics of microcelebrity as well as its potential as a political actor on social media platforms. In the second part, I focus on the body of scholarship on the resistance to repressive governments and emphasise the role of humour and play in these resistance cultures. As a common feature of Turkish Twitter microcelebrity tweets is humorous narration of everyday life and politics, I find it necessary to discuss the role of humour and creativity in resisting authoritarian governments. Thereafter, **Chapter 4** presents the methodological framework. I discuss the common methodologies in the field and their applicability to the Turkish context to make a case about how focusing on microcelebrity tweets may mitigate some of the issues that limit the ability to collect data in such settings. I then explain the methodological approaches I used when conducting this research.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present the main findings of this research. **Chapter 5** focuses on the impression management and political topics discussed by microcelebrity accounts. I explore how microcelebrities have negotiated and justified the increase in political content they shared during the elections. This chapter shows how microcelebrities

framed political engagement as a civic duty for high-visibility accounts and promoted pluralism and unity against the government in fulfilling this duty. **Chapter 6** discusses the strategic deployment of contextual cues in disguising the criticisms of the government. I particularly focus on the ways microcelebrities used the familiarity and the contexts they shared with their audiences to avoid directly referencing the president and the governing party. Here, I coin the term "ambient context", context created by other tweets, as a unique strategy that alludes to the subcultural connections between audiences and microcelebrities. Relying on ambient context provides opportunities to hide meanings in tweets as it is based on the assumptions about the context provided by the other tweets in the vicinity when a tweet appears on audience timelines. **Chapter 7** discusses the weaponisation of Internet culture literacies both to disguise dissent and to achieve temporary reversals of power against pro-AKP accounts. Finally, the **Chapter 8** is the conclusion to this thesis that summarises the key findings and provides suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Understanding the role of digital culture in politics requires a foundational knowledge of the political systems and cultures that surround the digital (Anstead and Chadwick, 2008). Therefore, it is necessary to begin with an introduction to the factors that led to social media platforms' rise to prominence for expression of dissent in Turkey.

In this chapter, I will focus on the recent interventions to the media landscape by the AKP government in their mission to consolidate power in one hand. I will discuss how opposition media was largely eradicated in the last decade to satisfy AKP's need to silence critics and mould society by pressuring entertainment media to represent only the religious and conservative lifestyles that the AKP government endorsed. The deteriorating freedom of speech and the erasure and intolerance of lifestyles that fell outside of AKP's value system, led to the emergence of the largest protests in Turkish history in 2013. I draw attention to two particular paradigm shifts in Turkish political culture that happened during the 2013 Gezi Park protests: the emergence of an anti-AKP network and the emergence of Twitter as a space for resistance against the AKP regime.

Justice and Development Party (AKP) was formed in 2001 and achieved its first election victory in 2002, which historically ended a long period of unstable coalition governments and coup d'etat regimes in Turkey (Irak, 2016). As a newly formed party, their success in the elections was because they emerged at an opportune time with novel campaign promises that appealed to the public expectations and a charismatic leader that heralded a change for the better. At the time, the centre-right government was failing to adapt to the shifting expectations of the public - rising right wing sentiment and religiosity to name a few- and public held the government responsible for the 2001 financial crisis (Yesilada, 2015). Their consecutive re-election into government in the following 20 years, however, marked an authoritarian turn in Turkish politics in which the AKP has consolidated power through referenda and effectively put an end to checks and balances and separation of

powers (Bakiner, 2017; Yesil, 2017; Irak, 2016). During this time Turkey was called a dominant party system and an illiberal democracy, in which the multiparty elections were used as a front to disguise authoritarian tendencies of a government that is unlikely to be replaced through elections (Irak, 2016). Party leader and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has dubbed this new system the "New Turkey", in reference to their majoritarian political order in which the "nation's will" exercised through their consecutive re-election legitimised their claims to absolute power (Ozbudun, 2014). New Turkey project also included a new sociocultural order that was shaped by the personality cult of Erdogan and aimed to mould the society according to neo-Ottoman and Islamic values through media control and education reforms (Hintz, 2019; Irak, 2016; Yesil 2017).

Erdogan's idealised image as the champion of people against the corrupt elites would not have been as impactful and ever-present in the shaping of new Turkey if it wasn't for his powerful influence over mass media (Yesil, 2020). In the last decade the AKP government has seized many major media outlets and sold them to pro-government businesses and restructured state-run media agencies according to their agenda both to achieve their vision of "New Turkey" and to curb dissent (Akser and Baybars-Hawks, 2012; Bakiner, 2017). Irak (2016) observes that during this time, advertising of state-run firms, which include powerful industry actors such as energy and construction businesses, were also given solely to pro-government newspapers. Therefore, applying a significant economic pressure onto rival media organisations. This period has seen a surge of mass media closures due to economic or political pressures, imprisonment of journalists and erasure of dissent from mass media (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Meanwhile, entertainment programs were also getting a makeover based on Erdogan's definition of ideal Turkishness that rested on religious, conservative values that endorsed integrity of the family unit. This restructuring of media content and the growing emphasis on religious education in schools that aimed to mould the society in the way that was endorsed by Erdogan were seen as two major outcomes of Erdoganisation. "Erdoganisation" refers to Erdogan's increasingly personalised leadership style that aims to consolidate power in one hand at the expense of his party (Selcuk et al., 2019; also

called Erdoganism in Yilmaz and Bashirov, 2018). This meant that lifestyles that were considered “dangerous” for the society, such as non-heterosexual or pre-marital relationships, the consumption of alcohol and tobacco products etc. were censored or purged from screens (Hintz, 2018). It is, for instance, impossible to find and uncensored version of the TV series Game of Thrones in Turkey through legal channels. These interventions to media were accompanied by Erdogan’s more direct attempts at social engineering such as, endorsing having at least 3 kids, abortion bans, heavy taxes on alcohol and tobacco products and major support schemes for large families (Hintz, 2021).

Especially after the 2016 failed coup attempt, what remained of the free/opposition media was also either shut down, changed hands, or pressured to toe the line through excessive fines (Murat, 2018). During this time, distrust to mass media reporting grew exponentially for those who oppose the government; according to a survey conducted in 2018, 4O% of the participants claimed that they could not trust most news most of the time (Yanatma, 2018). This placed Turkey on the top of the list of 37 countries included in this report in terms of distrust to mass media. One of the journalists Tufekci (2017) interviewed in the aftermath of the attempted coup d’état summarised the way in which this censorship works:

> “I first censor myself, as I know I’ll be in trouble if I write something critical of the government. And then my editor censors me, if I haven’t been mild enough. And then owners of the newspaper also check, to make sure nothing too critical gets through. And if something is published anyway, especially if in defiance, someone from the government calls our boss. And then the tax inspectors are sent in, to find something to fine the newspaper with.” (p.33)

When the mass media is stripped of its duties as watchdog and systematically erase dissident viewpoints from the public arena, those who oppose the government rely on social media to find political allies, express grievances (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012), take on citizen journalism (Hassid, 2012), and police government’s narratives (Kavanaugh et al., 2016). First major response to these interventions of the AKP to free speech and civic liberties has emerged in the form of 2013 Gezi Park Protests in which Twitter was used as

a tool for coordinating mobilisation and for the expression of dissent (Varnali and Gorgulu, 2015). Gezi Park protests marked a turning point in which new repertoires of political contention in Turkey were established through the formation of new solidarities against the AKP government and the uptake of social media during the protests (Genc, 2014; Varnali and Gorgulu, 2015; Polat and Tokgoz, 2014).

2.1 Gezi Park Protests: AKP and Its Discontents

On 28 May 2013, a group of peaceful protesters at Gezi Park in Istanbul, Turkey found themselves in a cloud of tear gas. The tents they left behind were set on fire by the police as they ran for a breath of fresh air and security. Harrowing photographs were disseminating on social media, depicting the unproportionate response by the police to these protesters who have shown no sign of violence; many were calling for help and support. Soon after, what started as a peaceful environmentalist protest against the demolition of Gezi Park to build a shopping mall has become the visceral expression of all the discontent that has been building up towards the AKP government.

At this point the hegemony of AKP over every aspect of Turkish society eradicated many of the outlets and spaces where lifestyles and viewpoints that are alternative to those endorsed by the government could freely exist (Tufekci, 2014). This included heavy fines for TV channels that broadcast media content showing alternative lifestyles, linking certain types of entertainment - particularly the Western media texts - with terrorist and immoral acts, cancelling several music festivals and limiting/banning the consumption of alcohol in the remaining ones and countless other interventions to lifestyles that fell against the AKP's vision for the "New Turkey" (Hintz, 2019). These were challenged in Gezi Park through the rise of pluralistic discourses and demand for more progressive representation (McGarry et al., 2019).

2.1.1 New Solidarities and Divides: Defining Turkey's Anti-Government Publics

This solidarity exhibited in Gezi Park indicated a paradigm shift in Turkish political culture because Turkish society has always been considered distinctly polarised into political factions (Kalaycioglu, 2010; Esmer, 2012). In the lead up to Gezi Park protests, the opposition landscape in Turkey consisted of groups formed around specific parties each with their unique and narrow vision of progressivity who blamed each other for ruining the country by being too fringe or too complacent (Bakiner, 2013). Gezi Park solidarities emerged in this conjuncture with a clear message of unity against an opponent that poses a greater threat and refused the outdated and limited progressivity exercised by the opposition parties (Chrona and Bee, 2017; Damar 2016; Bakiner, 2013; Tufekci, 2013). On the ground, unlikely alliances between ideologically distant political groups have emerged where it was common to see anti-capitalist Islamists, Kurdish separatists, Kemalist social democrats and Turkish ultra-nationalists chant arm in arm, share food and discuss their vision for the country together (Acar and Ulug, 2016). The novel intersectionality of these solidarities also brought traditionally distanced social groups together such as conservatives and LGBTI+ youth.

An extensive survey conducted during the Gezi Park protests showed that 79% of the participants claimed no affiliation to a political party or NGO and 93% claimed that they weren't involved in the protests as a member of a political party (Konda, 2014). Therefore, the insights from Gezi Park indicated a diminishing trust in political organisations which were seen as ineffective in addressing AKP's hegemony. Thus, the protests were organised via social media, rejected any formal leadership, and refused opposition parties' attempts to claim spokesmanship (Aksan, 2017). Bennet and Segerberg (2012) observed a similar phenomenon in the way in which 2011 15M protests were organised in Spain, where political organisations were replaced by online interpersonal networks as these organisations were seen as a part of the political problem. Due to the polyphony of its participants, Gezi Park was a protest that was guided by shared values of anti-authoritarianism, pluralism and inclusivity rather than shared ideologies which constituted the essence of what was called "Gezi Spirit" (Mercea and Levy, 2019).

Erdem Damar (2016) argues that in the aftermath of Gezi Park protests, the most important change that the "Gezi Spirit" inspired was this blurring of the lines between polarised segments of the public. He further attests to the emergence of a politics of recognition among diverse citizens who are willing to unify against the intolerance promoted by the AKP government. Budak and Watts (2015), add that even though participants of the protest were certainly more supportive of the other opposition parties after the protests ended, a large portion was consisted of those who already were tolerant and supportive all along. Similarly, Ozen (2018) argues that the solidarities and the politics of recognition formed in Gezi Park were later exhibited in the June 2015 parliamentary election in which some voters of the main opposition party (CHP), voted instead for the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) in an attempt to get them over the 10% threshold needed to claim seats in the parliament.

In this sense, one major flaw of the post-Gezi academic literature on the expressive political participation on Turkish Twitter is the lack of attention to the paradigm shift manifested by these solidarities and discontent towards political parties. What happened to these sections of the public after the protests and how this change manifested itself in the subsequent political events remains largely unexplored. For instance, the limited number of studies that explored citizens' political participation on social media after Gezi Park, still focus on the users who explicitly express support for different political parties either on their Twitter profiles (in the profile picture, cover photo or bio description) or by using party specific hashtags (see. Yilmaz and Abul, 2018; Kelly and Francois, 2018). One exception to this is Ozduzen and McGarry's (2020) study on the digital traces of Gezi Park protests in which they show that Gezi Park protestors still use Gezi as a reference point in the expression of their political identity and in their opposition to the AKP government. Gezi as a breaking point in Turkish political culture is well accepted but the implications of this rupture need further attention and should be grounded in empirical research.

In this research, I acknowledge this paradigm shift by seeking the political talk that happens outside of these explicitly partisan spaces that are coordinated by party hashtags

and affiliations. The proponents of this paradigm shift are difficult to define in political terms as they do not identify with parties or political figures and share a common ground only in their opposition to the government. For the purposes of this thesis, I use dissidents and anti-government groups interchangeably in reference to these publics and define their expressive political participation as oppositional or anti-government political talk. That is not to say that these terms do not carry different connotations in different settings, most notably Daase and Deitelhoff (2018) argue for the difference between opposition and dissidence, claiming that the former "makes use of institutionalised forms of political involvement to express its dissent", while the latter "rejects the rules of the order and chooses unconventional forms of organization and articulation to exercise radical critique of rule" (p. 12-13). Even though, this may fit with the understanding and exercise of political contention in democratic nations, the separation between the two terms blur in the Turkish context.

As Michnik (2003 cited in Olszewska 2005) argues, in democratic nations, a dissident is a minority, an outsider, whereas, in authoritarian contexts, it is the 'voice of opposition' against the hegemony of the state. In the illiberal democracy and the dominant party system of Turkey, dissidents become the voice of opposition, but one that has lost its belief in the existing democratic institutions yet needs to find alternative ways to exist within them to claim any agency. Therefore, to say that dissidents engage in oppositional political talk in the Turkish context is appropriate in defining these otherwise politically distant segments that are willing to come together in their mutual aim to replace the AKP government.

2.1.2 Bird against the Penguin: Role of Twitter in Anti-Government Political Talk

Beyond the solidarities among protestors on the ground, another paradigm shift was happening with the emergence of Twitter as the main space for anti-government political talk and mobilisation. Only a few hours into the protests, Twitter had a surge of new users and 2 million tweets containing Gezi related hashtags were tweeted (Egin, 2013). Tucker

(2013) observed that this exceptional tweeting behaviour was linked to the lack of media coverage of the protests in Turkey.

Over the course of the protests, the extent of government control over the mass media has become ever more visible as almost every traditional media channel was broadcasting reality TV, talk shows and cooking shows, basically 'anything but the biggest news event of the year' (Tufekci, 2017, p.4). The term 'Penguin Media' emerged among protestors in response to CNN Turk broadcasting a penguin documentary while CNN International was giving a full coverage of the intensifying clash between the police and the protesters at the Taksim Square. The discontent towards traditional media grew even larger and resulted in boycotts and decreased trust towards traditional media sources which only amplified the reliance on social media channels (Demir, Bastug and Douai, 2020).

Subsequently, the image of a penguin wearing a tear-gas mask became the official symbol of the resistance and soon after it was accompanied by images of the blue bird in the Twitter logo wearing a tear-gas mask. These two images became emblematic of the core values of the protests, penguin symbolising the resistance against the hegemony of AKP and Twitter bird symbolising the freedom of speech (Jenzen et al., 2020). Especially the appropriation of Twitter bird showed the emphasis put on the platform by dissidents when opposing the government. Twitter was essential in the creation of a crowdsourced news cycle (Haciyakupoglu and Zhang, 2015), the dissemination of calls for support for the protesters affected by police violence (Varnali and Gorgulu, 2014) and the deliberation of issues, grievances, and emotions (Eslen-Ziya et al., 2019).

As the protestors extended their solidarity on the ground to social media, an anti-AKP network started to form on Twitter as users begin following like-minded others, meanwhile, pro-AKP accounts, albeit on a much smaller scale, were forming their networks (Varnali and Gorgulu, 2015). Through this shared consciousness two distinct imagined communities were formed on Twitter as pro and anti-AKP groups and the use of "us" and "them" became increasingly common in tweets (Varnali and Gorgulu, 2015). In

reference to the anti-AKP Twitter community Varnali and Gorgulu (2015) further noted that:

> "Despite the fact that they [participants] suspect once the Gezi Park protests cease, the group they are collectively engaging in expressive political participation with will lose gradually its identity and function as a community (because Gezi Park protests constitute the raison d'être of the community), they had a strong belief that they have an ongoing agreement to act jointly in the future, whenever predetermined conditions arise again." (Varnali and Gorgulu, 2015, p.5, brackets added for clarification)

Effects of this "ongoing agreement" that is manifested through value-based connections and follower networks that are built on Twitter were indicated in later research where in interviews with Turkish Twitter microcelebrities Ozdemir (2019) noted that most of them traced the foundation of their current fame to the connections they built during the Gezi Park protests. Similarly, Damar's (2016) and Ozen's (2015) studies that indicate ongoing solidarities among anti-AKP groups also show that this community-level engagement with politics is still exercised during political events such as elections.

The reciprocal links between social movements and elections have been most notably pointed out by Mcadam and Tarrow (2013) through what they termed as "electoral contention" which considers electoral mobilisation of movement groups and frames elections as a movement's tactic. Therefore, election periods may invoke the "predetermined conditions" through which anti-government networks on Twitter can act upon their "ongoing agreement. This emphasizes the importance of Gezi Park protests for establishing Twitter as a platform for dissident solidarities and opposition to AKP hegemony.

2.2 Gezi and Beyond: Censorship and Control

Even though, Twitter has been hailed as a critical tool for dissent and a platform "reflecting everyday politics in Turkey" (Dogu and Mat, 2019, p.232), AKP's ambitions for total media control introduced many obstacles for exercising free speech on the platform. By 2013, AKP had already began its attempts to control online media by targeting specific content and websites – most notably, the 3-year ban on Youtube in 2007 - but in the aftermath of Gezi Park protests it reached unprecedented levels (Dogramaci and Radcliffe, 2015). Realising the potential of Twitter in harbouring an anti-AKP movement, then Prime Minister, now President Erdogan declared Twitter 'as the worst menace to society' in June 2013 and later in an election rally in March 2014 vowed to eradicate Twitter, which was followed by the police arresting 29 Twitter users for criticising the government (Caliskan and Waldman, 2017).

In February 2014, AKP government has introduced a controversial Internet law, which gave the government absolute authority for blocking entire websites and targeting individual social media accounts without needing to go through the judiciary processes (Letsch, 2014). The law also made it mandatory for websites to archive all content for two years and allow authorities to access it upon request. Three days before the 2014 parliamentary elections, in response to corruption allegations that were publicised via Twitter, the government blocked access to Twitter (Akgul and Kirlidog, 2015). The ban was lifted three days after the elections by a court ruling against the decision. Later, AKP government requested Twitter to set up an office in Turkey to regulate its use, however, Twitter refused this request (Caliskan and Waldman, 2017). The government has also adopted bandwidth throttling, which refers to the interventions to speed of Internet service to curb access to Twitter and other online spaces during major events such as the 2015 bombings in Ankara, Turkish capital (Wilson and Hahn, 2021).

However, these direct attempts to block Twitter were not very useful in stopping anti-government groups using these platforms, many circumvented the ban with absurd ease

through VPNs and using different DNS settings (Tufekci, 2014). In fact, the ban only worked in stopping pro-government users and politicians as they could not deliberately ignore the rules set by the government. However, banning, and demonising Twitter as a space used by foreign agents and terrorists was still a form of censorship (Karatas and Saka, 2017; Krajeski, 2014). Tufekci (2015) argued that the aim of the ban was to sully the motivations behind expressing dissent on Twitter and to discredit Twitter as a fringe and manipulative platform. This way they aimed to deter AKP voters from Twitter and deny dissenting users further reach and attention. Therefore, the ban further deepened the already existing rift in media consumption between pro and anti-AKP sections of the public.

Despite all the efforts to unpopularise and 'tame' Twitter; the damaging consequences of the Gezi Park protests for the government's image and the discontent towards Twitter bans and the arrests of Twitter users and journalists were too much to ignore. AKP soon realised that deterring their supporters from Twitter only worked in strengthening the anti-AKP sentiment on the platform (Waldman and Caliskan, 2017). In fact, while dissidents were using Twitter to express dissent and coordinate one of the largest protests in Turkish history, AKP's presence on social media was mainly limited to party accounts (Waldman and Caliskan, 2017). In response, AKP started to establish their own base/supporter group on Twitter to regain their reputation and disrupt dissent (Saka, 2017). Studies suggest that 6000 trolls (namely, AkTrolls) were employed by the government to push government agenda on Twitter and to discredit opposition rhetoric through misinformation, lynching and trolling (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017). Soon after, AKP has established New Turkey Digital Office which was largely considered as the base of operations for AkTrolls to monitor and subvert online dissent (Yesil, 2021). In recent years, these government supported 'trolls' and the Pro-AKP accounts were responsible for a majority of the content removals and the reporting of dissenting accounts to the police (Basaran, 2020; Saka, 2017).

Mobilisation of citizens against political dissidents is not a new phenomenon in Turkey and has ties to the early 70s 'informant citizen' initiative that functioned as a

neighbourhood watch and allowed the citizens to report the issues, protests or suspicious circumstances they observe to the police. It was first introduced in Turkey after the military memorandum on 12 March 1971 in an attempt to combat the violent domestic strife between the left and right-wing sections of the public. At the time, this call from the military, had formalised and encouraged whistleblowing, which was once frowned upon among citizens. This newly defined role of the ordinary citizens in sustaining the status quo has disproportionately penalised those who held grievances against the state and the lines between dissent and treason were blurred. This meant that without holding an official political power, the citizens whose opinions, vision and values aligned with those of "the power" have become the eyes and ears of the state in places where it couldn't reach before. In process, these citizens enjoyed expanded powers and became a part of the dominant.

After the Gezi Park Protests and the failed coup attempt in 2016, President Erdogan has announced to revitalise the informant citizen initiative online and offline; police reporting boxes were placed in neighbourhoods to encourage citizens to take action, sometimes in exchange for a small compensation (NTV, 2013; Diken, 2016). This initiative, initially aimed at combatting terrorism, gained a looser definition and its scope got extended to reporting any instance of dissent against government officials, which worked as a deterrent for the individual expressions of dissent (Pitel, 2017). It has increased the extent of surveillance experienced by the average citizen and led to instances of people getting arrested due to seemingly trivial reasons. For instance, a tea shop owner reported a customer to the police for criticising the new coins designed to commemorate the failed coup attempt (Diken, 2017); likewise, another got arrested for sharing their opinions against mosques on Twitter (Diken 2017a). Therefore, the online or offline spaces where those who oppose the government could express their discontent, were no longer protected from the surveillance of the regime, as those who seemed as "one of us" could wield more power than they let on.

As a result of these interventions, studies note an increase in self-censorship in online spaces due to the fear of being penalised (Wilson and Hahn, 2021; Tanash et al., 2017).

Dissidents interviewed by Wilson and Hahn (2021) consistently report the difficulty of criticising the government without attracting a surge of abuse from trolls and pro-government accounts alike. Political views on Twitter get policed so regularly by ordinary users and state employed social media moderators, a report by Freedom House (2018; Turkey Blocks, 2018) showed that 65% of content removal requests to Twitter has been issued by Turkey and in 2017, Turkey was classified as 'not free' in terms of Internet freedom for the first time.

Penalising individual expressions of dissent was also accompanied by bans on collective expressions of dissent. In Turkey, organised protest, and public political participation (which is mainly associated with the political left) has long been frowned upon on the societal level; especially, since the coup d'état in 1980, engaging in public expressions of dissent has been seen as bad citizenship by reinforcing the paternalistic conception of the state in Turkish society (Irak, 2016). With the prominence of Erdogan as a leader this notion of state as a paternal figure was further reinforced, for instance, in 2017, arrests due to "insult to the president" charges were 13 times more than the preceding period (Yuksel, 2019). During this time, the AKP government has taken various measures to crackdown on public political participation through increased police presence during protests and excessive use of riot control agents on peaceful protesters (Aljazeera, 2019), in addition to placing bans on labour union demonstrations on May 1 (Reuters, 2019) and pride celebrations of LGBTQ+ activists (Dalton, 2019) to name a few. Through the government's preference for a divisive language that equates any public demonstration of dissent with treason, dissidents, the "bad citizens" of the past, found new identities as traitors, scavengers, and foreign spies, which distanced them from the rest of the public even further.

This crackdown had serious consequences for the public expression of dissent as the difference in police response to peaceful demonstrations and violent riots became non-existent, which demonised all forms of street demonstration and the protestors had to pay big tolls for their participation. During this time, scholars showed how urban activists have utilised "unusual" places such as small parks (Ozduzen, 2019), wedding halls and

courtrooms (Ozduzen, 2021) for informal political encounters and solidarity networks. There are also several NGOs such as Kaos GL, a prominent NGO defending LGBTQ+ rights and Northern Forests Defence, formed against the deforestation in Northern Turkey for capital gain, which still effectively organise and build solidarity networks. However, studies such as Zihnioglu (2021) show that since the 2016 coup attempt these NGOs had to carry on their mission in private social media networks rather than in public spaces.

Despite these pitfalls and obstacles, in claiming agency, social media still presents dissidents a necessary space for political deliberation in Turkey (Dogu and Mat, 2019). Especially, since the sale of large media conglomerate Dogan Media Group to a pro-government businessman in 2018, AKP controls 90% of the mass media in Turkey (Ahval, 2018). In this media landscape, the two most recent election periods have shown the extent to which those in opposition to the government, including opposition parties, are dependent on the imperfect freedom of speech social media provides (Polat, 2018; Lerner, 2018). Even though the debate on the extent of social media's role in political participation is yet to settle, in repressive regimes, due to a lack of alternative spaces to vocalise political demands and grievances, social media's place in the democratization of political discourse can still be more central than it is in many Western nations with functional democracies (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). As Basaran (2020, no pagination) puts it in Turkey "the Internet is, for many, the last open public forum".

Chapter 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Celebrity, Microcelebrity and Politics

Microcelebrity is the latest frontier in the celebrity culture and is often discussed in terms of its similarities and differences from traditional celebrity. I find this a useful starting point as I will demonstrate in this chapter that the importance of microcelebrities' political participation in large part derives from the failures of the top-down media and celebrity cultures as well as the logics of social media platforms. I will do this by focusing on two paradigm shifts that were triggered in the past two decades. First one is the authenticity crisis in the celebrity and media cultures (Turner 2014; Marshall, 2014; Street 2012; Corner and Pels, 2003; Coleman, 2002). Second one is the fragmentation of public attention with the advent of social media platforms that challenged mass media's monopoly on the attention economy. Through these developments, I will explore microcelebrity politics as both a consequence of the networked communication and a response to the demand for ordinariness and authenticity in those who use their platform for advocacy or political participation. Finally, I will bring these together to situate the accounts I research in this thesis within the wider microcelebrity politics literature.

Before moving on, I would like to clarify that in the following sections I use "microcelebrity practice" and "microcelebrity" as two separate concepts, which derives from the lack of consensus in academic research on whether microcelebrity refers to what someone 'is' or what someone 'does'. As pioneers of this field Senft (2008) and Marwick (2010, 2015), both defined microcelebrity as a set of practices, a mind-set of carefully constructing online self as a consumable good with the expectation that the others do the same. In this sense, they consider microcelebrity not as a status but as a consequence of social media architecture that encourages users to conduct themselves as celebrities competing for visibility. Whereas in other academic works microcelebrity is

mostly used as a status one obtains by successfully maintaining a large audience (see. Page, 2012; Tufekci, 2013; Badran and De Angelis, 2015; Abidin, 2015; Jeslev, 2016). In eliminating any confusion that may arise from this dichotomy, I find the need to separate microcelebrity practice from microcelebrity, former refers to the practices that users engage with to gain visibility and fame in online spaces and the latter refers to the accounts that successfully employ these practices.

3.1.1 Celebrity: Evolved

One of the most famous and contested definitions of celebrity is presented by Daniel Boorstin (1962) in his pioneering work 'The image: A guide to Pseudo-events in America' in which he describes celebrity as 'a person who is well known for their well knownness'. He argues that celebrity is a construct of media that does not carry any substance to justify the attention it is given, one that does not possess any talent, skill or greatness apart from the unprecedented 'well-knownness' it was attributed. Today, many would agree that celebrity does not necessarily come from greatness (Rojek, 2012) and there is an uneven spread of talent among those who we grant celebrity status online or offline. In its application to Internet celebrity, Gamson (2011), and Jackson (2018) point to Reality TV contestants turned into social media stars such as Kim Kardashian as textbook examples of Boorstin's critique.

Nevertheless, it would be a misconception to perceive celebrity as equal to well-knownness. As Neal Gabler (2001) argues, even though 'well-knownness' is a key element of celebrity it only captures the fame aspect of it. Being famous can be achieved in silence, away from the spotlights however celebrity demands performance and visibility that has a much more fragile life span (Van Krieken, 2012), which Marshall (2014) refers to as the liquidity of celebrity power. This ephemerality applies to both online and traditional forms of celebrity which demands a coherent performance of self to maintain. Therefore, celebrity is not synonymous to famousness, it encompasses fame by its additional qualities of currency (Van Krieken, 2012) and narrative (Gabler, 2001; Turner

2014; Marshall and Redmond, 2015). However, how these qualities and narrative get cultivated, differ immensely in traditional celebrity and microcelebrity contexts.

The currency of celebrity is often regarded as celebrity capital which is accrued traditionally by accumulating media visibility and recognisability (Brooks, Drenten and Piskorski, 2021; Driessens, 2013). Traditional celebrity cultivates celebrity capital via media processes that are largely disconnected from the audience's wishes and demands, and gains recognition through access to unique opportunities in the media world (movies, sports, shows etc.). Internet celebrity, on the other hand, tries to cultivate celebrity capital in a terrain where attention is fragmented and the barriers to entry are negligible. To achieve celebrity, microcelebrity needs to respond to and interact with its audience through significant amount of attention labour (building a following), create a unique voice and personally cultivate coherence, authenticity, and community to be recognisable rather than as a part of top-down media processes (Brooks, Drenten and Piskorski, 2021).

Furthermore, traditional celebrity stands at a considerable social distance from their fans (Rojek, 2012). This distance accounts in part for the idolisation of celebrity and the differentiation of their personality from the 'others' (Page 2012). Whereas as Marwick and boyd (2011) demonstrate the social distance between microcelebrities and audiences are much less than that of traditional celebrity. Social media platforms incubate celebrity 'bottom-up' (Gamson, 2011) through performances of relatableness, authenticity, and intimacy, which culminate in an increased trust and familiarity between fans and microcelebrity (Jerslev, 2016). Therefore, microcelebrity commands a more direct sense of intimacy than traditional celebrity by being an active participant of the community that is built among its followers (Abidin, 2016). These characteristics contribute immensely to microcelebrities' ability to connect people and in doing so, disseminate ideas, promote lifestyles and generate affective bonds.

In sum, even though both traditional and microcelebrity demand performance and visibility, where celebrity establishes its value through its distance to its audience,

microcelebrity does it by its accessibility and intimacy; where celebrity gains attention through the mystique of their social distance, microcelebrity does so by being relatable and approachable. These characteristics which are also called microcelebrity practices make microcelebrities "more interesting than actors because they are perceived to represent commonality" (Danesi, 2008, p.225 cited in Abidin, 2015), which adds to their appreciation as 'people like us'. In the next section, I will discuss what this means for their political participation.

3.1.2 Authenticity in Crisis: Microcelebrities as 'people like us'

In today's entertainment-centric world using 'celebrity appeal' has been one of the most obvious ways to get attention (Thrall et al., 2008) due to this, celebrities taking part in political campaigns, becoming advocates for social justice or politicians adapting celebrity tactics to garner support have been common discussions in politics and celebrity studies (Street, 2012; Corner and Pels, 2003; West and Orman, 2003). However, in recent years, the appeal of celebrity advocacy is diminishing while many are turning their attention to microcelebrity advocacy instead.

Since 2020, there is a newly emerging interest in how microcelebrities are being used in political marketing (Cheng, 2021; Riedl et al., 2021; Venkataramakrishnan, 2020; Kiran, 2020; Goodwin, Joseff and Woolley, 2020). These studies and news articles document the growing trend of political parties in US mobilising influencer networks to sway votes. The crux of their arguments is that the appeal of using microcelebrities to disseminate political messages comes from their perceived authenticity and the trust relationships they build with their audiences. As one political PR executive puts it: "We all know celebrities and top-down stuff don't have [enough] influence […] the person delivering your message should look like you and talk like you." (Venkataramakrishnan, 2020, no pagination).

Authenticity crisis in celebrity culture is intertwined with the rise of microcelebrity in more ways than one, particularly in its connections to the rising demand for ordinariness in popular culture. In 2004, Graeme Turner has described the increasing power of the audience over the media as the 'demotic turn', in which he contextualised the rise of the ordinariness in celebrity culture through Reality TV and DIY (Do-it-Yourself) celebrity websites. Microcelebrities are a product of this demand for ordinariness that gained momentum with the rise of social media which decreased the monopoly of mass media over public attention. Abidin and Ots (2016) characterise successful self-representation of microcelebrity as one that is believable, accessible, and emulate-able by ordinary audiences as opposed to traditional celebrity which gains attention by cultivating extraordinariness.

Boorstin's (1962) criticism of celebrity culture, for instance, was embedded in his more general critique of the inauthenticity of mediatised events. Traditional celebrities need media to attach a compelling narrative to them (Gabler, 2001) and this narrative component demands coherence. Failure to tell a consistent story risks loss of trust and publicity, which Rojek (2012) refers to as celebrity cognitive dissonance, inconsistency in the actions or attitude of a celebrity in accordance with public's expectations. As Marwick (2015) states, today, there is a lower chance for any inauthenticity in celebrity's narrative to go unnoticed by 'savvy celebrity-watchers' who made it their mission to reveal the 'real' world of celebrity. This obsession to discover the true self of traditional celebrity, she adds, doesn't apply to microcelebrity because of the presumption that there is very little difference between the perceived and actual micro-celebrity personas. This inevitably makes the relationship between microcelebrities and audiences more intimate, as the audiences perceive microcelebrities as someone they truly know (Abidin, 2015)

In the year Theresa Senft was coining the term microcelebrity, Thrall et al., (2008) through an analysis of 53 environmental advocacy groups that use celebrities as advocates, were arguing in strong terms that celebrity advocacy does not generate public interest. Later research agreed with these findings but made a distinction that the effectiveness of celebrity advocacy depends on the perceived authenticity of the

celebrities' dedication to the cause they promote (Becker, 2013; Markham, 2014). Whereas the opinion leadership of microcelebrities were linked to their exclusion from the inauthenticity of the highly commercialised mainstream celebrity culture (Gamson, 2011). The idea is that microcelebrities' narratives take place "without overt manipulation", and they are "more 'real' than television personalities with 'perfect hair, perfect friends, and perfect lives'" (Senft, 2008, p. 16 cited in Abidin, 2015). In fact, Deconinck and Schmuck (2022) found that the perceived authenticity of Influencers who promote pro-environment messages result in increased pro-environment behaviours in their audiences because they see it as friendly advice from someone they trust.

Authenticity crisis is also prevalent in the political culture. The initial rise of the celebrity politics was considered as a response to the increasing distrust to politicians, perception of politicians as inauthentic (West and Orman, 2003) and the inaccessibility of political discourse (Corner and Pels, 2003). This has been evidenced to have roots in the failure of these figures to keep up with those standards that were set for them in their portrayal by the traditional media (West and Orman, 2003) and the changing expectations towards the performance of authenticity. Coleman (2002), in a comparative study between the popularity of parliamentary broadcasts and the reality show Big Brother argued that Big Brother's popularity came from the public acceptance of the contestants as 'people like us', the audience respected their authenticity because 'they spoke and behaved in ways that appealed to sections of the public who feel intimidated by the language and discourse of politics' (p.254).

Therefore, microcelebrities' appeal in political communication emerges from the ways they can exploit their ordinariness to draw a distinction between themselves and the mainstream media and political actors. Earliest example of these actors gaining academic attention was when Badran and De Angelis (2015) noted the growing influence of microcelebrities within Syrian Twitter who provide political commentaries that are unaligned with the mass media narratives. More recently, similar observations were made by Lewis (2019) who demonstrated the use of authenticity and relatability as a political stance by political YouTubers who use these characteristics of microcelebrity to

distance themselves from the inauthenticity of mass media and progressive politics. Similarly, Deconinck and Schmuck (2022) pointed to the palatable tone of microcelebrities' political messages which makes them appealing to a wide range of audiences.

An important thing to note is that while there is a growing interest in the microcelebrities' online political participation due to these trust relationships they build with their audience, in repressive settings where trust to traditional political elites is faltering due to hegemony and corruption, these discussions were taking place years in advance. Badran and De Angelis (2015) tied this accelerated rise of microcelebrity accounts to the diminishing trust to government-controlled mass media and the growing reliance to social media during the Arab Spring protests. In the next section, I will discuss how networked social movements cultivate microcelebrity and their increasingly important place in repressive settings.

3.1.3 Fragmentation of Attention: Microcelebrities as 'focusers of attention'

Perhaps an even less explored area of microcelebrity politics is the cultivation of microcelebrity through the rise of social media as the preferred communication channel during political events and social movements. Social media presents social movement actors and politically engaged citizens with access to opportunities in gaining visibility that were previously inaccessible without affiliation with powerful intermediaries. As Bennet and Segerberg (2012) noted in their research into new social movements, political organisations (unions, political parties, collectives) that were responsible for establishing political demands and grievances are now replaced by personal social media accounts disseminating political ideas throughout the Internet. This was claimed to democratise the political communication by allowing diverse voices to demand justice or accountability, find supporters and create impact without needing to conform to or associate with the ideas of any established organisation or relying on media attention.

However, Tufekci (2017) argues that "the open participation afforded by social media does not always mean equal participation, […] over time a few people consistently emerge as informal but persistent spokespersons with large followings on social media." (Tufekci, 2017, p.xxiii). In fact, several big data studies have documented the emergence of non-traditional political actors as the drivers of political discussions on Twitter during social movements and elections (Bakshy et al., 2011; Cha, Haddidi and Gummadi, 2012; Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2013; Sanjari and Khazraee, 2014; Freelon and Karpf, 2015; Jungherr 2015; Vicari 2017). For instance, Freelon and Karpf (2015) document how some celebrities as non-political elites and ordinary users as non-elites dominate the discourse around political debates during elections. They also draw attention to how celebrities in this debate assert their political opinions by mimicking microcelebrity practices of audience engagement and intimacy to strengthen their public image (Marwick and boyd, 2011).

The logics of microcelebrity guide how attention flows on social media, as the assumption is that everyone is engaging in microcelebrity practice to optimise their personal brand and gather attention (Senft, 2013). Unlike offline settings where power relations are linked to financial or political capital, social media use attention capital to determine its power structures (Tufekci 2013) and the kind of labour that goes into microcelebrity practice is often rewarded by attention (Marwick, 2013; Page, 2012). Therefore, even though social media has a low barrier for entry, it is the scarcity of attention that replicates the gatekeeping structures of other media. Those who can successfully gather attention (i.e., microcelebrities) emerge as de-facto spokespersons within issue communities without holding any official political position or claiming expertise (Tufekci, 2017).

Notably, Dahlgren (2013) draws attention to the citizens who gain popularity around protests with their communicative creativity, digital skills, and intellectual capacity. He refers to them as online public intellectuals who emerge as opinion leaders via their skills in cultural production. Other researchers have also consistently traced these accounts' rise to prominence during protests, even though they appear under different names. For

instance, as users gained visibility over the course of the Gezi Park protests, Varol and colleagues (2014) identified a quite significant increase in the amount of 'influentials', accounts with large following that produce the most retweeted content. Other researchers have also observed a similar pattern during Spanish Indignados movement and used 'hidden influentials' as a category to describe the ordinary users that were central to Twitter discussions (Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2013). These crowd-based dynamics breeding microcelebrity was also observed by Arvidsson and colleagues (2015) who explored these dynamics within the Twitter network of One Direction fans.

Specifically, within social movements, these accounts that are identified as 'influentials' through social network analyses, rarely become subjects to further research and rarely get classified as microcelebrities or online public intellectuals. This is because the assumption is that it is the group identity that cultivates their audience rather than their personal brand, which is quintessential to maintaining microcelebrity status (Arvidsson et al., 2015), thus no further attention is paid to what happens to these influentials once the protests end or they leave the networked space in which they found their audience. It is only recently, for example, that in Ozdemir's (2019) research it was briefly mentioned how the accounts I research in this thesis who were referred to as 'influentials' in Gezi Park research are still active as microcelebrities on Twitter. Similarly, a recent study on Finnish microcelebrity anti-Immigration activists argue that microcelebrity is "a platform-specific genre that occupies the post-movement political space by generating sustainable algorithmic visibility" (Laaksonen, Pantti and Titley, 2020, p.171). Therefore, it is evident that networks that form around protests, advocacy campaigns or fandom are fertile breeding grounds for cultivating audiences which can be maintained by those who build an appealing personal brand, even after these networks dissipate.

Through her analysis of the Arab Spring uprisings, for instance, Tufekci (2013) observes a set of actors that emerge on digital platforms, who mobilise citizens and inform global publics by commanding the scarce and scattered public attention which she describes as 'networked microcelebrity activism' (Tufekci, 2013, p. 658). Tufekci (2013) lays importance to the personal brand of these accounts and positions them as microcelebrity

"not because these activists are celebrities in the Hollywood or fan-based sense – they are not – but because their attention-commanding ability is based on status, as practiced within and through participatory media but not limited to it, rather than institutional affiliation or membership in political parties in the traditional sense" (2013, p.850).

Tufekci (2013) further asserts that microcelebrities' continued cultivation of audiences outside of protests is essential especially in repressive settings, where marginalised groups need these 'focusers of attention' to gain visibility on social media platforms. This is because in repressive settings decreasing trust to mass media channels and the forced containment of dissent further augments this shift in the attention economy. One to many communication channels that benefit authoritarian governments in controlling the public agenda are replaced by a variety of social media platforms for the communication of dissent where attention is a scarce resource. Therefore, in these settings, microcelebrity advocacy and political participation occupy a unique position in which they can infiltrate the dominant agenda by lending visibility to marginalised viewpoints.

3.1.4 Casually Political: Microcelebrities as Intermittent Political Actors

In the previous sections I discussed how microcelebrities' command of online attention and appeal as ordinary people makes them important in the vocalisation of marginalised viewpoints and perceived as more reliable alternatives to public figures. However, the examples I discussed were mostly political or activist microcelebrities who exclusively produce advocacy content. Especially in a repressive setting like Turkey where online dissent is criminalised, maintaining an exclusively activist/political account with a large following is incredibly risky. Research shows that, alongside self-censorship, Turkish Twitter users avoid engaging with activist accounts due to the fear that association with these profiles may put them under the risk of losing their jobs (Yanatma, 2018).

Furthermore, the online world does not only consist of accounts who exclusively discuss politics and those who never do; there is a spectrum of political engagement that these

studies do not address. Activist microcelebrities are users who use their social media accounts primarily to promote political events and ideologies and thus attract a limited but politically active audience (Tufekci, 2013). On the other hand, while still enjoying the privileges granted by perceived authenticity and command of attention, microcelebrities who intermittently engage with politics can attract more diverse audiences. Thus, more attention needs to be paid to microcelebrities who do not define themselves as activists but create political content as a part of their larger narrative (Pande, 2018).

For instance, studies by Gaddini (2021) Abidin, (2019), Abidin and Cover (2019), show how the decentralization of attention via social media allows those who are marginalized within their own community, society, or other media to claim political agency if they can command the scattered attention. In this sense, Gaddini (2021) explores the claiming of religious and political authority by white evangelical women microcelebrities while Abidin (2019 and Abidin and Cover (2019) explore the advocacy work of LGBTQ microcelebrities. These studies engage with microcelebrities who claim agency by intermittently making their politics explicit and other times create political agency through embodied representation of marginalised lifestyles. These studies show that there is much more to microcelebrity politics than the limited domain of activist/political microcelebrity.

Similarly, the type of microcelebrity accounts that I discuss in this thesis are not exclusively activist accounts even though most of them have ties to Gezi Park protests and they do generally narrate life in Turkey from an anti-government standpoint. Their lack of apparent ties to specific political parties or NGOs helps them in reaching a more diverse audience (Ozdemir, 2019) and helps them to be perceived as 'people like us' rather than institutionalised political actors with a specific agenda. Suuronen and colleagues (2021) even argue that the political participation of non-political microcelebrity accounts encourages their audience to engage with politics.

Typical of these microcelebrity accounts is to blend personal or professional narratives with political tweets that are presented on an 'as and when' basis which cultivates

authenticity through what Abidin (2017) refers to as calibrated amateurism. Calibrated amateurism, which refers to the practice of producing personal or intimate filler content alongside regular anchor content (Abidin, 2017), is becoming key for maintaining relatability and authenticity on Twitter. Through calibrated amateurism, microcelebrity practices are getting further intertwined with politics on Twitter. For instance, employing this practice, journalists create personal brands detached from media organisations and engage in intimacy work through 'lifestreaming' to claim agency and distinguish themselves as relatable and independent voices in the Twittersphere (Olausson, 2017).

However, unlike journalists who have a defined role as experts in the Twittersphere, what is filler content and what is anchor content is not as clear for the microcelebrities on Turkish Twitter whose content consists of narrating varied aspects of everyday life. The flexibility of their content gives them the ability to talk about anything, thus the lines between filler and anchor content blur. Yet calibrated amateurism is still a valuable framework for these accounts as the frivolous 'life' content they share help reinforce the authenticity of their more serious political content by distancing them from the rigidity of political language used by institutional actors.

On the other hand, when those who do not use social media to exclusively engage with politics express political opinions, due to the diversity of their audience they need to employ impression management strategies in order to avoid alienating audiences and attracting backlash from those who hold opposing views (Pearce, Vitak and Barta, 2018; Pearce and Vitak, 2016; Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik and Maoz, 2015). For non-political microcelebrities, engaging with politics may mean losing industry contacts or audiences (Goodwin, Joseff and Woolley, 2020), whereas for ordinary users it might affect offline relationships (Pearce and Vitak, 2016; Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik and Maoz, 2015). Most of these studies reference self-censorship as the most common impression management tool, Pearce, Vitak and Barta (2018) add that managing one political and one non-political profile is also increasingly common. The microcelebrities I explore in this thesis fit with neither of these categories, therefore, how microcelebrities who intermittently engage with politics manage these tensions need further attention.

3.1.5 Microcelebrity in a Restricted National Twittersphere

In this thesis, I focus on Turkish speaking/posting microcelebrity whose audience consists of those within a national Twittersphere, which creates further nuances in the ways they partake in political discourse in comparison to microcelebrities that exist in a multinational network. Acknowledging the caveats that come with focusing on microcelebrity practice in a repressive setting, Pande (2018) points to a lack of attention paid to the characteristics of local Internet cultures in microcelebrity research. She argues that local cybercultures make microcelebrities act differently to their Western counterparts due to issues such as censorship, lack of freedom of speech and different cultural norms. Evidently, the microcelebrity theories are predominantly based on the experiences and practices of English speaking/posting micro-celebrity (see Marwick, 2013; Abidin, 2015; Abidin, 2015a). Even Tufekci's (2013) insight into activist microcelebrities in Arab Twittersphere, is derived from an analysis of English-posting microcelebrities who operate within an international network.

In academic research there is a tendency to make sense of other cultures on Twitter by investigating the English-posting users from that culture (Morozov, 2009) which leads to the dismissal of the linguistic, cultural, and political differences of these communities and its effect to the way they interact with the communication technologies (Cuevas et al., 2013). As Kranzberg (1986, p.545) explains "[...]the same technology can have quite different results when introduced into different contexts or under different cultures" and these nuances that affect the way people engage with these technologies should be in the forefront of the analysis into these networks. For instance, in their research on Twitter use during 2013 Iranian elections, Sanjari and Khazraee (2014) find significant 'structural differences' between non-English and multinational networks. They identify microcelebrities as the key actors within the discussions on Persian Twitter networks, as opposed to the multinational English networks in which the media organisations and journalists were dominating the political discussions around Iranian elections.

It is important to note that there are major discrepancies in terms of the languages used on Twitter during political turmoil in different countries (Aday et al., 2012). Such as Tufekci's (2013) networked micro-celebrity activists in Arab Spring protests were called 'networked' because they were acting as gatekeepers in an international network. This gatekeeper status was essential for the global recognition of the first-hand experiences of the protesters, especially since there were concerns over the accuracy of press coverage of the events (Tufekci, 2013). Yet, this indicates that for Arab Spring protests, social media was mainly a heterogeneous space where the protesters and the international spectators came together for meaning making (Bruns and Highfield, 2014) and Twitter was specifically used for the benefit of the international spectators (Aday et al., 2012). Using social media to build international solidarity was also evident in the Egyptian revolution; it has been estimated that only 30% of those tweeting during the protests were actually in the country (Starbird and Palen, 2012).

However, when the tide of protests turned to Turkey, the international solidarity with the protesters on the ground majorly lagged in comparison to other protests of similar calibre (Varol et al., 2014). During the first week of protests, around 90% of all geolocated tweets were coming from within Turkey and approximately 88% of the tweets were in Turkish, which suggest that the audience of the tweets were other Turkish citizens rather than the international community (Barbera and Metzger, 2013). This indicates that even during political turmoil, Turkish Twitter remains a relatively enclosed space where the international attention is appreciated but not primarily sought after. This may be due to a level of pessimism by the protestors who lacked confidence in the international communities' willingness to support Turkish protests or could also be an effort to avoid delegitimization of the protests by the governing party as an uprising orchestrated to serve foreign interests. Nonetheless, this shows that the use of Twitter for political communication and the ways online visibility of microcelebrity was utilised were different to what was happening in most other countries with similar concerns over press freedom.

Outside of large-scale protests, Twitter users in the non-English speaking countries where Twitter is popular, show a high locality level in terms of relationships and information

flow (Cuevas et al., 2013; Poblete et al., 2011). Research shows that in these settings, the communication related to community issues including politics happen in national Twitterspheres, rather than in multinational networks (Bastos, Puschmann and Travitzki, 2013). Even though some bilingual users post in English when discussing political issues, this is mostly done to inform global publics only when there is an issue that needs global attention (Jansen, 2010). In these cases, the knowledge exchange is sustained by altering the content in a way that would be understandable by a global audience who might not be as informed on the full extent of the situation within the country (Jansen, 2010). Therefore, the ways Tufekci's (2013) networked microcelebrity activists communicate political issues with a global audience differ from the ways they are discussed among local users or by local microcelebrities.

On Twitter, where the main mode of communication is written text, microcelebrity status is discursively constructed through certain communicative techniques that cultivate sustained relatability (Abidin, 2015), relevance and accessibility (Marwick 2013; Jerslev 2016) and perceived authenticity (Marwick and boyd, 2011), all of which demand different strategies for multi- or mono-national audiences. In networks with linguistic entry barriers, discourse is tailored in a more culturally exclusive manner (Cuevas et al., 2013), in which the internet vernacular is intertwined with local cultures (Pande, 2018). Especially relatability and believableness that are mainly constructed through validation based on the perceived likelihood of certain experiences (Abidin, 2015) are more rigidly defined in smaller communities of people with similar cultural, geographical, economic, and political experiences offline. This creates opportunities for microcelebrities to address local community issues without alienating audiences who are not familiar with the local setting.

Degree of freedom of speech also constitutes an essential factor that shapes what kinds of discourses can emerge in online settings and how they are constructed. Indeed, unlike the subjects of the other microcelebrity studies I have so far shared, for highly visible accounts in Turkey, political participation creates significant tensions and comes at a personal risk due to the restrictions on free speech. However, networked

authoritarianism also functions differently in different localities, repressive governments often have their own brand of suppressing dissenting voices (Pearce and Kendzior, 2012). In China, for instance networked authoritarianism is employed through nationalisation of social media and sophisticated filtering and censoring technologies (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2020). Whereas in Turkey, as discussed in the previous chapter, online dissent is monitored through peer surveillance. This means that microcelebrities who oppose the government must navigate a space that is riddled with government supported trolls and pro-government peers (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017). However, how these accounts circumvent the context collapse between desired and undesired audiences, is thus far unexplored. Studies that explore surveillance circumvention by highly visible actors in other repressive contexts such as Russia (Lokot, 2018) and Cambodia (Lee, 2018) focus on activists who engage in more coordinated and networked practices to avoid reprisals from authorities, this is, therefore, the first study to my knowledge that explores this in a microcelebrity context.

3.1.6 Conclusion

This section of the literature review discussed the importance of microcelebrities' political participation through their perceived authenticity and command over public attention in online platforms. I demonstrated how microcelebrities' lack of apparent ties to political parties or activist groups may help them to be perceived as 'people like us' as they 'speak and behave in ways that appeal to sections of the public who feel intimidated by the language and discourse of politics' (Corner and Pels, 2003, p.254). Cynicism towards the intentions of public figures and politicians doesn't apply to microcelebrity because of the presumption that there is very little difference between the perceived and actual micro-celebrity personas (Marwick, 2015). I then discussed how protests and social movements can breed microcelebrity and how microcelebrities can aid marginalised groups and social movements by focusing the scattered public attention.

Moving beyond the focus on activist or exclusively political microcelebrity accounts, I made a case for exploring microcelebrities who intermittently engage with political

topics. These accounts that are not exclusively political, operationalise both the authenticity and the command of online attention that makes microcelebrity an appealing political communicator and occupy a unique space in repressive regimes where online dissent is criminalised, and political actors are distrusted. However, as accounts who intermittently produce political content, the way they engage in impression management to maintain their audience with varying degrees of interest in political topics needs further attention.

Finally, within the constraints of navigating a restricted national Twittersphere, their position as highly visible accounts also make them vulnerable to the surveillance mechanisms. Therefore, the ways they partake in political talk may reveal interesting insights into the ways dissident narratives gain visibility while remaining under the radar in repressive settings. In the following section, I will focus on how dissent is communicated in repressive settings and the 'language of resistance' in Turkey which will inform my analysis of the political talk by these microcelebrity accounts.

3.2 Resisting Repressive Governments Online

Studies that explore online resistance to repressive governments demonstrate how users avoid explicit criticisms and operationalise digital skills and hidden meanings to communicate dissent (Soh, 2020; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2020; Lokot, 2018; Lee, 2018; Poel, de Kloet and Zeng, 2013). These studies challenge the binary dispositions such as political/non-political and frivolous/essential by arguing for the importance of digital practices such as memes and intertextual humour in subverting power dynamics (Soh, 2020). It was evidenced that in authoritarian settings, the vernacular creativity afforded by social media has been used for evading surveillance (Poel, de Kloet and Zeng, 2013) and challenging oppression (Denisova, 2016). Looking into the blurred lines between such concepts and understanding the value of hidden, inexplicit and tactical ways of online political participation in repressive contexts have been gaining some attention in

academic research in recent years. However, a majority of the reflections on creative and imaginative political participation on social media still remain mostly limited to democratic settings (Jenkins et al., 2016).

Playful, irreverent, and humorous engagement with politics is a common element of Internet cultures everywhere; everyday social media rituals of memeification, parodying and intertextual appropriation are frequently adapted for political commentary (Highfield, 2018; Freelon and Karpf, 2015). Humour has been documented as a common way of engaging with electoral topics in a variety of countries including Korea (Park, 2013), France (Frame and Brachotte, 2015) Norway (Kalsnes, Krumsvik and Storsuland, 2014), the US (Freelon and Karpf, 2015), and Australia (Highfield, 2018). Jenkins and colleagues (2016) showed how youth is mobilising around fan networks and popular culture in the US to assert their voice by creating civic imaginaries of a better future outside of institutionalised politics. Wells and colleagues (2016) documented that parody accounts draw substantial attention and engagement during elections in the US and France. In Netherlands political criticism communicated through memes were dubbed "LOLitics" and discussed as popular formats that are used to mock politicians and disseminate political views as in-jokes (Klein, 2019). Even though, a majority of these studies have mapped a terrain where free speech is protected and where the proponents of political humour and creative imaginaries have ideological and creative freedom, they are emblematic of an important cultural practice in engagement with politics.

On the other hand, humour and cultural production are not Internet unique forms of resistance or political engagement, even though they are more normalised and amplified by the Internet culture. Specifically in repressive settings, the subversive power of creativity and play has been most notably discussed in the works of Bakhtin (1985) and Scott (1990) as the 'weapons of the weak' through which subordinate groups could achieve temporary reversals of power. Imaginative tactics of overcoming restrictions and imposed cultural codes were also central to De Certeau's (1984) ideas about how people claim agency in everyday life against the hegemony of the elites. I will now, turn to these key academic works and particularly engage with Scott's idea of infrapolitics to explore

the links between creativity and subversion and discuss how these apply to digital settings and microcelebrity.

3.2.1 Creativity, Subversion and the Infrapolitics of Dissent

In his work into the subversive resistance of ordinary people in the Middle East, Asef Bayat (2010) called the daily struggle to exist within an undemocratic, autocratic regime as the "art of presence", which he defined as "the courage and creativity to assert collective will in spite of all odds, to circumvent constraints, utilizing what is available and discovering new spaces within which to make oneself heard, seen, felt, and realized." (p.28). Bayat (2010) further explains that these creative acts of dissent emerge in spaces that authoritarian governments cannot fully control which constitute "zones of relative freedom— that can be filled and appropriated by ordinary actors." (p.25). History of resistance to hegemony is filled with examples of subordinate groups finding these spaces to assert their will, however, as James Scott (1990) argues how resistance is performed in these spaces are equally crucial in avoiding retaliations. In these relatively free spaces resistance does not happen through direct confrontation; it relies on the shared understanding of vernacular codes between subordinates that engender the discursive tactics needed for communicating dissent when the opportunities arise (Scott, 1990).

Traditionally one such outlet of political resistance in Turkey and the Middle East has been the ancient tradition of oral folk humour through which ordinary people were able to circumvent the constraints on the free speech in resharing of folk stories that held no one beyond reproach (Etaati, 2018; Aksan, 2016). Scott (1990) similarly acknowledges the middle ground between the dominant and subordinate groups that is formed by folktales, rumours, jokes and rituals, which carry different meanings to those who understand the hidden messages and those who don't. He calls these zones of relative freedom "infrapolitics". He further asserts that infrapolitics provides ample opportunities for resistance because "the control of oral culture is almost impossible since it's secluded, anonymous and decentralized" (p.4). He argues that the true meanings that are hidden

behind the folklore are invisible to the dominant classes as they are excluded from the cultural processes that deemed such acts/hidden messages meaningful.

Scott's framework of "infrapolitics" is often referenced in the studies on online political resistance to repressive regimes as the space that exist between explicit political contention and total compliance (Lee, 2018; Ncube and Chinouriri, 2016; Yang, Tang and Wang, 2014). Ncube and Chinouriri (2016) argue that in Zimbabwe the nicknaming of politicians is used as a form of Scott's (1990) "weapons of the weak" as in tactics that are employed to express discontent without reprisal from the authorities. On the other hand, Yang, Tang and Wang (2014) consider modern popular culture as infrapolitics in the restricted Chinese Internetsphere where popular culture, in a similar way to folk tales, is used both as a site and a tool for covert political resistance.

As I have discussed within celebrity politics and previously in this section, popular and Internet cultures as infrapolitics is also evidenced in both Western and non-Western settings (Jenkins et al., 2016; Highfield, 2018; Coleman, 2002). For instance, in the UK, Scott, Street and Inthorn (2011) found that popular cultural artefacts "offer young people particularly salient points of identification with the national and international arena in a way that news media do not" (p. 513). Similarly, Lisel Hintz (2019) have argued that in Turkey, "pop culture constitutes a site in which beliefs about what key political issues are and how they should be approached are disseminated, shaped, and contested." In these works, popular culture is discussed as a legitimate tool for reclaiming voice that has long been ignored by institutional politics that only recognises certain forms of political speech as worthy to be heard (Couldry, 2010).

Since the days of the subversive folk tales (Scott, 1990) used for carnivalesque resistance (Bakhtin, 1984), this miscalculation by the political elites who see popular culture as a frivolous outlet for anyone who has serious grievances has been also the cultivator of its capacity for subversion. In later research Hintz (2021) further adds to the subversive potential of popular culture by asserting that on Turkish social media, pop culture is a

device for veiled criticisms against the AKP regime that may not instigate civic action but builds connections among those who are in on its meanings. In repressive settings, popular cultural artefacts enable in-group identification and unique vocabularies (Hintz, 2021) which are appropriated for political resistance that may remain under the radar due to being coded as entertainment (Yang, Wang and Tang, 2014).

Similarly, Bayat's (2010) "art of presence" require instances of non-collective resistance that seem insignificant and unharmful to repressive governments and, through this miscalculation, manage to inspire much change. These acts, such as the ones traditionally performed through humorous folktales or through Internet culture, hold immense value in repressive contexts where the surveillance regime and the state's desire to subvert any explicit form of dissent hinders the political agency of those who oppose the regime. Infrapolitics, therefore, is the act of exploiting 'zones of relative freedom' to claim back agency. However, these are not just any instance of indirect engagement with politics, subversive power of infrapolitics depends on the creation of codes, meanings and connotations that cannot be easily decoded or coded as political by those in power. Today, Internet pop cultures are conduits for building such vocabularies.

3.2.2 Oral to Digital – Languages of Resistance

Etaati (2018) in a study on the political dissent during Iranian elections draws a link between folk humour and online humour. He shows that digital folklore provides a new and improved space for re-enacting this oral tradition in opposition to autocratic governments. He argues that social media vernacular of memes and intertextual humour, as well as conditions of ephemerality and replicability create a useful terrain in which users can create digital folk humour that is decentralised and difficult to control. Similarly, scholars argue that the re-popularisation of humour as a tool for dissent in Turkey during the Gezi Park protests emerged from a reinterpretation of this ancient tradition of oral folk humour in its implicitness and pluralism (Aksan, 2017; Gole, 2013). Aksan (2017) particularly considers the role of Internet culture in defining the new language of opposition in Turkey as an extension of this oral tradition. She points to the parallels

between political humour on Twitter that builds on the “Gezi language” and traditional folk humour in terms of their reliance on improvisation, creativity, and pluralism.

Gezi Park protests have instigated what was considered a ‘wits versus weapons’ struggle between the government, their supporters and those who oppose them, alongside a physical reclaiming of space by the marginalised publics through the occupation of Gezi Park. In the words of the protesters “the disproportionate use of tear gas” was responded by a “disproportionate use of intelligence”, which was conveyed through folk humour, pop cultural polyvocality and satire (Yigit, 2015). The digital skills, discursive styles and culture that were defining a new anti-government political talk during the Gezi Park Protests (Varnali and Gorgulu, 2014) have found a new identity on the streets as tweets became graffities and other street art were shared and replicated on Twitter. (For a detailed analysis of the street art and humour in Gezi Park see. Morva, 2016).

The resurrection of folk humour as the language of resistance also had ties to the shifts in the media landscape. Even though humour had an important place in Turkish politics since the early years of the republic in the form of folk humour, political satire magazines and TV shows, under the AKP regime, these magazines and shows have encountered many difficulties as the formal political sphere grew less and less tolerant towards political humour (Morva, 2016; Tufekci, 2017; Aksan, 2016). On the other hand, Gezi Park protests have arrived several years into the popularisation of social media platforms in which humour was being established as the Internet common language (Shifman, 2007; Freelon and Karpf, 2015). Political humour exhibited during the Gezi Park protests, therefore, was also a response to the eviction of humour and creative expression from the political sphere while it was traditionally such a large part of resistance and was once again gaining significance in everyday life through social media (Ayata, 2014 cited in Aksan 2017). As Tufekci (2017) states

> “This humour-laced but sharply political meme culture echoed hundreds of years of tradition in Turkey when poets and jesters would use sarcasm to criticize what was seemingly untouchable— even the Ottoman caliphs. But now, this centuries-old method was reborn and reimagined online, often in ways that seemed

> obscure to those outside of the youth culture that fuelled it. Thus, many had missed its scale." (p. xx)

To further Tufekci's point in the first sentence, this reimagining of the oral culture in online spaces also necessitates a rebranding of the arbiters of oral culture that were once jesters and poets as microcelebrity, a skilled online storyteller who is adept at Internet culture. This is not to say that only the microcelebrities have used this language but during the protests, those who have shown superior skill in weaponising Internet cultures to create political content became microcelebrities much like jesters and poets who were more skilled at rhetoric than laypersons. I will come back to this point in the following sections to draw further parallels between microcelebrities of today and the public storytellers of the oral tradition. I will unpick the rest of the quote here as Tufekci points to another important implication of this cultural shift which is the polarisation that this language has created.

Gezi Park protests have shown the detachment of the AKP and the pro-AKP groups in mitigating a protest that was fuelled by Internet culture and conveyed through a language that was foreign to the conservative political culture endorsed by the government (Tufekci, 2017). Morva (2016) argues that due to this separation, cultural references, humour and creativity were the ways in which those who oppose the government could distinguish their voice from that of the dominant during the protests, which was an important tool for solidarity between otherwise polarised publics. Therefore, this language that is used create the in and out group boundaries engendered an oppositional subculture in which the ability to understand and create humorous and imaginative content determined the subcultural insiders (Gurel, 2015). In fact, a popular slogan during the protests echoed "The only thing they don't know how to deal with is humour" acknowledging this separation (Gorkem, 2015); as the protestors shared "not just the joke but also the distance they have established through the joke between themselves and the object of ridicule" (Dagtas, 2018, p. 123).

Thereafter, the literacy of this language was deemed as a litmus test for identifying pro and anti-AKP groups (Irak, 2017; Yalcintas, 2015). This is also how these practices of overt criticism through ridicule became infrapolitical, as they operationalised cultural codes that were shared within the anti-AKP sections of the public that they considered to be unfamiliar to their political opponent. However, we know very little about how this language is used on Twitter. In fact, even during the Gezi Park protests studies that explored Twitter use in Turkey mainly considered its role in coordinating protests (Ogan and Varol, 2016; Varnali and Gorgulu, 2015) but "the language of resistance" was mostly studied through the images from the ground that disseminated on Twitter rather than the ways it was manifested in tweets (Aksan, 2017; Dagtas, 2016; Morva, 2016). More recent studies show how witticisms, humorous metaphors and euphemisms that were the core tenets of Gezi language still guide the language used by resistant citizens on social media (Yigit, 2015; Gorkem, 2015; Karatas, 2021; Onbas Anbarli, 2021), yet these studies rely on interviews and do not explore the content itself. This indicates that the use of this language on social media and the conventions of the oppositional subculture that it engenders need further attention as social media platforms are among the last remaining venues where collective interaction between oppositional groups is still possible and where the voices of the dominant and the oppressed coexist (Dogu and Mat, 2019).

3.2.3 Online Infrapolitics and (In)visibility

In restricted and monitored online environments, the tactical use of Twitter to mobilise around or even critically engage with political events call for a variety of counter surveillance tactics in order to avoid the consequences of being in opposition to the dominant ideology. In the Turkish brand of authoritarianism, this means circumventing a terrain riddled with government trolls and eager pro-government accounts ready to report dissent to the authorities (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017; Saka, 2017). In this sense, a further examination of James Scott's (1990) juxtaposition of the public transcripts of power relations with the hidden ones becomes necessary. He asserts that "every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant." (1990, p. xii) which are then operationalised during infrapolitical interactions with the dominant actors. He cautions

researchers that these hidden transcripts can only be known by observing the discourse that happens outside of the direct interactions between the powerful and the powerless as they happen in those spaces where the resistance "germinates" (p.xii).

Scott's argument, however, depends on the dichotomy of the public and the private. Public space, in his understanding, is where we see an ideological roleplay and a masking of true opinions by the oppressed groups in their encounters with the dominant. These are then only unravelled in the privacy of the backstage that exists between those who are subjected to similar struggles; only within these spaces that are concealed from the surveillance of the dominant, hidden transcripts and the conventions of infrapolitical talk are formed. The idea of a back and front stage in social interactions was most prominently proposed by Erving Goffman (1967), who considers these interaction rituals firmly within the domain of face-to-face interactions. In the complexity of technologically mediated social relations, however, scholars came to talk about "publicly private" (Lange, 2007) or "privately public" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 140) social lives afforded by social media platforms. The distance and difference between public and private are diminishing online where seemingly private information can have public audiences and vice versa. In fact, Ditchfield (2019), in their research into Facebook argues that this publicness of online interactions makes back/front stage concepts inapplicable to social media platforms. Furthering Goffman's work into stages of identity presentation, they propose the "rehearsal stage" that is enabled by the platform architecture and happens during the pre-post editing. If applied to online hidden transcripts, it can be argued that in online environments, where those expressing discontent with the government(s) have little control over their audience (boyd, 2010), the success of hidden transcripts is in large part connected to the skill of the content creator and their familiarity with their intended audience that they exhibit in the rehearsal stage. This becomes even more complicated in the case of microcelebrity due to their heightened visibility that hinders their ability to control the reach of their tweets and understand the full extent of their audience.

3.2.4 Structures and Conditions of Visibility

In understanding the infrapolitical performances of microcelebrities, Abidin (2021)'s conceptualisation of refracted publics as publics that are circumvented by users, is particularly helpful. It provides a useful framework for delineating the structural affordances of social media that allow for this form of resistance. She argues that the conditions of refracted publics emerge from the transience, discoverability, decodability and silosociality that are afforded by social media platforms. In describing each of these conditions Abidin (2021) asserts that while transience refers to the ease of removing content or coding content to be legible in the short term, the other three conditions arise from strategies of tailoring content to be accessed by those who have access to specific contexts or knowledges.

Context collapse on social media platforms make effective communication with specific audiences difficult (Marwick and boyd, 2011) therefore in navigating refracted publics microcelebrities need to operationalise contextual cues, or in Abidin's words "weaponised contexts" to avoid unintended audiences. Particularly, in repressive settings, for those who engage in oppositional political talk, the content reaching unintended audiences carry staggering risks that go beyond losing social capital. Focusing on self-presentation, many studies on context collapse draw attention to the various strategies such as social steganography, using friend lists, subtweeting and vaguebooking that the social media users need to employ to protect their privacy or reputation (Hogan, 2010, Vitak, 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2014). Especially for microcelebrity accounts, due to their high visibility and need to maintain their status, much of the practices of avoiding context collapse ordinary users can adopt (such as making content selectively available to private friend lists) become unfeasible.

Furthermore, creating such exclusive content would assume that the microcelebrities are able to correctly identify pro-AKP accounts. This further complicates matters as Scott's (1990) framework also depends on the clear distinction between the dominant and the dominated, which is easier to identify in the context of his research that primarily focuses

on the class and racial struggle. This means that both parties of the discourse can recognise their own from the others belonging to a different social class (rich people and their servants; slaves and slave owners; workers and bosses) whereas the boundaries between the dominant and the marginalised are more complex and blurred in the online spaces of (semi-)/democratic countries where the differences between these groups are flattened (Nakamura, 2002). Therefore, the cultural references, surreptitious humour and creative language developed through shared understandings gain further importance in distancing from unwanted audiences in online platforms where they cannot be always correctly identified.

3.2.5 Hiding Dissent in Plain Sight: Addressing Intended Audiences

Traditionally, visibility and publicness have always been an important part of the subversiveness of infrapolitical interactions. They used to be performed through staged performances of oral culture, which often took place in public spaces and relied on certain actors who were skilled in imbuing their tales with subversive hidden messages (Scott, 1990; Bakhtin, 1984). In the Turkish context, these performances were staged in coffee houses by public storytellers called Meddah[1]. In explaining Meddah's role in Ottoman society, Komecoglu (2005) cites several European observers from 1800s who claimed that Meddah fulfilled the role of journalists who provided social and political critique about the day's events and conditions viva voce. Meddah's stories would then be told and retold by the audience members similar to the way memes circulate today or content gets reshared across platforms (Tufekci, 2017). In this sense, the storyteller's role was not to become a spokesperson but to strike the appropriate balance between political criticism and harmless entertainment so that the others could retell and mimic these without fearing reprisals from the authorities.

Therefore, if the language of dissent in Turkey is a re-enactment of this oral tradition through digital folklore (Gole, 2013; Aksan, 2017; Tufekci, 2017), then it is appropriate to

[1] Meddah refers to a travelling public storyteller and actor who performs humorous, witty and original material with a strong improvisational prowess in coffeehouses and town squares.

consider microcelebrities and prolific content creators as a re-enactment of Meddahs. Similarities between microcelebrity practices and the oral culture mediated by Meddahs can be seen in the way Aksan (2017) discusses these actors:

> "Performing in such places requires an ability to integrate the material to the specific venue and audience. For instance, the humorous work of Meddah depends on his ability to integrate his jokes and mimicking relating to current events with his social and political criticism (And 1979: 156). The improvisation, therefore, requires quick-witted answers […] the creation of a great variety of conversational forms (And 1979; Tekerek 2007)." (p.28)

In online spaces, adapting content to the specific demands of platform cultures (venue) and according to an intended audience are key performances of self (Senft, 2008). Defining Internet performances in their relationship to earlier forms of public performance is not new, notably Burgess and Green (2018) consider vlogging performance as an online Vaudeville. Similarly, Kaymas and Yakin (2019) considered Youtube microcelebrities in Turkey as modern day Meddahs. Youtube, being a visual platform for staged performances, presents opportunities to draw more direct comparisons between these cultural formats, whereas Twitter microcelebrity compares to Meddah not in terms of format but in terms of content output, which blends entertainment and social commentary.

This comparison is useful in several ways. Microcelebrities on Turkish Twitter must navigate a similar terrain to Meddahs in engaging with infrapolitics. When narrating everyday life, they need to integrate their jokes with socio-political observations and need to present quick-witted responses to daily events before they become old news in the transient setting of Twitter. Secondly, Meddahs and microcelebrities share a similar flat relationship with their audiences. In Meddah performances, audience was free to interfere, comment on or add to the performance (Komecoglu, 2005) much like in the Twittersphere, which allowed for creating mutual understanding and familiarity by diminishing the distance between the performer and the spectator. This familiarity was further enabled by the common phrases that were used in Meddah performances; all

performances started and ended by reciting the same verse, which functioned much like "Once upon a time" in fairy tales. This is mimicked by the microcelebrity in the sense that due to the lack of a 'backstage' to agree on hidden meanings, when they criticise the government, they need to do so by understanding their loyal audiences through the relationships they have built and by adhering to ritualised forms of engagement that are recognised by social media users. Highfield (2016) considers memes, parody, intertextual humour as these social media rituals that are not inherently political but can serve a multitude of political purposes. Defining these practices as ritual is essential to tease out their capacities to host hidden transcripts and to establish microcelebrities as digital Meddahs, because rituals are habitual elements of folk cultures that are recognisable and formalised through mutual cultural consumption (Couldry, 2004).

Rituals are a part of microcelebrity culture as microcelebrities maintain their audience and brand through the consistency of their communicative styles and persona (Marwick and boyd, 2011), which allows them to develop patterns and establish a unique voice in the way they communicate dissent and everything else. Their intimate relationship with their audience and the familiarity they have established with their audiences over time (Abidin, 2015, Abidin 2017) work as a conduit in the recognition of their unique voice by savvy audiences. Therefore, much like the public storytellers of the past, these communicative styles microcelebrity accounts develop as a part of their personal brand (Abidin, 2015a) and the relationships they establish to maintain an audience base (Marwick, 2013) are inextricably linked to the ways they remain under the radar. Furthermore, akin to oral culture around folk tales, successful and viral content often gets mimicked and replicated in participatory cultures where users collectively recontextualise and redistribute cultural products (Shifman, 2007; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013). This means that the communicative styles and tactics these popular accounts use to remain under the radar do not just impact how they engage with politics but also how their audiences who are inclined to imitate and emulate (Abidin and Ots, 2016) their communicative styles engage with politics as well, since especially in the Turkish context, the ways they avoid detection may be considered as a blueprint for safer anti-government talk.

In the actualisation of infrapolitics, microcelebrities' role in Turkish Twitter should draw further interest as Daghan Irak (2017) argues that digital cultural capital is an anti-hegemonic tool used by anti-AKP groups in Turkey. He asserts that the accumulation of digital cultural capital by the anti-AKP sections of the public created a digital divide between anti- and pro-AKP groups. While anti-AKP groups developed the capacity, access and skills to obtain cultural literacy into social media platforms, the pro-AKP groups were left out because of the AKP regime's insistence on vilifying meaningful engagement with the Internet cultures. In this sense, cultural capital is also considered as what underlines the humorous discourse that was a core component in the development of the language of dissent in Turkey (Morva, 2017). This suggests that political participation of microcelebrities, who arguably have a considerable amount of digital cultural capital, need to be scrutinised as they have the necessary tools to skilfully weaponise the digital divide created by this skill and literacy gap between pro and anti AKP groups to achieve temporary reversals of power.

Digital cultural capital derives from the ability to understand the internet cultures and produce content that satisfy the tastes and expectations of the online publics. In media studies, research has considered use of memes and other reproducible online cultural artefacts as signs of accumulated (sub)cultural capital (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015). Nissenbaum and Shifman (2015) and Milner (2012) argued that memes and other intertextual content, constitute cultural capital because in their intertextuality they require a specific form of subcultural literacy and are, therefore, used as a means to differentiate the group members from "passerbys". These characteristics of Internet language nurtures infrapolitics because infrapolitical interactions are inherently intertextual as they bridge the hidden and public transcripts. In a similar vein, Wu and Fitzgerald (2020) argue that the literacies of Internet culture can be weaponised in repressive settings. As they identify that Chinese Internet users rely on intertextual allusions and quotations to hide dissent in plain sight. In doing so, they capitalise on the multi-layered meanings that the allusion or quotation enable and rely on their audience's ability to decode the political, contextual, and pop cultural dimensions of the content. In

relation to the subversive power of the internet pop culture weaponised by microcelebrities Abidin (2021a) cautions researchers to not belittle this format and further asserts

> "They may not always seem like the most learned or most certified people, but the networks of their power and information circuits are extremely dispersed, and when they consolidate, that's when you really see the subversive power of them all" (p.55)

In the context of this thesis and Irak's (2017) argument, a more specific element of the digital cultural literacy that also needs attention is the shared understandings about how to use Twitter, which include the topics that are deemed appropriate and the communicative styles, tonality, presentation of the tweets which indicate an "implicit knowledge with which users demonstrate that they are "getting" Twitter" (Schmidt, 2014, p.6). Schmidt further asserts that

> "Possession of this implicit knowledge about shared routines and expectations becomes a condition of inclusion or exclusion in the "community of practice" of Twitter as a whole, as well as of participating in particular subcultures via Twitter" (p.7)

"Getting" Twitter, involves understanding the platform vernacular and rituals which include the ways to circumvent limitations Twitter's format of 240-character tweets presents for meaningful self-expression. Papacharissi asserts that "individuals confronted with a restricted stage for self-presentation seek to overcome expressive restrictions through imaginative strategies that include play" (2012, p. 1998). In this sense, "play" being a central characteristic of Twitter culture allows for surreptitious political expression to pass as "business as usual" on a platform that is rife with such expressive styles. This façade allows for a measure of deniability when faced with confronting the authorities that seek to penalise dissent (Papacharissi, 2012). Therefore, anti-AKP groups' accumulation of digital cultural literacies (Irak, 2017) that allow them to understand Twitter vernacular may mean that the hidden meanings could also emerge from the literacy of the discursive styles, rituals and knowledges that are created in the platform as

they get reused and repurposed in the dissident talk. In this sense, looking at how microcelebrities partake in anti-government political talk may reveal how social media rituals and platform vernacular are used for covert political criticism.

3.2.6 Conclusion

In this section, I have reviewed the scholarly works on the ways dissent is communicated in repressive contexts by particularly focusing on James Scott's (1990) framing of infrapolitics as the grey area between direct confrontation and total compliance in the subordinate groups' interactions with the dominant. Infrapolitics that traditionally existed in public performances of folk tales are now re-enacted online through appropriations of pop culture, intertextual allusions and memes that allow for playful and surreptitious engagement with politics. In settings like China, these formats of the Internet vernacular allow for claiming zones of relative freedom under state surveillance by hiding the political messages within an entertainment context which bypass technological censors that track certain keywords and expressions. However, in settings where online dissent is monitored through peer-surveillance like Turkey, the structural characteristics of these platforms that make the intended and unintended audiences collapse, introduce further problems to the capacities of hiding dissent in plain sight. I have argued that as highly visible accounts who need to navigate this context collapse, how microcelebrities weaponise contexts (Abidin, 2021) to reach intended audiences need further attention.

Furthermore, by exploring the language of resistance that delineates the power relationships between the pro and anti AKP groups in Turkey, I have discussed how Internet culture literacies and the accumulation of cultural capital by those who oppose the government equip dissidents with tools to circumvent surveillance. These skills and literacies that inform the political humour and creative political talk are seen as the catalysers of temporary reversals of power achieved both during the Gezi Park protests and in online spaces. Even though the studies that identify the shared cultural understandings and literacies as the tools for dissent in Turkey are plentiful, to date, there hasn't been any academic interest into how these literacies are weaponised on social

media. Existing studies are limited to the ones exploring the Gezi Park protests, and theoretical accounts such as Irak (2017). With this in mind, I have argued that this reliance on digital cultural literacies further amplifies the significance of exploring microcelebrities' political participation on Twitter, as accounts who gain status through their command of the platform cultures.

Chapter 4 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter provides an outline of the approach and the research methodology I have employed to answer the research questions "How do microcelebrities partake in anti-government political talk on Turkish Twitter? What are the strategies they use to remain under the radar?" In order to answer this question, I will be utilising interpretive content analysis which is deemed as a fitting method to study how meaning is constructed within digital cultures through an in-depth analysis of latent meanings tweets (Rosenbaum, 2017). Interpretive content analysis is a qualitative method that enables analysing both meaning and the communication of meaning through inductive and reflexive processes. This methodology also pays attention to the technocultural aspects of meaning production in digital environments (Langlois, 2011), that considers "extra-textual materials" (Rosenbaum, 2017, p.23) such as, gifs, URLs and pictures as components of meaning that should be analysed alongside texts which are often overlooked in the other forms of content analysis. The discussions of this method and the ways in which it will be used to address research questions will be detailed further in the following sections.

This research is methodologically situated in the intersection of social media (specifically Twitter) microcelebrity studies and the studies on the political discourse on Twitter. These two fields have adopted different methodologies when approaching the dynamics of online communication. Research into political discourse on Twitter has mainly utilised social network analysis, content analysis and other quantitative digital methods when investigating how political topics are discussed among networked publics (see. Tumasjan et al., 2010; Larsson and Moe, 2011; Vaccari et al., 2015; Ogan and Varol, 2017); qualitative methods were mostly used to address the social media use of politicians and political parties (see. Broersma and Graham, 2012; Baxter and Marcella, 2012). Meanwhile, similar to the research on politicians' use of social media, microcelebrity studies have taken a more qualitative interest into the communicative strategies of these accounts through discourse and textual analyses (see. Marwick and boyd, 2011; Tufekci, 2013; Abidin, 2015; Jerslev, 2016). In line with this trend, most recently, Abidin (2021b)'s

study that explores how Youtube Influencers have created spaces for social and political commentary focuses on a single prominent Influencer account.

A certain topical convergence can be observed between these two fields with the development of user influence studies that took interest in the power dynamics between users within the issue networks on Twitter. User influence studies have allowed researchers to identify the key actors that drive political discourse within social media platforms. Even though these fields rarely speak to each other, insights from user influence studies are also relevant to microcelebrity studies, as it deals closely with the distribution of attention and influence on social media, such as the work of Arvidsson et al., (2015) on microcelebrity formations within One Direction fan networks is an example that methodologically sits between these fields as they combine network analysis with content analysis to discuss how microcelebrities contribute to the discourse. In this study, my data collection and sampling are inspired by these studies that look at microcelebrity narratives not by focusing on case studies but by analysing multiple accounts to reveal patterns in the way high-visibility accounts are contributing to discourse whereas my method of analysis sits closer to the qualitative microcelebrity studies that analyse specific accounts such as Abidin (2021b).

In the first section, I will start by addressing different research designs I have considered before settling on conducting an interpretive content analysis on 100 microcelebrity accounts. Because a majority of the studies in the area of political discourse on Twitter have been quantitative, the research design will be discussed with a given emphasis on how this research both benefits and moves away from big data and quantitative digital research. This will be interlaced with a more focused account on the limitations caused by the divergent uses of Twitter in repressive settings for conducting such research. These discussions will also form the methodological underpinnings of the sampling and data collection techniques I have employed.

Following this, I will present interpretive content analysis as the main research method and discuss the ways these will be used to tackle the research questions. In doing so, I will be drawing from the application of this methodology by Rosenbaum (2017) who has used interpretive content analysis to explore the construction of meaning in Twitter cultures. Even though, Rosenbaum's study mainly focused on the reconstruction and contestation of racial and cultural identity on Twitter, her approach is valuable for this research as it focuses on the analysis of complex latent meanings in tweets. This methodology is also inspired by the works of Marwick and boyd (2011), Tufekci (2013), Badran and De Angelis (2015) and Jerslev (2016) who have employed discourse and textual analyses on tweets and Facebook posts of certain microcelebrities in order to provide insight into the ways they use these platforms for self-promotion (Marwick and boyd, 2011) and political communication (Tufekci, 2013; Badran and De Angelis, 2015). As it is the case with every interpretive analysis, my positionality as a researcher becomes central to the interpretation of these tweets which I will address in the final section, here I will also provide an overview of ethical issues and the limitations of this research.

4.1 Responding to the Field: a Review of the Methodological Approaches

Using large datasets and network analysis methods have allowed researchers to unravel patterns and flows of communication on Twitter which provided necessary insights into the discussion around elections (Freelon and Karpf, 2015) and protests (Segerberg and Bennett, 2011). At the start of this project, I have also envisioned to bring together social network analysis and content analysis to explore microcelebrity tweets within the networks formed by elections related hashtags. This was mainly inspired by the common methodologies in the field such as Arvidsson et al., (2015) who used content and social network analyses to reveal how microcelebrities were contributing to the discourse in the networks of One Direction fans. As I was aiming to explore how political criticisms were expressed by high-visibility accounts, hashtags provided a suitable site where political discussions would take place in a highly visible setting. This approach was supported by

the studies which show that Twitter microcelebrities relied on hashtags to garner visibility and find audiences (Page, 2012), and the studies into political discourse on Twitter which claim that political discussions around elections are often coordinated by hashtags (Wright, Graham and Jackson, 2016). In the process of developing this research however, I have observed several issues with employing hashtag-based data collection methods on Turkish Twitter. In this section I will discuss these issues to add to the points made by other researchers about the shortcomings of these methodologies due to the cultural and structural differences in the ways platforms are used in different settings. I will then discuss how focusing on a large microcelebrity corpus to analyse political talk during elections may help mitigate some of these methodological shortcomings in divergent settings.

4.1.1 Hashtag or not to Hashtag: Expressing Political Concerns on Twitter

A majority of the studies that explore citizens' political engagement during political events have been focused on hashtags and other signifiers that help researchers to identify spaces where politics is discussed explicitly and collectively (Jungherr, 2015). In fact, especially in non-English social media, network analysis and other digital methods bypass the linguistic barriers and offer a way in for researchers to understand communicative patterns in these settings. Thus, research that focused on citizens communication around elections in non-English settings have analysed political participation in a networked form (social network analysis) and content in aggregate (Tumasjan et al., 2010; Weerkamp, Carter and Tsagkias, 2011; Larsson and Moe, 2011; Giglietto, 2012; Kim and Park, 2012; Vaccari et al., 2015). In this section I will explain why this is not the most suitable way to explore anti-government political talk in Turkey and in repressive settings in general. Focus on hashtag datasets in digital politics research comes from the expectation that those who seek public attention and engage in political discourse use these conversational markers to connect with like-minded others and gain visibility (Page,2012). The increased visibility the hashtag grants for the discourse and participants, makes it a suitable space to explore online discourse around political events. Hashtags also allow for talk to be searchable (Zappavigna, 2011) and easier to access for researchers trying to make sense of the online political culture.

Even though much has been learnt about political discussions that form around hashtagged content, this approach has been criticised for its lack of consideration for the political talk that emerges outside of these parameters. Most notably, Bruns et al., (2016) assert that hashtag datasets "constitute the low-hanging fruit in social media data" (p. 21) and there is a need for Twitter research that focuses on less instantly accessible content. Furthermore, this assumption that all attention worthy political talk should be coordinated by hashtags was addressed by Wright, Graham and Jackson (2016) who argued that the overwhelming focus on explicitly political content ignores "the everydayness of political communication" (p. 74); in result, the research 'largely captures the usual political suspects" (p. 79). These assertions gain further importance when enquiring into the ways social media platforms are used for political participation in repressive regimes, which comes with several challenges for the researchers. Notoriety of repressive regimes in employing surveillance measures to keep online discussions under control (Shirky, 2011) manifests itself in the form of increased self-censorship and political hashtag avoidance (Tanash et al., 2017), which makes the common ways researchers group Twitter data such as, use of certain keywords and hashtags less productive for these networks.

Large scale social movements such as Gezi Park protests are exceptions to this rule which create opportunities to analyse anti-government content coordinated by hashtags (Ogan and Varol, 2017; Mercea, Karatas and Bastos, 2017). However, these are exceptional circumstances that make hashtag use possible in repressive settings as the individual users are protected by the large volume of hashtagged tweets (Tufekci, 2013). Therefore, these brief windows in which hashtags are widely used should be evaluated by acknowledging the privileges that arise within the large-scale protests and should not inform our understanding of the uses of these platforms for everyday political engagement or during events like elections in which singling out dissent and dissidents is easier due to a lack of unity in narratives.

In addition, Tufekci's (2014) analysis draws attention to the divergent uses of hashtags in local/National Twitter cultures. They showed that even during the Gezi Park protests, intensity of hashtag use decreased considerably after the first two days. Protestors reported that hashtags were only useful in drawing attention to things that didn't get that much attention, otherwise after two days of protests Twitter timelines were so saturated by protest related tweets that it removed the necessity of using hashtags (Tufekci, 2014a). Therefore, whether something is a dominant story on Twitter has much effect on whether it would be discussed via hashtags, which would indicate that in local/national Twitterspheres, high-profile events like elections would not necessarily demand hashtags to become dominant stories as they concern most of the participants of these spaces. In fact, a recent study by Yurtcicek-Ozaydin (2021) confirms this by showing that most salient hashtags during the 2019 mayoral elections were about electoral fraud mobilisation rather than elections in general. Hashtags are also used as tools for superficial political engagement in Turkey. Studies on government supported troll behaviour on Twitter show how bot-driven or voter coordinated hashtag campaigns are a key strategy for these accounts (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017; Saka, 2017). Due to this, Tufekci (2014) points to the hashtag wars that emerge between pro and anti AKP Twitter users in which both sides are trying to trick the algorithm through coordinated efforts to enter a hashtag into trending topics rather than using it for meaningful engagement.

These issues with the divergent uses of hashtags and the fear of overt political engagement in repressive settings make it crucial to account for the less instantly accessible political talk on Turkish Twitter presented in ways that are less obviously politically coded. I have made this point several times in my literature review, however, I reiterate it here to draw attention to its methodological importance because the largely untapped area of surreptitious political talk in Turkish Twitter does not only signal a gap in the literature but also a methodological problem that cannot be addressed by the common ways of collecting Twitter data.

Due to these issues with hashtags in Turkish Twitter, I have decided to focus on the tweets by microcelebrity accounts directly, rather than as a part of a hashtagged

discussion. This added a further step to my data analysis as I had to sift through all the tweets of these accounts to find ones that are relevant to elections. It has also broadened my research scope as I was collecting not just microcelebrity tweets but also tweets that are retweeted by microcelebrities. This has enriched my analysis by providing me with further insights into what is considered safe or worthy of resharing by these accounts. At this stage, I have also considered interviewing microcelebrities, but I didn't go through with this because at the time Turkey was still governed under state of emergency which meant that political dissent was under further scrutiny. Especially researchers affiliated with foreign institutions were vilified as foreign spies and needed to get permissions from authorities to conduct research on Turkish citizens, which jeopardised my ability to keep my participants anonymised. In addition to this, I am more interested in how these accounts communicate and articulate political issues rather than their intentions, I am therefore, more interested in the end product and the ways these messages can be decoded rather than the processes through which they were constructed.

Furthermore, my exploration of microcelebrities' political participation is a response to this methodological gap created by the ineffectiveness of the hashtag-based data collection techniques to gain insight into Turkish Twitter. Afterall, hashtags capture the political talk by accounts that wish to gain visibility and therefore collecting data via hashtags already limit the data to the tweets that are written with an aim to reach audiences beyond one's own follower network. I replace the form of visibility that the hashtags provide with the one that comes from status to reveal how surveillance is circumvented and the political topics are discussed within the digital spaces maintained by microcelebrity accounts. In this sense, even though microcelebrity tweets, are not in any way perfect reflections of how ordinary users talk about politics, they constitute an appropriate alternative to hashtags in exploring politics discussed in plain sight due to the visibility they command.

4.2 Sample Selection

One of the ways this research is building up on the other studies on microcelebrity's political participation and activism is that it aims to draw a clearer picture of how microcelebrities are contributing to anti-government political discourse by moving away from the constraints of account-specific modes of inquiry (as seen in Tufekci, 2013 and Badran and De Angelis, 2015). In doing so, I decided to analyse a sample of 100 micro-celebrities to provide a more substantial insight into the patterns and trends in the ways these accounts communicate political dissent on Turkish Twitter. Therefore, in terms of sample size and data collection techniques, this research sits closer to quantitative studies, however, my main motivation to work with such a large corpus is not to seek representativeness but to have a better idea about the platform vernacular and common practices within anti-government political talk. Secondly, as these accounts are not exclusively political, I found it appropriate to focus on a larger number of accounts to make sure that I work with a meaningful number of elections related tweets.

Following the previous research on microcelebrity (Marwick, 2010; Jerslev, 2016), this research takes on purposive sampling for identifying its participants. This type of sampling is one of the most common in qualitative research, particularly for interpretive content analysis (Rosenbaum, 2017). It refers to selecting participants based on a criterion set by the researcher to gather the most "productive sample" to answer the research questions (Marshall, 1996, p.523). As this research is interested in microcelebrities who participate in political discourse and the true population of all micro-celebrities in the network is unknown, this was chosen as a fitting approach.

Who should be considered a microcelebrity is also complicated, as discussed before, there is yet no quantitative standard on which accounts can be considered as microcelebrities. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I decided to use the criteria determined by previous research in which microcelebrities in Turkish Twitter are defined as accounts who are followed by over 30.000 users (Sabuncuoğlu and Gülay, 2014). As I

am concerned with the pressures of visibility, this criterion is set with the intention to focus on the most prominent users in the network that have a significant follower base. In order to find the accounts to include in this study, I have started by determining a set of seed users among the most popular names in Turkish Twitter through purposive sampling. In doing so, I have started with the accounts that I have been following since 2013 Gezi Park Protests and the ones that have appeared on the "must follow" lists of Buzzfeed-like Turkish websites that publish popular tweets of the week/month. Through this I have manually identified accounts that had above 30,000 followers.

Second step was to check whether these users were at all tweeting about political and community issues, as not all microcelebrity accounts are willing to discuss political issues to avoid alienating apolitical or politically diverse audiences. Only the accounts that were presenting a narration of their personal lives in a way that they occasionally (or frequently) talk about political and community issues were included in the sample. This also excluded the accounts that primarily talked about politics. Following this process of identifying the seed users, I have expanded this sample through snowball sampling by visiting these micro-celebrities' timelines and utilising who to follow function which suggests accounts similar to that user. This way I ended up with a group of microcelebrities that were similar to each other in the ways in which they used Twitter which offered a suitable sample of accounts to explore patterns and practices in the ways these accounts partake in political talk.

After identifying all the accounts, I have created a private Twitter list for data collection and observation during the election period. Using a private Twitter list was beneficial both for analysis and for monitoring the status of these accounts during the election period. In fact, 3 of these 100 accounts got deleted or became private over the course of the elections, I have excluded these accounts from data collection and ended up with a sample of 97 microcelebrities.

4.3 Data Collection

After obtaining ethics approval on 25 April 2018, the data collection period for this research was set to be the 3 months between 26 April to 26 July 2018. This period coincides with the election campaign period and ends two weeks after the election day. During this time, I collected data through Twitter's standard API (Application Programming Interface) by using two different data collection tools that collect and present data in different ways. As a novice in scraping Twitter, I have taken tutorials on several data collection tools and decided to use two of them that seemed most promising for my aims. I have also spent at least 2 hours each day reading through the tweets in the private list and taking preliminary notes about my initial observations. This was an essential step for the close reading of tweets laden with surreptitious expressions that relied on ephemeral contexts, such tweets demanded to be seen and analysed at the exact moment they were tweeted and not after the fact.

My first data collection tool was Mozdeh, a big data text analysis tool that offers a function to scrape tweets from specific users through Twitter's standard API; second one was University of Southampton Web Science Institute's Web Data Research Assistant tool that scrapes Twitter timelines as they appear on screen. I chose these two tools for this research because both present and scrape data in different ways and can be utilised for different purposes. Mozdeh continually saves the collected data; in case of a power loss or any intended or unintended pauses in data collection, it allows for merging the datasets before and after the interruption to make up for the lost period which was why it was my backup data collection tool set up as a contingency for any issues that may come up during these three months.

On the other hand, I picked the Web Data Research Assistant as my primary data collection tool because it allows for capturing tweets in the order that they appear on the Twitter timeline. This decision came from my preliminary observations into the ways microcelebrities talked about political issues. I have realised that in decoding the tweets, I

was frequently relying on the other tweets that appeared on the timeline which is a practice described in Chapter 6 as “ambient context”. This meant that I needed my final dataset to capture tweets in the order they appeared on the timeline and thus the Web Data Research Assistant was a suitable tool for this purpose. Other data collection tools, including Mozdeh, function detached from the Twitter timelines and because of this, it is difficult to understand in which order they present tweets. Web Data Research Assistant works as a plug-in on browsers and scrapes tweets directly from Twitter timeline -- in this case the timeline of the private list I have created which ensured that my preliminary notes and the final dataset were aligned in terms of which tweets were captured.

One limitation of the Web Data Research Assistant is that it does not show the original authors of retweets (except for the Twitter handles in the URL) which makes the data messier and adds additional hardships for analysis. Mozdeh software is useful for this, as it shows retweets and replies in a clearer way than Web Data Research Assistant. However, as the tweets microcelebrities retweet become as much a part of their online presence and narrative as the original tweets they share, I decided to overlook this limitation but took notes whenever I saw a retweet when coding the dataset. The last provision to increase the depth of the data was to gather further contextual information (such as, interactions; political happenings of the day) to be able to analyse the references made by these tweets. During my preliminary analysis throughout the election period, I took notes about the dates of big events, rallies and speeches that happened. This was particularly important as these events have changed the discursive quality and frequency of tweets by microcelebrity accounts and allowed me to explore the transformation of Twitter discourses as these accounts reacted to other media events.

I have scraped data from the Twitter list every day using the Web Data Research Assistant plug-in on Google Chrome. I have downloaded this data as an Excel spreadsheet and saved each day as a tab in the same spreadsheet. I have then collated these tabs into one spreadsheet at the end of the data collection period. The final dataset consisted of 20981 tweets.

4.4 Interpretive Content Analysis

Qualitatively analysing 20981 tweets is a difficult task that demands a systematic approach to create sensible and meaningful categories to be able to analyse meanings in a manageable way. Due to this, scholars working with large social media datasets often opt for content analyses to organise and analyse their data, because content analysis helps researchers reveal themes and patterns in a systematic way (Arvidsson et al., 2015; Freelon and Karpf, 2012). In this section, I will outline the main methodology of this research and discuss how I utilise content analysis to organise my data and form a foundation for further close reading of tweets. I will provide details of the research processes from coding to analysing this large dataset in order to answer "How do microcelebrities partake in anti-government political talk on Turkish Twitter? What are the strategies they use to remain under the radar?" Answering these questions about political talk in a repressive setting and on a platform rife with context collapse demands researchers to pay attention to latent and polysemic meanings that may resonate with different audiences in different ways. In this sense, interpretations of content require going beyond the manifest meanings which has always been a shortcoming of traditional content analyses. I have, therefore, selected a form of content analysis that mitigated these issues and tailored my methodological approach to fit with the demands of this project.

To start with, it is important to position this research epistemologically, as the method introduced here (i.e., content analysis) takes many different forms depending on the researcher's paradigmatic assumptions. Conventionally, content analysis is often regarded as a quantitative research method that aims to create replicable inferences for the analysis of texts through systematic coding that is informed by the categories designated by previous research (Neuendorf, 2017). In line with positivist or realist epistemologies, it relies on statistical analysis of texts, and it follows the notion that meaning is something that is inherent in the text, hence, it can be analysed objectively (Krippendorff, 2013). These processes involve categorisation of texts into 'fewer content related categories' and it is assumed that when put into certain categories these texts

would share the same meaning (Elo and Kyngas, 2007 p. 108). By taking a more constructivist epistemological position, interpretive content analysis challenges this notion that deems the meaning of words as self-evident and claim that,

> "...the researcher's purpose and frame of reference may make an important difference in the understanding of words in context. From this epistemological perspective, texts do not simply contain meaning but are instead rendered meaningful by the perspective and understanding of the reader for specific purposes." (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p.5).

In order to develop a deeper understanding of the meanings of content, Baxter, (1991, p. 240) suggests researchers to adopt interpretive content analysis, defined as 'a type of qualitative analysis that focuses on understanding the construction of meaning as evidenced in textual material using an inductive, comparative approach akin to grounded theory' (Rosenbaum, 2017, p.20). This is achieved by close reading of texts which demands paying attention to contexts and audiences. I consider this method is an approach to content analysis that draws heavily from the approaches to textual analysis in cultural studies which demand asking questions to the text until the text is understood through its most likely interpretations (Mckee, 2001). Therefore, in this form of content analysis, meaning is not simply contained in the text, it goes beyond descriptive questions of "what" and "how" and tries to contextualise the viewpoints of an ordinary reader to find answers to "for whom" and "in relation to what" a text was constructed (Rosenbaum, 2017, p. 29).

This method, without discrediting the quantification of content, encourages content analysis accounts to emerge from close readings of texts rather than predetermined categories. In this sense, interpretive content analysis differentiates from other forms of qualitative content analysis as it encourages coding categories to 'rely on indigenous conceptions rather than on analysts' theory-imposed conceptions' (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 21). Even though the research itself can be informed by theory, the analysis needs to be inductive and reflexive and not limited by the categories defined by previous research. Essentially making content analysis more about the interpretations of texts within a

context rather than about the frequency of words. Due to this, I consider interpretive content analysis as a more structured form of textual analysis in which close readings are used to create overarching categories that can be used for qualitative analysis of large datasets.

To be able to read a text in a way that the questions about its intended audience and subtext can be answered require much greater awareness of contextual inferences and access to specialized knowledge into the texts and contexts that are being analysed. This is further amplified when enquiring into the political talk on Twitter in smaller non-English networks where linguistic and cultural barriers exist. As Postill and Pink (2012, p.x) states; "Uses of social media can also be interwoven with the qualities, political structures and histories of localities or regions." Therefore, my familiarity with the political structures and localities of Turkey as well as everyday happenings and events provide an essential reference point when analysing the content. In this sense interpretive content analysis is a fitting method to analyse these tweets as it allows for investigating texts beyond their denotative meanings (Ahuvia, 2001, p.196) and in a way valorises researcher's interpretations as a member of the community or context in question (Kohlbacher, 2006). This is why this type of content analysis is also referred to as ethnographic content analysis: in the case of social media research, it introduces the culture of the platforms into the study of content and encourages researchers to immerse themselves in the contexts and environments of the subjects of the study, in order to understand the ways meaning is created (Altheide and Schneider, 1996).

Immersion in a digital culture is a key requirement of doing qualitative research into these spaces. Hine (2000, p.38) argues that internet users are 'involved in the construction of the technology: through the practices by which they understand it and through the content they produce'. This, in a way, resonates Rogers' (2016) suggestion "follow the medium" when they were advocating for digital methods. By following the medium, Rogers (2016) refers to embracing the logic of the Internet and the affordances of the platforms as enablers of certain social formations. This also illuminates the overlap in the use of the same medium as both the subject and the tool for the research (Postill and

Pink, 2012). This is why, this research pays attention to the connections of tweets with other tweets on the timeline in order to acknowledge the role ambient context of a tweet plays in the construction of its meaning. In construction of these meanings, I also consider the interplay between the text and the extra-textual content in tweets, such as images, GIFs, videos, memes, and URLs. Here, I operationalise the term "text" as it is understood in the textual analysis literature in which images and other visual material are also "read" as texts and their interpretations are considered within the domain of textual analysis. Thus, when analysing visual content, I have considered these material as texts and discussed their meaning not only in relation to their manifest characteristics (style, elements, colours etc.) but also in relation to their cultural and social context.

Therefore, I approach the analysis of microcelebrity tweets from the perspective of an audience and a member of the Turkish Twitter community, as all content on social media are constructed to address a familiar audience (Senft, 2008). Especially, since the surreptitiousness of anti-government political talk demands that those who decode these tweets should also be those who are 'in-on' its meanings, whether the researcher is a part of this intended audience matters immensely for them to arrive at the most likely interpretations of tweets. This in a way follows McKee's (2001) account on textual analysis in which he suggests that what makes interpretations of texts likely is the awareness of the researcher of the context in which that text appears and the audiences it addresses. With these in mind, I will now move onto how I have employed this methodology.

The first step in interpretive content analysis included coding of the tweets under certain categories to find out which and how elections related topics are addressed by microcelebrities. In creating coding categories I used analytic induction in which the researcher takes on an inductive approach in determining the coding categories without strictly following an established codebook (Altheide, 1987) and attempts to create codes that capture the meanings in text (Rosenbaum, 2017). In this sense, inductive coding is specifically used when there is limited academic literature or theory on the researched phenomenon (Elo and Kyngäs, 2007; Hsieh& Shannon, 2005). This type of reflexive coding

is also the most common coding method in social media research (Snelson, 2016). In this process, I utilised open coding in which the coding categories emerge from the data itself (Elo and Kyngäs, 2007). Open coding first aims to establish rough categories which require researcher to be immersed in the data (Elo and Kyngäs, 2007). Even though inductive coding does not require codebooks, it is still suggested to create a preliminary codebook as a starting point, especially when dealing with abundant social media data (Marwick, 2013). Therefore, I have created preliminary categories through an initial analysis of the data during the data collection period. This also provided an overview about the possible areas of interest to look for when analysing the collected tweets after the elections, here I have mainly identified the communicative styles (humour, allusion, intertextual references) and the main message of the tweets (criticism of the government/opposition, voting encouragement, narration of political events etc.). This preliminary codebook was kept on an Excel spreadsheet and updated regularly.

After data collection, I started by separating political tweets from the others, to clean the data from all irrelevant content. I have coded a tweet as a political tweet if it was commenting about politicians, political institutions, the state, or the elections; if it was talking about the economy, infrastructure, education, social welfare, justice, and human rights; and finally, if it was providing a commentary on the citizenry both in terms of political affiliations and as voters. In exploring how these accounts articulate anti-government viewpoints, I found it important to not just code for criticisms of the government but also the diversity of political topics these accounts engaged with during the elections because these tweets provided the necessary context through which criticism of the government were articulated. This was also important for exploring whether there were differences in the ways they articulated criticisms. This proved to be a cumbersome process especially when it comes to criticisms of the government, the allusive and veiled commentaries demanded each tweet to be read multiple times and contextualised through the other tweets in the vicinity and other events of the day to interpret it correctly. I have noticed that criticisms of the government were coded into tweets that had different primary aims which supported my decision to code all political talk. In this step, when I didn't recognise a political or pop cultural reference made in a

tweet, I have utilised additional sources such as Internet forums and news articles to arrive at the correct interpretations.

Through this process I have identified 5520 elections related tweets which were categorised through open coding by using the categories that emerged from the preliminary analysis as guidance. At this stage, I was mainly noting down what the tweet was about and the most interesting aspect of the tweet to focus on in further analysis. This process showed that the preliminary categories I have noted down were not enough to account for the complexity of meanings that were present in the dataset, therefore, in identifying elections related tweets I have expanded these categories to make sure that I account for the diversity of content commenting on the elections. These tweets showed that outside of the mobilisation efforts against electoral fraud, hashtags were very rarely used. In fact, only 62 tweets that were critical of the government used hashtags. This confirms Tufekci (2015)'s argument that in Turkey hashtags are mainly used to alert the audiences about new developments and mobilisations (such as electoral fraud) rather than as a tool for continued engagement.

Thereafter, using the constant comparison technique of grounded theory, I narrowed and tested these categories against the rest of the data to ensure that they were applicable to the remainder of the dataset. This is also called a hermeneutic circle, during this process, the researcher refines the categories through reiteration until there are no tweets left in the dataset that can't be coded with the existing categories (Rosenbaum, 2107, p.23). While categorising the data, I produced semantic units that focus on meaning or context of texts rather than manifest units such as, the word, the sentence or other arbitrary surface feature markers (Baxter, 1991). This included interpretations of the aims of a tweet such as criticising the government, support for a candidate etc. and the ways in which these commentaries were communicated such as through self-disclosure, the use of pop cultural references, allusions, and satire etc. Therefore, I started by working with two coding categories, first one would explain the purpose of the tweet and the second one would explain in what ways the message was communicated. After the open coding process, these categories need to be grouped into "higher order headings" (Elo and

Kyngas, 2007, p. 111) which is also called the abstraction phase which mainly consist of bringing together different categories of content into larger, overarching categories. However, this was not possible for the two coding categories I used. They were linked to each other in complex ways and both categories included many codes that could not be narrowed without losing significant amount of meaning. Therefore, I opted for creating overarching categories as a separate coding category which concerned the main aim of the tweet and included three codes, criticism/analysis, narration/reporting and mobilisation.

These three categories were overarching themes that all political tweets in the dataset fit under. In the criticism/analysis category, tweets offered criticisms of various parties, politicians and party supporters and analysis of voting strategies and campaigns of parties. In narration/reporting, tweets were reporting on or narrating daily happenings, events and news or feelings of the microcelebrity account about what was happening. Mobilisation category concerned mobilisation of audiences to vote or take action against electoral fraud as well as calls for action to disseminate information. These overarching categories were useful in revealing double meanings, such as if a tweet was coded as "support for the opposition candidate" but appeared under "criticism/analysis" it meant that the tweet was framing support for a candidate as a criticism of another (often Erdogan and the governing party). Similarly, if a tweet coded as "criticism of the government" appeared under narration/reporting category it meant that the criticism was implicitly communicated in a context where the primary aim was narration of everyday life or an event. This added further context to the tweets and was particularly useful in revealing how criticisms of the government were articulated.

These coding categories were further contextualised by annotations on the additional material that supports the meaning of the texts such as, gifs, memes, hashtags, screenshots, quoted tweets and other digital objects. This follows Krippendorff (2013, p. 16) as they state that interpretive content analysis "works with categories as well as with narrative descriptions; it focuses on situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances presumed to be recognizable by the human actors/speakers involved".

Supporting sections included these annotations based on narrative descriptions of extra-textual content presented in the tweet, as well as hashtag categories for tweets that use hashtags and additional information which includes notes about content that is retweeted and whether a tweet is a reply to another microcelebrity tweet. After this process I have analysed the quantitative breakdown of the codes to identify the larger trends in the dataset. Particularly the distribution of the aims code has shown a clear majority of tweets that criticise the government. This can be seen the pie chart below which I will further analyse in the findings chapter.

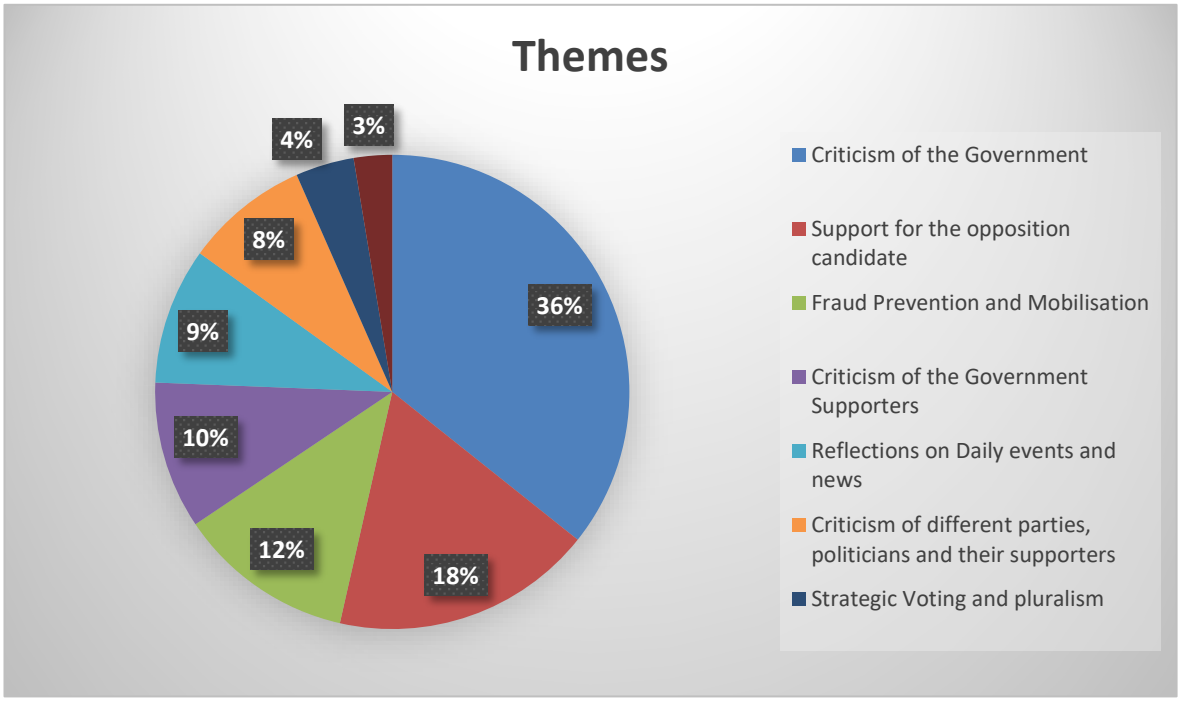

Figure 1. Frequency of themes in the elections related tweets

Due to the complexity of this data, my approach to interpretive content analysis differs from the common applications of this methodology. I use the coding principles of interpretive content analysis to create coding categories that would enable me to categorise this large dataset of 20981 tweets into manageable subsets that I can further analyse using a textual analysis approach. This was a strategic decision as over the course of my analysis, I have realised the multiplicity of meanings contained within these tweets

which required multiple coding categories to explain. Even within these categories more nuance was needed that could not be captured by codes, for example, criticisms of the government were often communicated by appropriating popular culture, political content, memes and other intertextual references which demanded many coding categories to capture in full but instead I used "appropriation" as a place holder then in further analysis I have gone deeper into the specific uses of appropriation in the dataset. This resonates with Rosenbaum (2017)'s use of this method, in which they have presented their findings through a discussion of example tweets from the coding categories to explain the complex meanings that emerge from the data. Therefore, I have ended up using these coding categories as a way to establish most prevalent patterns, narratives and practices in the ways political tweets are constructed then I have focused on the most interesting and prevalent combinations of codes for further textual analysis to go more in depth into the ways they articulated political messages. I found that playful, creative, and imaginative engagement with political topics was indeed a common language that applied to all content but was particularly prevalent in the tweets criticising the government.

Through this, I have narrowed my focus on the instances when criticisms of the government were communicated via appropriation (intertexts), ambient contexts and allusions and the instances when platform cultural practices and literacies (such as memes, gifs, remixes, assertions about quality of content) were used to confront, ridicule, and criticise the government and their supporters. These together make up the tweets that were used in the chapters 6 and 7 to talk about the common practices in hiding dissent in plain sight and achieving temporary reversals of power through Internet culture literacies. On the other hand, as this thesis is concerned with how microcelebrities navigate their visibility when engaging in anti-government political talk, in Chapter 5, I focus on the instances when microcelebrities were justifying their political participation to their audience and alluding to the importance of Twitter for political talk which spoke to the ways they envisioned their role and responsibilities in vocalising anti-government viewpoints. These chapters together respond to the research questions of how do microcelebrities partake in anti-government political talk on Turkish Twitter? and what are the strategies they use to remain under the radar?

In the following section I will talk about my positionality and in the last section of this chapter, I will give an overview of the ethical considerations of this research and the ways they were tackled. I will conclude upon discussing the certain limitations of my chosen methodology.

4.5 Acknowledging the Researcher's Positionality: Motivations, Reflections, and Interpretive Work

Reflexivity in research can be a great asset for qualitative inquiry as it demonstrates the inevitable link between the data and the researchers' personal values and experiences that affect the analysis. Acknowledging the researcher's positionality allows for "...explaining to an audience how we move through research manufacturing processes to certain conclusions" (Corlett and Mavin, 2018, p. 377). This reflexivity is especially important when the research stems from a personal experience. So here I will first explain the origins of this research and secondly, I will talk about how my identity as a dissident Turkish citizen affects the ways in which I approach this data.

Some of the accounts included in this thesis are the ones I have been following since 2013, others are the ones I am familiar with through intermittent exposure over the years. The account I used back then is now protected to avoid the identification of these microcelebrity accounts and I will discuss the necessity of such precautions in the next section in detail. Yet, this also means that my familiarity with these accounts extend beyond the time period I am analysing for this thesis, which adds an ethnographic component to this study. Of course, for ethical and academic reasons the analysis is strictly limited to the elections period but my ability to understand these discreet expressions, metaphors and analogies used to communicate dissent comes from this experience of being immersed in this culture for many years. This might be seen as a limitation due to my preconceived assumptions about the political identities and writing

styles of these accounts. Yet, it is also a strength, as it allows me to understand when a tweet is being satirical and when it is serious, it enables me to tell the difference between genuine retweets and mock retweets. As it will be discussed later, it is my observation that these accounts assume an imagined audience that is familiar with their styles of communication and understand these latent meanings. Therefore, it is only apt that a researcher aiming to delineate this hidden discourse to also be familiar with these discursive characteristics. It is therefore important for me to acknowledge the value of these past 9 years of observing and following these accounts for the quality of my analysis in this thesis.

4.6 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Ethical conduct is one of the most debated issues in social media research. Lack of regulation in the ways "public" data can be used is under scrutiny for the degree to which current legal regulations are enough to exempt the researcher from further moral obligations. Especially when doing interpretive content analysis, Drisko and Maschi (2015) have argued for the importance of ethical conduct as this methodology is putting the content generated by the participants under serious scrutiny. In accordance with this, ethical issues have been addressed in an application to the University of Southampton ethics committee; the reviewers deemed the precautions taken in this research sufficient and approval was granted on 25 April 2018. I will now give an overview of the main ethical considerations of this research and how these will be addressed in this thesis. First, I will cover the ethical responsibilities of the researcher in compliance with the platform terms of service, then I will introduce further ethical considerations that emerge from the moral responsibilities of the researcher when studying a context in which political dissent is criminalised.

This research did not seek informed consent from its participants as it only dealt with the content that was publicly available on Twitter. Twitter's terms of service only restrict

access to the content produced by the protected accounts and the content in the direct messages; in these cases, Twitter encourages the researchers to seek informed consent (Twitter, 2018). It also classifies deleted content or accounts as 'private', even if the account or content was public during the time of data collection. This leaves the researcher liable to seek consent for such content. However, this is hard to practice as there is no mechanism in place to inform the researcher of such changes (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). In this research, due to the controlled sample of accounts, conducting the necessary checks to ensure that no account has been made private or deleted was a relatively easy task. However, it was hard to do the same for the content these accounts share. There is no way to manually trace back 20.981 tweets without dedicating an unrealistic amount of manual labour to this purpose. Therefore, during the analysis I have only checked the availability of the tweets that I was directly referring to in my thesis.

It is important to note that just because content is publicly available it doesn't mean no precautions to protect the privacy of participants are needed, I argue that anonymisation is particularly necessary and the reasons to why can be detailed in two ways. First issue is that people are often oblivious to the fact that their data can be used in research. It has been reported that many users do not read terms and conditions of the platforms they are using, (Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2016) which causes problems in terms of informed consent. It may be unreasonable to ask researchers to obtain consent from every person who posts a tweet, but it is unethical for researchers to justify their actions as ethical simply because the data is accessible. In other words, just because content is publicly accessible, it doesn't mean that it was meant to be consumed by just anyone (boyd and Marwick, 2011).

The second issue is very much related to the first one; the possible implications of research drawing attention to certain content that might be harmful to the account owners. This is important on two levels, the first one is that the researcher has an additional responsibility to treat data with care, secondly, anonymisation is important in any context; it is not up to the researcher to gauge what can be considered as sensitive. Therefore, unless it adds specific value to the research, omitting names or personal

information from the data would be a necessary step to secure the confidentiality of the participants. Especially in Turkey where social media users are under a lot of scrutiny for the political content they share on social media and there is a risk of prosecution, it becomes extremely important to make sure data is anonymised. Townsend and Wallace (2016, p.11) guide researchers to take following precautions:

> "If there is risk of harm to individuals whose data you are using, you must either a) paraphrase all data which is republished in research outputs, having taken steps to ensure that the paraphrased data does not lead interested parties to the individual's online profile; b) seek informed consent from each person, should you wish to or need to use their data in its original form in research outputs..."

With this in mind, I take several steps to avoid identification of the accounts I analyse. Considering the political climate in Turkey, to ensure the safety of these account owners, I have first considered to anonymise the account names, and they would be given code names from M1 to M100. However, as I started quoting certain tweets it became obvious that giving codenames might still put the participants who were quoted multiple times at risk of being identified. So, I decided to present tweets by referencing the row number they are assigned in my dataset (Row 1-20981) rather than by referring to the content creators. Furthermore, I did not collect or refer to any personal information that would jeopardise these accounts' anonymity such as, ethnicity, gender or age.

In addition to these, all the content was translated to English, which eliminated the risk of disclosing participant's online identity to third parties in case they attempted a Google search of the direct quote. I have also ensured that the translations of the quoted tweets did not return the exact phrasing when put through Google Translate. All these precautions were taken to guarantee the privacy of the participants. These precautions I have taken to ensure my participants' safety and privacy aligns with what Markham (2012) defines as fabrication. Markham (2012) argues that fabrication, which relies on the researcher's interpretive authority, is an ethical and viable method of presenting online content as qualitative inquiry always represents reality in ways filtered through the researcher's assumptions. In this sense, my efforts in "fabricating" tweets by translating

them in a way that both protects the meaning and the content creator allowed me to assert my positionality and assure ethical handling of data. However, it is important to acknowledge that, in any qualitative research into online behaviours, guaranteeing full anonymity is not possible (Zimmer, 2010). The type of information included can be traced back to the individuals in the hands of tech savvy analysts through the digital traces left on these platforms by the researcher or certain information disclosed in the research might lead to the identification of one or more of these accounts. In order to reduce these online traces, I have put all the participants in a private list on Twitter prior to data collection; the account that I used to follow these accounts in the past is also now protected.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to address some of the limitations of this research. First of all, it is important to acknowledge the reflexivity of this research as it makes it possible for the analysis to be skewed towards the bias of the researcher. In relation to this Drisko and Maschi (2015) cites Finlay (2002, p. 215), "the challenge for researchers using introspection is to use personal revelation not as an end in itself but as a springboard for interpretations and more general insight." In this research, I take on a constructivist epistemological stance that considers the researcher and participant as inherently linked (Sale, Lohfeld, & Brazil, 2002). My personal reflections will be used as a means to unravel latent meanings in text which will then be put into context by leveraging the general coverage of the issues referenced by the tweets. As constructivist research assumes the existence of multiple realities, through this research I aim to achieve an outlook into microcelebrities' political participation through the perspective of likely interpretations of their tweets by audiences. However, the contextual specificity of these insights may limit their applicability to other contexts. Secondly, this research aims to provide a new approach to the study of political communication in restricted national Twitterspheres through microcelebrity tweets. However, due to the limitations of the sample size and sampling techniques, its ambition lies in providing a window into the possible styles of engagement in inexplicit political talk under danger of detection without claiming to map all the possible ways Turkish citizens express their political criticisms.

Chapter 5 "With great power comes great responsibility": Lending Visibility to Risky Political Content

In this first analytical chapter, I explore how microcelebrity accounts negotiate their roles within the anti-government political discourse and justify their political participation. All content on social media is produced with an audience in mind (Senft, 2008) and negotiating the boundaries between catering to audience expectations and the need for self-expression is a common dynamic for content creators. This dynamic is particularly essential when analysing the risky political content that is produced by microcelebrity accounts. In the attention ecology of social media, getting involved in politics may put microcelebrities under the risk of alienating sponsors and audiences (Goodwin, Joseff and Woolley, 2020) which may result in loss of income and status. Especially, in the high-stakes environment of Turkish politics, these risks of expressive political participation are also accompanied by the risk of prosecution for those who hold opposing views to the AKP government. As the risks are staggering for microcelebrities who wish to amplify and express these opposing views, a fine balancing act is needed to maintain status and lend visibility to marginalised discourses in a system where fame is currency. Twitter users are more scared than ever to see, interact with or produce political content (Tanash et al., 2017), which necessitate careful approaches for those who want to express political opinions to acclimate audiences into accepting the incoming political content.

Others who studied impression management in politically risky settings focused mainly on strategies that allow for favourable self-presentation to family, friends, colleagues, and others with whom the content creator is connected in offline settings (Pearce and Vitak, 2016; Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik and Maoz, 2015). Therefore, to my knowledge, this chapter makes the first contribution to how microcelebrities negotiate an increase in political content with their audiences. In doing so, I mainly draw from the tweets that describe microcelebrities' justification of and motivation for sharing political content. I identify

three interconnected strategies that microcelebrities put forward to justify their political engagement to their audiences, which are, priming, retargeting, and redefining roles. I trace how these strategies support and build on each other throughout the election period and culminate in the framing of political participation as a duty for all microcelebrity accounts. I demonstrate that in fulfilling this duty, microcelebrities' moderate their political tweets in a way that appeals to politically diverse audiences by relying on the repertoires established during Gezi Park, which results in an overwhelming focus on anti-government content. I conclude by arguing that as "focusers of public attention" (Tufekci, 2013), their committed participation in the risky anti-government political talk has major implications on which content gets attention and how political views are communicated.

5.1 Negotiating the Twitter Cool, Creating a Hype

The negotiations around the increase in political content was a common sight throughout the election campaign, which generated mixed responses from audiences. In the early days, these negotiations were mainly focused on priming the audience for the likely increase in political content. Priming is a strategic communication tool, and it refers to emphasizing certain messages or topics in earlier content to influence how the subsequent messages on the topic should be viewed (Van Duyn and Collier, 2018). Even though priming is often discussed in relation to mass media, research has shown that this strategy is also useful for Influencers when presenting sponsored content, as it helps Influencers to sustain their authenticity (Luoma-aho et al., 2019). I propose that priming as a microcelebrity tactic has uses beyond the limited scope of creating a more amicable outlook on sponsorships. It can be applied to all self-preservation efforts to control audience perceptions about an upcoming change or disruptions in the topics, alignment, frequency, and intensity of content. I argue that if consistency is a key tenet of sustaining authenticity and fame on social media (Marwick and boyd, 2011), any disruption to coherence - including new sponsorships- will require similar amount of warm-up to ready the audiences for what is to come.

Even though, priming has a close relationship to impression management, it is not widely discussed in the Influencer or microcelebrity literature. Particularly in the context of social movements and political discourse where microcelebrities are considered as the "focusers of attention" (Tufekci, 2013), priming, which allows for selectively directing the attention of audiences to a desired interpretation of content should be further investigated as a core microcelebrity strategy. In April 2018, the first reactions to the announcement of snap elections reflect how this strategy is essential in politically turbulent settings. I will now present different uses of priming through four tweets that exemplify this strategy which were sent within the first few days after the announcement of snap elections:

> "Elections being scheduled around the same time as the World Cup is really bad. We were going to follow websites for scores but now we will chase ballot boxes on Twitter instead, damn!" (Row 50)

> "Ramadan, Elections, World Cup; look these three are the periods that Twitter is most fun, we will have a lot of fun together you will see!" (Row 92)

> "Wow, this is my last day at work, I quit, and I wanted to come here to talk about holidays and not having to go to work tomorrow but once again certain political things have happened so we will need to speak about those" (Row 146)

> "These snap elections are seriously like a lifeline to many. People were chasing cats on streets to increase their interactions on Twitter. We have clearly become addicted to this, let's have a referendum after the elections too!" (Row 1469)

First use of priming is justifying topical shifts. For instance, the first tweet is sent by an account that often provides football commentaries for whom the upcoming World Cup is of great interest and importance. For these accounts, not focusing entirely on the World Cup is unusual and out of character, thus, amplifying the importance of the content that will replace the World Cup commentaries is essential to maintain their audiences' attention. The second tweet exemplifies how priming can be used to go beyond signalling an upcoming change and create excitement around the elections related content by priming the audience to consider elections content as fun. The final two tweets add to this sentiment by pointing to Twitter's reputation as a platform for political discussions and leveraging this aspect of platform culture helps building an expectation that this abrupt change in content is normal and positive. This point is especially clear in the final tweet that claims political events are when Twitter microcelebrities produce their best content to both create excitement about and normalise the upcoming change. All these approaches to preparing the audience for a topical change show that content production is a two-way process between audiences and microcelebrities in which their commitment to satisfy audience demands requires them inform their audience of sudden changes.

Priming can also be used to sustain attention rather than to channel or encourage it. Later during the election period, priming statements repeatedly appeared as a way to refocus attention. For instance, in the week leading up to the election day when the intensity of political talk has reached overwhelming levels, statements such as below were used to reassure audiences and remind why their sustained attention is important. This is perhaps one of the clearer connections between Meddah performances and microcelebrity as the former almost always included a brief apology for any offence caused without actually adjusting the tone of their performance (Komecoglu, 2005). Here, priming is used mainly as a tool for negotiation by openly positioning the content as a mutual commodity of audiences and the content creator even though the content creator was in full control:

> "There are only a few days left until the election, so where there is a need for a ballot box attendant, what the opposition candidate has said etc. whatever crosses my way I will RT. If this ends the way we want, I promise there will only

be jokes and comedy here. This account will be like a carnival, so please be patient." (Row, 13970)

What makes these priming statements is that even though the topic of concern (i.e., elections) is introduced, it is not discussed. The focus is rather on preparing the audience for the upcoming shift in the frequency of elections related content. In this sense priming is different to framing; where framing concerns how a topic is evaluated and understood, priming focuses on the salience of the content (Van Duyn and Collier, 2018). A common aspect of these priming statements is that they create a coherent narrative which allows these accounts to shift the responsibility of the increase in political content to the platform itself rather than framing it as their own choice. Expected outcome is that audiences primed in this way will be more forgiving about the focus on elections, even if they do not want to see more political content.

This priming strategy create the impression that involvement in political discourse for popular accounts have multiple dimensions that are not all at the discretion of the content creator. Personal preferences, platform culture and audience expectations play a role in shaping these accounts' content production, perhaps at a much higher level than other accounts with less public presence. This intermingled influence sphere of social media content lends importance to not just political talk itself but also the choreographies around politically charged content that increases its acceptance and the attention paid to it. Which makes the impression management techniques employed by these accounts when engaging in political talk as important as the actual political commentaries they tweet.

5.2 Self-Expression: Targeting a Niche, Keeping up Appearances

As the elections related tweets started appearing at greater frequency, other techniques of impression management also started emerging that are bolder and riskier than

priming. Indeed, despite the priming efforts, due to the light-hearted and humorous tone of their usual content, these accounts faced backlash from some of their followers who demanded to see fewer political tweets (e.g., Row 371, 1329, 13210). Coherence is essential to impression management online as it is a marker of authenticity and reliability (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Even though the narrative established by priming may push the blame away from the content creators, audience backlash redirects the responsibility back to them. In which case, when audiences point to a lack of coherence, it can be addressed one of two ways either by defending this change which may lead to loss of audiences, or by succumbing to audience pressure which may lead to loss of trust by the audiences who saw microcelebrity as an independent voice and decrease the audience's belief in microcelebrity's authenticity.

In resolving this predicament, I have observed two strategies that go hand in hand on Turkish Twitter. First observation is that the overwhelming majority have opted for the first option, by which they have ascertained confidence in their authenticity and right to self-expression by aligning themselves with the expectations of a politically minded audience while rejecting others. Secondly, by creating a narrative of responsibility for people who command public attention they have rendered the second option of refraining from politics on Twitter altogether or due to audience demands intolerable and cowardly. Therefore, insinuated that audiences on Twitter either had to accept and pay attention to political talk or seek other social media platforms where the microcelebrities that cater to their needs are more accepted. Secondly, they deferred responsibility for choosing to engage with politics by indicating that this was a requirement of their visibility on Twitter. I will unpack how these strategies have unfolded respectively.

The first narrative was actualised by publicly rejecting the audience demand for fewer political content and thus retargeting content to those who appreciated political talk. Some examples of how they responded to audience backlash can be seen below:

Quote RT response to a tweet saying "don't do politics":

> "Do you think you own me? If you don't like it, there is the door!" (Row 13210)

> "I write as I please, dear friends. I am not your clown; all I do is to permit you to watch me and that's all. If you can't stand what I say, you can just f*** off!" (Row 1401)

> "I promised that I will never talk about politics again, but I can't stay silent now" (Row 4330)

These tweets aim to undermine the importance of audience demands for these accounts' status on the platform by ascribing the locus of their success to the quality of their content. This may seem contradictory to the negotiatory priming practices I have discussed earlier but it complements them by drawing up some form of boundary to reinforce a level of control that these accounts have over their own narrative. That is, this allows these accounts to reinforce trustworthiness and authenticity by creating a perception that they do not care about commercial interests and fame large audiences bring as much as staying true to their opinions. This works for the retargeting strategy by appealing to the audiences who are disgruntled by the lack of tenacity and commitment shown by the microcelebrity accounts who do not partake in political discourse. In doing so they deflect the criticism about their content back towards the audiences who wish to see fewer political tweets. This is also supplemented by retweeting supporting content by audiences such as the one below:

> "I follow you for your political tweets otherwise your jokes are bad." (Row 13216, RT)

Which audience responses microcelebrities choose to engage with and which of them they ignore is a performative act, especially when it comes to those they choose to

retweet or Quote Retweet. By publicly rejecting certain audience demands and amplifying others that align with their agenda, these tweets first communicate a pledge, a reassurance to those who demand more political content during elections. Secondly, even though we may never know the true extent of the backlash these accounts face, these tweets serve priority setting and boundary forming functions between audiences and microcelebrities when it comes to editorial independence which reinforces the authentic image of microcelebrity.

5.3 A Twitter State of Emergency: Shifting Roles and the Responsibility of Being Seen

Even though the tweets shared in relation to retargeting so far have shown a very bold and unyielding stance against audience backlash, this was justified through the adoption of a second strategy that I call redefining roles. Retargeting was concerning microcelebrity accounts' right to self-expression whereas redefining roles strategy framed political participation as a responsibility of those commanding public attention. Thus, by framing creating political content as a duty and not just a personal decision, these accounts have strengthened the underlying morality of partaking in political discussions at the expense of audience demands. Through this they assigned a grander purpose to their right to self-expression and created an understanding that their refusal to succumb to audience demands was not just self-indulgence. For example, through the tweets such as below they signal the importance of lending visibility to political content on Twitter and reinforce the framing of this as a duty:

> "These unfollows do not hurt me! Tag and send me anything that needs to be disseminated. I just want this to be a fair election." (Row, 15594)

> "Dear microcelebrities, […] many thanks to you for choosing to remain silent. I kiss you on your non-existent honour." (Row 16091, RT)

This duty narrative was most prevalent towards the final days of the election period when the attention was on the outcome and the mobilisation against electoral fraud. During this time, much of the discontent was directed towards those micro-celebrity accounts who avoided speaking about politics (e.g., Row 14452, 15523, 15593, 16489, 16554,), which further enabled the politically minded microcelebrities to push back against audience demands by framing political talk as a key part of Twitter culture and microcelebrities as key actors within the political talk (Ozdemir, 2019). These tweets were presented as if they were calls for a state of emergency on Twitter that demanded all to channel their efforts towards a unified purpose.

Frustrations and demands that echoed both in retweets from followers and micro-celebrity tweets were not just addressing the accounts whose usual content include or can be easily adapted to accommodate political discourse. They were indiscriminately extended to all microcelebrities including those (such as beauty, lifestyle, gaming etc. microcelebrities) who are normally not very politically active. Among these micro-celebrities, those who stepped outside of their usual narrative to partake in the political discourse were praised for their involvement. Most notably, a well-known beauty vlogger's unexpected involvement in addressing electoral fraud and encouraging their followers to go to rallies on Twitter attracted much attention and support for its potential of mobilising a young, beauty vlogger audience that is often considered apolitical. For example, the beauty vlogger's tweet about electoral fraud and the support tweets that were sent in response can be seen below:

> "My dear friends with high number of followers! Instead of joking around, go ahead and disseminate the injustices that are happening! So that tonight we can all joke and laugh together." (Row 15512)

Responses:

"Bravo!! Know that I like you!" (Row 14874)

"You are the greatest!" (Row 14883)

"Will you look at this! I am almost becoming a Beauty Influencer fan!" (Row 15572)

"After what you have done during the elections, I am behind you 100%, if anyone says anything about you, they will need to deal with me!" (Row, 18158)

This sense of duty towards amplifying anti-government voices and aiding the mobilisation against electoral fraud was most felt on the Election Day when 97% of the tweets were about the elections. As highlighted in the case of the beauty vlogger, high visibility of micro-celebrity accounts was seen as essential in the mobilisation efforts to prevent electoral fraud and to encourage reluctant voters to exercise their democratic rights. The emphasis was put on the microcelebrities' responsibility to disseminate information and aid collective mobilisation by leveraging their visibility. This emphasis was also conveyed by separating Twitter from other social media platforms that are seen as more frivolous. This was done by framing Twitter as a more "serious" platform that deals with bigger issues as opposed to other platforms and placing the blame on those microcelebrities on other platforms who don't understand the importance of political participation. This was also why the political engagement of the beauty vlogger was reciprocated by such enthusiastic support. Some examples of these grievances towards other platforms are shown below:

In response to audience tweet saying: “Don’t speak about politics!”:

“I guess I will need to make a tutorial on how to make slime tonight instead” (Row 371)

“Where are those YouTubers who are constantly screaming, he stole my video, she stole my joke? I have no words for you! Do you understand what they are ‘stealing’ from you right now?” (Row 15523)

“Let’s not forget those bloggers, Instagrammers and Youtubers who post photos from holiday resorts on the day of the elections rather than helping us [in preventing electoral fraud]. You can’t earn millions that comfortably…” (Row 14452, brackets added for clarity)

Microcelebrities usually have accounts on multiple platforms, but their fame often stems from a single platform. Because of this, in Turkish Internet culture microcelebrities are referred to by their main platform (i.e., Instagram microcelebrity; YouTube microcelebrity) rather than their genre. When microcelebrities whose fame originates in another platform have Twitter accounts, their indifference to topics that are valued on Twitter becomes an issue. The first tweet above exemplifies the perception of other platforms as frivolous, as it criticises an audience’s demand for fewer political tweets by demeaning the content produced by microcelebrities on other platforms by sarcastically referencing how to make [blank] videos on YouTube. On the other hand, the last two tweets more directly criticise the content creators of other platforms for their indifference. This hostility towards those who refrain from political talk and the separation of Twitter from other platforms are also key for the pushback against audiences who demand fewer political tweets. Framing Twitter as a space for political talk and the importance of microcelebrity participation allow these accounts to justify their commitment to political talk and supplement their retargeting efforts.

5.4 Just Against the Government: Appealing to a Politically Diverse Audience

Framing political participation of microcelebrities as a civic duty, however, is not a free pass to say anything, despite whatever else these accounts would claim. Social media game for microcelebrity is intrinsically linked to the expectations of their imagined audience (Senft, 2008; Marwick 2013) and even the duty rhetoric they have built around political participation is tethered to the visibility granted by their high number of politically engaged followers. Therefore, how they engage with politics and which topics they cover are indicators of their imagined audiences and are as much a part of their impression management as their efforts to justify political talk. This thesis includes a sample of 97 microcelebrity accounts, so I expected this to be unanswerable and complex due to the potential political diversity of these accounts. However, the thematic breakdown of the elections related tweets has shown overwhelming evidence that these accounts have, at a base level, focused on two main topics, criticisms of the government and garnering support for the main opposition candidate. The commonality of these two themes across 97 accounts reveals interesting insights about microcelebrity mediated political talk and their imagined audiences.

The commonality of these themes shows that mitigating the lack of coverage about the government's wrongdoings in mass media was a large part of how microcelebrities perceived their duties as high-visibility accounts. Secondly, distancing from political parties was also useful in maintaining audiences by appealing to a politically diverse audience who were in opposition to the AKP government. These indicate strong parallels between the ways these accounts approach political talk and the rhetoric of Gezi Spirit which also emphasized pluralism and anti-government sentiments. This is not to argue that all microcelebrities in Turkish Twitter were exclusively Gezi Park supporters but that by bringing together diverse sections of the public, Gezi Park protests allowed those who align with its values to gain fame by appealing to a wider audience than others who share specific issue or party oriented political opinions. Therefore, the inclusive rhetoric of Gezi Park protests synergised well with the need for maintaining a large audience base and

thus being a microcelebrity who partakes in political talk became easier for those who shared these values. Exhibiting political identities that aligned with the sensibilities shared among Gezi Park protestors enabled these accounts to engage in political talk without alienating diverse audiences. Indeed, this focus on shared values rather than ideologies overlaps with the aesthetics of Gezi Park protests, in which lending visibility to the government's wrongdoings was seen as a moral responsibility of social media savvy protestors (Mercea and Levy, 2019). This shows that the legacy of Gezi Park protests still govern the ways in which anti-government sections of the public utilise Twitter as a space for contentious politics. This also supports Laaksonen, Pantti and Titley's (2020) arguments that microcelebrities occupy the post movement space by generating sustained visibility.

I trace these overlaps through two common themes: rejection of alignment with political parties and advocating for the main opposition candidate by focusing on his alignment with the key Gezi Park values such as pluralism and progressive politics. Therefore, in terms of microcelebrity practice, this inclusivity both worked as a bid to mitigate the loss of audiences (Bozdag, 2020) by casting a wider net for their political content and advocating pluralism, as well as a response to the growing political disaffection and disdain towards the available political parties (Konda 2014). These pluralist narratives that assume and encourage unity across political camps need attention as they represent how the legacy of Gezi Park protests have influenced microcelebrities' political participation. The imagined audience of these microcelebrities sharing the "Gezi Spirit" also provides an important context for the ways these accounts hide dissent behind a language that is understood by these subgroups, which I will discuss in the following chapters.

5.4.1 Distancing from Political Parties

The figure below demonstrates the thematic breakdown of all the elections related tweets which shows a significant contrast between criticisms of the government (36%) and support for other parties and candidates. Those that communicated support for any of the opposition parties (CHP, HDP, SP and IYIP combined) amounted to only 3% of the

tweets which was the least common category. In fact, the criticism of the opposition parties and their supporters (8%) more than doubled the support for all these parties combined, which shows that these accounts distanced themselves from political parties.

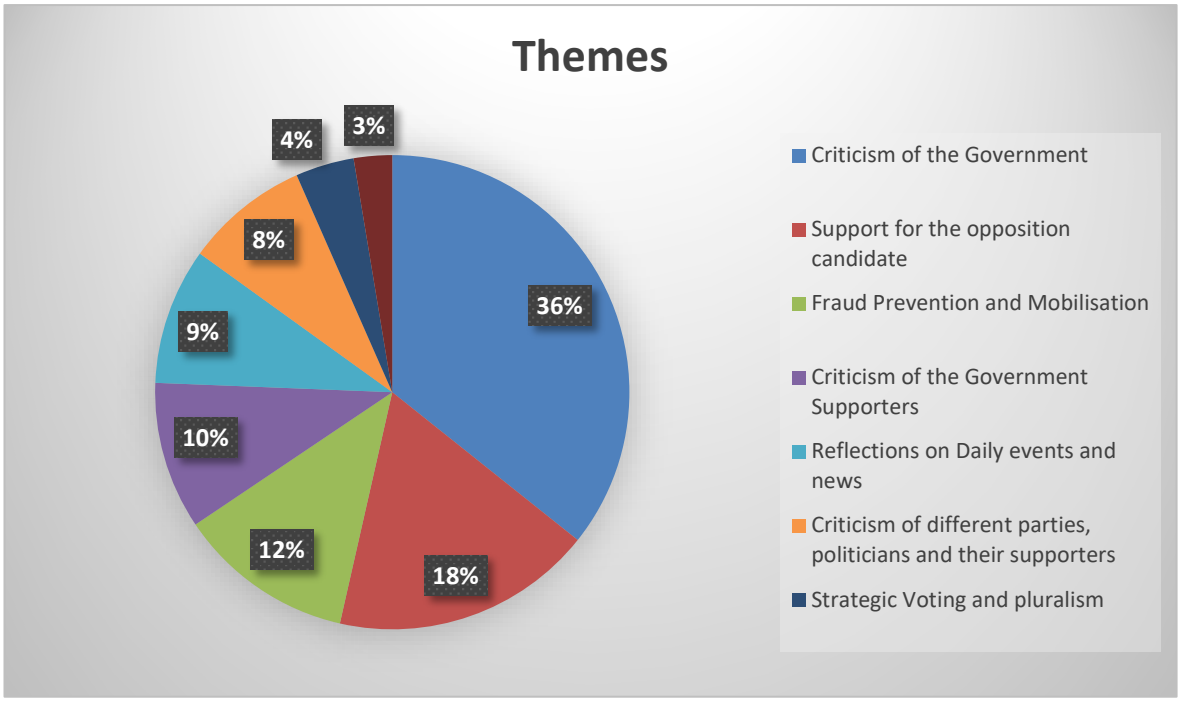

Figure 1. Frequency of themes in the elections related tweets

Even though the support for the opposition parties was not very common, support for the presidential candidates told a different story. The second largest category in Figure 1 is the tweets that communicate support for the main opposition party's (CHP) candidate Muharrem Ince who was running against the President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. As the main opposition party has the second largest voter base in Turkey, he was seen as the only candidate who had the potential to secure a win against this powerful opponent. The 2018 presidential elections marked a turning point in Turkish politics; the elected president was going to assume extended powers in the new presidential system which was contested for its potential to turn the country into a fully totalitarian regime. This created a sense of urgency to unite against Erdogan. So, most of the discourse on political parties was focused on their candidates for presidency.

However, before the candidates were announced, microcelebrity discourse around the main opposition party CHP's candidate selection has particularly focused on their distrust in the oppositional political parties' ability to let go of their partisan tendencies and unite polarised voters. Most of the opposition parties participated in the presidential elections by putting their party leader as candidates. However, the main opposition party was expected to set aside its partisan ideals and select a candidate that would unite politically diverse voters (e.g., Row 1122). This was because as the party with the second largest voter base in Turkey, the main opposition party CHP's candidate was likely to have a better chance of winning.

After a news article reported that the main opposition party was looking for a presidential candidate who would unite voters, the article was shared many times with suggestions of names such as international celebrities (Row 173,192,197, 1568), international football players (Row 176, 1565) and other Turkish Internet celebrities (Row 181) in a humorous attempt to show the impossibility of CHP finding a candidate that would appeal to diverse voters. These tweets that mock the main opposition came from many different accounts some of which were those who identified themselves as CHP voters in other tweets due to the lack of a better alternative. This self-reflexive humour by the CHP voters showed a different narrative to the blind support and fanaticism that is expected during elections in Turkey (Kalaycioglu, 2010). These tweets were relatable to a wider range of audiences; those against the main opposition could enjoy the ridicule and those who support the main opposition could see these as commentaries about the stubbornness of other political factions refusing to get behind their candidate.

Microcelebrities often refrained from expressing partisan support for a political party or candidate but rather channelled their efforts towards finding the optimal voting strategy to achieve the goal of replacing the government. Twitter was used as a venue for negotiating compromises to avoid splitting the opposition votes across the candidates of different parties and for encouraging support for the candidate that is most likely to win (Sengupta, 2018). In doing so, these accounts declared support for the parties and candidates that they claimed they would not have considered otherwise. In fact, many

have declared that they will not be voting for the party of their preferred presidential candidate in the general elections (e.g., Row 8460, 7120, 3933, 4830, 6074).

> "[...]Everyone should vote for their benefit, which means against RTE (Erdogan)[...] HDP supporters (Kurdish Democrats) […] need to understand this." (Row 3644)

> "It seems like we will vote for […] Muharrem Ince [CHP candidate] […] May Allah not put anyone in a position where they must vote based on their actual political alignment. Look at what we have become. (Row, 3933)

> "Look I am saying this very clearly; f*** whether the candidate has capital or aptitude; is Kurdish or Turkish; patriarchal or feminist; where they were when something happened and what they are offering to do. We are dying man! We need to unite." (Row 4772)

As can be seen in these tweets, elections stir strong emotions in those who are disgruntled by the lack of change in leadership. These tweets exemplify the demand for unity despite ideological differences to ensure change even if it is at the expense of exercising democratic rights. Over the course of the election period a larger variety of strategies were put forward than the ones presented above. Some became more popular and repeated by many others and some others remained quite niche but nonetheless these attempts to counter the hegemony of the current regime were similarly individualised as the repertoires of contention developed during the Gezi Park protests (Abbas and Yigit, 2014).

These accounts were united in their opposition to the AKP but the ideas about the best ways to achieve the desired change differed from account to account. They discussed the

voting alternatives in a non-committal way that focused on their disdain for the current government rather than belief in the other alternatives. These attempts to form a unified elections strategy, therefore, indicated a "connection [between likeminded people] but not necessarily collectively formed consensus" (Papacharissi, 2015, p.70). Therefore, here, my focus is not on the impact of these efforts on election results but on the characteristics, styles, and implications of the political identities represented by microcelebrities' that tell a different story than the partisan clusters that form around elections.

Without committing to a specific party ideology, these narratives allowed political content by microcelebrity accounts to be relatable to a wider audience and created opportunities for engagement with and exposure to diverse political views by creating spaces for dialogue. In a way, in maintaining a politically diverse audience, the participatory culture (Jenkins, 2010) afforded by these platforms and exploited by microcelebrities allowed for a space to engage with multivocal perspectives. A good example for this can be seen in these opinion polling tweets:

> "The Iyi Party supporters who will support Ince (the main opposition candidate) for the Presidency quickly favourite this tweet." (Row 8460)

> "Vote for Ince for presidency and HDP in the general elections to guarantee seats in parliament; please write it under this tweet if you have another solution to this. I no longer want to write "xyz isn't alone" and forget about it" (Row 7120)

> "Nationalists, who would you vote for if in the second round of the presidential elections Demirtas [Kurdish candidate] and Erdogan were your options?" (Row 1206)

These types of tweets have the potential to create spaces where the politics of recognition that started in the Gezi Park protests can flourish by allowing for exposure to the ideas of diverse political groups. These polls and questions have the potential to permeate partisan sections of the public due to the palatable tone of these narratives for politically diverse audiences who may also retweet these into different political networks. Even though online activity cannot be equated to impact, it "may introduce primary disruptions to the stability of powerful hierarchies that grant a movement momentum, which may accumulate over time." (Papacharissi, 2015, p.8). Which places microcelebrity accounts whose status is derived from their ability to appeal to a large number of users, in a key position within this dynamic. This diversity can be seen in the many opinion polls done by these accounts at various points during the election period (51 tweets). These polls that were used to gauge followers' opinions on strategies of voting and general voting preferences show a great diversity and reach across partisan networks including AKP voters. These negotiations and contact points between ordinary citizens that are above party politics go unnoticed when the primary focus of research is on explicitly political spaces that are marked by partisan hashtags.

5.4.2 Almond Moustache vs Beer on the Beach: Support for the Opposition Candidate

Parliamentary representation taking a back seat was also evident in the way that the commentaries about the presidential candidates were very personal; the political party they emerged from was of secondary importance and was still subjected to criticism even if the candidate was supported. During the 2018 Presidential elections, the tweets often referred to Gezi values of pluralism, respect and anti-authoritarianism when debating the ideal virtues of a presidential candidate (Row 10007, 11711, 14203, 14972, 15156 16295). Therefore, a candidate showing alignment with the Gezi Spirit through progressivist and pluralistic rhetoric made it easier for them to be considered as a fitting replacement for the current leadership. Due to this, the support for other candidates was often framed through their cultural, and social distance from Erdogan rather than their political party affiliation or campaign promises. Therefore, the priority in selecting/supporting a candidate was still very much about replacing the current government and the president.

Muharrem Ince, despite being affiliated with the main opposition party, has consistently positioned himself as everyone's candidate and used a pluralist rhetoric (Esen and Yardimci-Geyikci, 2019) which made him more easily accepted by those who did not support the main opposition party or other political parties. Thus, his candidacy and pluralist rhetoric has revitalised a hope for change in many who lost belief in the elections over the previous 16 years (e.g., Row 4303, 13995, 14081, 15027). In fostering this pluralist image, the tweets that emphasise hope and unity in the later days of the election campaign have used photos and videos from his rallies that depict the diversity in the crowd (e.g., Row, 11867, 14155, 14755, 14760, 14805, 14887). These photos carried many similarities to those that were shared during Gezi Park showing the generational, socioeconomical and political diversity on the ground to communicate hope for a united, pluralist future. To reinforce these parallels between the support for Ince and the solidarity exhibited in Gezi Park, these accounts shared content that showed how rival football teams (Row 14689, 17471), diverse political ideologies (Row 13455, 15296, 15493), diverse religions (Row 11081, 14690) were all coming together in support of Muharrem Ince.

Both the support for and the opposition to the main opposition candidate was mostly justified by comparing him with the President Erdogan. Microcelebrities have referred to Muharrem Ince as an embodiment of the Gezi Spirit (Row 9139, 9536, 11078) and as someone who can restore the tolerance and freedoms that were lost during Erdogan's long tenure. Evidently, Pro-AKP accounts also shared this view as they started circulating photos of him drinking beer on the beach during the month of Ramadan which is a period when the sensitivity to people drinking alcoholic beverages is at maximum for Muslims. The same photo, however, has been welcomed by these microcelebrities who oppose the government, many commenting that this is the kind of president they want to see in power (Row, 3932, 3941, 3955, 3985, 4013, 4031, 4035, 4106). This showed that the distance a candidate can project between their own lifestyle and that of the AKP's was more central to their acceptance than their party affiliation. In this sense, the support for Muharrem Ince was framed by showing him as a direct contrast to everything that

Erdogan (and his supporters) represented. These commentaries have been indicative of the grievances towards the lifestyles favoured and encouraged by AKP, as can be seen from these tweets:

> "As Muharrem Ince reminds me of drinking beer while wearing a vest in the summer months I would vote for him with a clear conscious, whereas Abdullah Gul [former AKP PM] reminds me of a mosque carpet and "Mama Meral" [Candidate and the head of the nationalist Iyi Parti] reminds me of military service." (Row, 1136, parentheses added for clarification)

> "A duel between Erdogan and Muharrem Ince would probably be like: "You! Ince, will you be representing this [Muslim] nation by sitting in the beach with shorts and sipping beer?" Ince – "Yes?"" (Row, 3980, parenthesis added for clarification)

> "It's been 15 years, no one is looking for quality, we are just looking for someone who doesn't have an almond moustache [facial hair style associated with the AKP], is this so hard to comprehend?" (Row 3652, parenthesis added for clarification)

The main opposition party was rarely mentioned in the support for Muharrem Ince because, as can be seen in these tweets, the locus of this support was this juxtaposition of him with the current leadership. Microcelebrities praised his knowledge of physics and science (Row, 4024, 4075, 9350, 12382, 18548); his teacher background was also appreciated widely due to being in stark contrast to Erdogan's oft questioned university degree, as well as the lack of scientific development and the incarceration of dissenting academics under the AKP rule (Row, 11829, 13814, 14659). Muharrem Ince's liberal lifestyle coupled with his rural upbringing in a modest, pious family were brought up repeatedly to show how as a president he would reinstate the lost freedoms of those who

were marginalised without alienating the pious or rural segments of the public (Row 11081, 14203, 14484, 16021).

In sum, during the election period microcelebrities have rendered both their support and criticisms of others through the lens of being in opposition to the government. For instance, the main justification for supporting Muharrem Ince as the most fitting option for presidency drew from his juxtaposition to Erdogan and thus even the tweets supporting him were underpinned by the criticisms of the government. In fact, after the elections were once again won by the AKP and it became certain that Erdogan had secured another four years of presidency, the commentaries about Ince echoed this view:

> *"Our aim was not to lift you up with our love but to get him down from his throne with our hatred. The reason we trusted you so much was because you could shadow this grand hatred with collective love. […] On behalf of those who are waiting for him [Erdogan] to die…"* (Row, 20921, parenthesis added for clarification)

As can be seen in this tweet, while the support for Ince was rendered through a criticism of the government, his juxtaposition to the government was rendered through Gezi Park values (collective love/pluralism). This indicated that these accounts both promoted these values and assumed their audience to share these sensibilities which allowed them to appeal to a diverse audience through inclusivity and create spaces for dialogue. This focus on a pluralistic anti-AKP rhetoric is therefore an advantage for maintaining audiences on Twitter but it is also a riskier endeavour than just promoting other political parties as online dissent is monitored and criminalised. In the next section, I will explore how this pressure to partake in political talk and the need for creating anti-AKP content to avoid alienating audiences carry significant consequences for microcelebrities.

5.4.3 Fear and Loathing: Mitigating the Consequences of Visibility

Assigning key roles to microcelebrity accounts during elections exacerbates the risks these accounts need to take to fulfil these responsibilities. So, beyond the indifference of apolitical microcelebrity accounts, here, I identify two fears that hinder microcelebrities' ability to engage in oppositional political talk, fear of prosecution and fear of losing industry contacts. Many Turkish social media users are afraid of engaging in political talk on Twitter due to the criminalisation of oppositional talk and resort to self-censorship (Tanash et al., 2018). Even though, fear due to the risk of arrest and harassment is common on Turkish Twitter for all account holders, for microcelebrities whose income is reliant on good industry relationships, political talk carries additional risks. One of the accounts who took part in oppositional political talk during the elections for instance have shared this tweet when they noticed that they were left out of a viral campaign:

> "Am I not included in this [viral campaign for a brand] because of my support tweets for the opposition's presidential candidate?" (Row 17460)

Similarly, another account got into trouble with the brand they were advertising as the company didn't like the fact that the sponsored tweet was indicating that their products make people want to vote for the opposition party (Row 2596, 2600). This is because anti-government political engagement is controversial, hence, strictly policed on Turkish Twitter not just by the government but by audiences, companies, and sponsors alike. Much like their counterparts who work in other creative industries such as actors and musicians, microcelebrities in Turkey also battle with precarity and lack of legal support systems that would protect them when they conflict with employers or sponsors (for more on precarity in Turkish creative industries see, Bulut, 2022 and Mejia and Bulut, 2019). Not aligning with the government can lead to loss of contacts, as companies need to be on the good side of the government to stay afloat. Indeed, sharing these sentiments was also a part of impression management, making these sacrifices visible strengthens authenticity as they distance themselves from the commercial aspects of the

microcelebrity culture. Similarly, others also found the fear of losing income and followers as a weak excuse to neglect citizenship duties:

> "We are seeing the fake micro-celebrities who don't tweet about the most important elections to ever happen in the country out of fear of losing their industry contacts and viral campaigns, you cannot hide. When the times change, we will know who to trust." (Row 14703; tweets sent in support: 14711, 14725, 14729)

> "Fear is like this. Those micro-celebrities who try to get girls on Twitter 24/7 remain silent during the elections because they are afraid of losing followers or being arrested. […] they act dead because they are afraid." (Row 16089)

The priorities of the popular accounts were expected to shift during important political events from merely holding on to their microcelebrity status by producing their usual content, to actively engaging in the political discourse. Therefore, these accounts were expected to get involved in the anti-AKP political discourse not only by taking on the risk of arrest but also by accepting the long-lasting risk of losing income and industry contacts. Furthermore, the trivialisation of fear and the frequent reminders by the microcelebrities about these risks they took on created a pressure of involvement in anti-government political talk to sustain authenticity. These pressures also showed how the topical configuration of Twitter is policed by the politically engaged:

> "When there are election topics to discuss no one would care about this aid campaign. You should bring this up again after the elections so that we can do something." (Row 12352)

> "Didn't wanna say it during the election period but our baby food stocks are gone, and I need your help. If you can't send money or food, please help by RT. Please use this link […]" (Row 16587)

Similar to these tweets, this pressure to partake in political talk was demonstrated even a few weeks after the elections when many were humorously questioning whether it was too soon to speak about matters other than politics without a backlash from their followers (Row 16121, 16122, 16131, 17001). On the other hand, those who shared political content to be in on this trend but then deleted their political tweets shortly after the elections were once again won by the governing party also faced backlash for their insincerity:

> "Those microcelebrities who were burning with a love of country and nation seem to have deleted their tweets today. F*** your opportunism!" (Row 16151)

After the general and presidential elections were won by the AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the incumbent President has gained additional powers which meant that the fear of prosecution in the Twittersphere has increased. In this climate, even though deleting past critical tweets may attract negative attention and backlash, it was a valid self-preservation tactic and more common than publicised. Through the course of this project, I had to delete and replace the tweets I present in this thesis as examples of these practices because they gradually got deleted by the account owners. In fact, a police investigation has started four days after the elections on a microcelebrity account for encouraging a coup d'état because of a joke they made about the government, which showed the extent of freedom of interpretation the government prosecutors had on what counts as criminal. Police has searched the house of the account owner to find links with terrorist organisations and even though no evidence was found other than the tweet, they were sentenced to seven years in prison. The decision was later reversed in a court appeal for the lack of evidence. In the immediate aftermath of the decision, many tweeted in support of the microcelebrity (Row 17407, 17409, 17412, 17650, 17666,

17827) but the fear of sharing a similar experience was present in the post-election tweets:

> "You won't see as many microcelebrities [...] who talk about the irregularities and reveal the misconduct by politicians anymore… everyone has a family, and everyone is scared" (Row 16156)

Evidently, the demand for weaponising visibility by stepping outside of established microcelebrity personas and the expectation to overcome fear come at a great personal risk for these accounts who need to maintain followers, industry relations and their authenticity while avoiding arrest. Even though the strategies of priming, retargeting and redefining roles are useful in encouraging and normalising expressive political participation, they are not capable of protecting these highly visible accounts from the risks that come with creating oppositional content. Navigating the dangers of visibility that makes these accounts susceptible to scrutiny is a difficult task; especially, when they are given the responsibility to partake in risky discussions which, as I have shown throughout this chapter, is a responsibility these accounts have helped to create. In fact, by pointing out these risks they took and the fears they had to overcome when partaking in political talk, they strengthened the message that microcelebrities have a duty to their audience and country that goes beyond the need for self-preservation. However, this does not mean that they did not engage in self-preservation at all. Following chapters will show that even though these pressures on Twitter leave very little room for microcelebrities to refrain from political talk on the platform, they still create strategies that allow them to engage with anti-government political talk in a way that is understood by their intended audiences. In this case, this intended audience seems to share a subcultural space that was established during the Gezi Park protests.

5.5 Conclusion

Furthering others' work on the strategies for online impression management in politically risky settings (Pearce and Vitak, 2016; Mor et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2012), this chapter introduced three strategies that work together on increasing the acceptance of political engagement by microcelebrities in the Twittersphere. I have shown that while the narratives introduced through priming aims for sustaining attention and normalising the increase in political content, retargeting, and redefining roles strategies are used to present microcelebrity commitment to political talk as a testament to their authenticity and political participation as a condition of microcelebrity status which is out of the account owner's control. These culminated in the framing of lending visibility to oppositional content as a duty for accounts that command public attention and therefore the increase in the political content was justified as fulfilling a responsibility rather than an outright rejection of audience demands to see fewer political tweets. Moralisation of political participation also created a pressure on Twitter where all microcelebrities were expected to channel all their efforts to amplify the reach of oppositional political talk. These pressures arose from the idea that visibility is fundamental for the dissemination of information online which naturally puts the onus on those that command the most attention. Furthermore, this shift in the roles of microcelebrity corresponds with a trend that is not isolated to Turkey, recent research shows an increasing demand by audiences for microcelebrities to engage in political talk in the United States, which accounts for a much larger and globally known market than in Turkey (Goodwin, Joseff and Woolley, 2020). Therefore, the impression management strategies of microcelebrities in dealing with these demands needs further attention.

I identified that an important part of microcelebrities impression management was exhibiting political identities that appealed to a diverse audience and in doing so they positioned themselves against the government without claiming allegiance to any political party. They drew from the Gezi Park values of pluralism and progressivism in creating eclectic political commentaries around elections topics. This meant that a majority of their political content was criticisms of the government. A downside of these changing

roles of microcelebrity in the Turkish context and the focus on anti-government commentaries is that the high visibility they command increases their vulnerability against surveillance mechanisms in such settings where online dissent is prohibited (Tufekci, 2013). In this paradoxical context, the tweets by popular accounts that directly address the government's wrongdoings are necessary and demanded whilst their high visibility puts them in danger of being detected and penalised (Pearce, Vitak and Barta, 2018; Lokot, 2018). This situation amplifies the tension between the need or willingness to disseminate anti-government viewpoints and the desire for self-preservation by not being too overtly critical. With the shifting roles of microcelebrities defined in this chapter, this tension seems to have become even more pressing for Turkish microcelebrity accounts.

Due to microcelebrities' ability to command attention, the ways in which this tension is resolved may have ramifications for the ways expressive political participation takes place in Turkish Twittersphere. The risk of prosecution inevitably creates a need for inexplicit and indirect engagement with political issues to evade those dangerous consequences of being seen. These accounts must thread very carefully when forming a strategic language that will protect them from the authorities but also will not alienate their audience by being too cryptic. In this restricted stage for those who are critical of the government, the evasion tactics employed by these popular accounts provide a unique window into the conventions of "safer" political talk. In the following two chapters, I will discuss these strategies that show how an interplay of the digital and political cultures was weaponised as a tool for dissent focusing particularly on the inexplicit political talk that is prevalent in tweets criticising the government.

Addressing “The Correct Audience”: The Art of Evading Unwanted Audiences

> “Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of power holders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites” (Scott, 1990, p.136)

In the following two chapters, I will be exploring the ways in which microcelebrity accounts have mitigated the risks of their visibility by tailoring their content to be deciphered by the correct audience. Elections related content shared by these accounts fit within three main categories which are criticism and analysis (incl. opinions, speculations, holding politicians to account), narration (of events, news, and happenings) and mobilisation (against electoral fraud or to attend opposition rallies). Within these categories, the risky content that criticises the government or the president is the most common and amasses 36% of all elections related tweets. Due to the high visibility of these accounts, these expressions of dissent necessitate operationalising strategies that will hide dissent in plain sight. Because of this, the tweets criticising the government cannot be pinned down to one category but can be found across categories imbued in contexts where criticism is only apparent in the subtext. Thus, I consider not only the primary aims and messages but also deeper more subtle meanings and communicative styles in tweets via second and third coding categories as explained in the methodology chapter. The following chapters handle the key themes that emerged from the most prominent intersections between these categories.

In the following chapters, I analyse the strategies used in disguising dissent on Twitter and the shared understandings between audiences and microcelebrities that make decoding of these hidden messages possible. I demonstrate that in formulating these strategies microcelebrity accounts relied on two key characteristics which emerge from their status

and strategic self-presentation on the platform, which are the familiarity and subcultural connections with their intended audiences and their Internet culture literacy. Reliance on these characteristics demanded that the intended audiences of these tweets have access to the necessary contexts to be able to correctly decode the multi-layered meanings of these tweets which limit this audience to a very specific group that is in the know.

The first chapter focuses on the inexplicit references to the President Erdogan in the dataset that were used to surreptitiously communicate dissent to an audience who was assumed to have access to the relevant contexts to decode the correct meanings. I argue that the contextual alignment needed to decode these tweets required a familiarity between microcelebrities and audiences through a subcultural connection which also helped cultivate a feeling of community and closeness (Abidin 2015). I identify that this familiarity was established through shared contexts afforded by involvement in political subcultures with similar social codes (in-jokes, vernacular language), by occupying the same space (a rally) or sharing an online or offline experience at a specific time (watching the news).

The second chapter explores the strategies that rely on Internet culture literacy when criticising the government and it identifies Internet culture literacy as a crucial factor in the ways microcelebrity accounts express criticisms by formulating a language that is understood by subgroups who are acclimated to the platform culture on Twitter. In doing so, I particularly focus on the social media rituals that include weaponised intertextual humour expressed through appropriations of other cultural texts and memeification of the government supporters. In the second part of this chapter, I focus on how these internet culture literacies and ability to produce “good” content is associated with good politics and how the claims to superiority in digital skills and literacies were used to achieve temporary reversals of power between anti and pro-AKP groups.

These two chapters together explain the key strategies that microcelebrities used to make their criticisms of the government inexplicit and the implications these strategies

have on who gets to engage with this content in a meaningful way. These strategies that intend to keep the AKP government and their supporters at bay also create a digital divide within oppositional circles between those who are acclimated to the conventions of political talk in Twitter subcultures and those who are not.

Chapter 6 "The one that must not be named": Navigating Contextual Information in Political Talk

Subversive power of hiding dissent behind a creative language relies on its ability to be decoded by intended audiences while protecting the speaker from the retaliations by the authorities it defies (Scott, 1990). Accomplishing this task is challenging on social media platforms due to the context collapse between intended and unintended audiences (boyd, 2011). Especially during political events, there is a surge of pro-government accounts on Twitter who promote pro-AKP narratives and keep those who criticise the government in check (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017). Therefore, navigating and operationalising contextual knowledge becomes key in controlling who has access to the correct meanings (Lee, 2018). It was a difficult task to analyse these tweets because Twitter users – both microcelebrities and accounts they retweet- gave as little identifiable information as possible in their criticisms of the government to make it more difficult for their tweets to be interpreted correctly by wrong people. I found that this was particularly the case for avoiding direct references to the president, as explicit criticisms of the president may have dangerous consequences. This practice resonates with microcelebrities' position as digital Meddahs, as Meddahs traditionally avoided naming characters to avoid causing offence or trouble and instead conveyed their meaning through mimicry and allusions (Komecoglu, 2005).

In this chapter, I particularly focus on the skilful deployment of contextual cues in the indirect references to the President and discuss two main strategies, which are nicknaming and subtweeting. The latter refers to the practice of concealing names in tweets when criticising someone on Twitter. These tweets often make sense in a particular moment to a select audience who have the necessary context available to them and lose all meaning when looked at in isolation or after the fact. I identify that decoding these tweets both relied on long-term engagement with the content produced by these

accounts, and the subcultural knowledges formed by those who are in opposition to the government. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the ways microcelebrity accounts created contextual anchors and weaponised contexts (Abidin, 2021) by leveraging their familiarity and subcultural connections with their followers to control access to correct interpretations of their tweets.

Indeed, this style of tweeting is not unique to instances when there is a need for surreptitiousness. Due to Twitter's ephemerality and pace, meaning is rarely contained within a single tweet and fragmented narratives are often decoded by linking individual tweets to other sources of information (Sadler, 2017; Chadwick, 2013). Especially political content often requires the audience to build causal links between tweets and specific political events or news to interpret the tweet correctly (Sadler, 2017). Therefore, tweets are always written with a specific audience in mind who has access to the necessary background information. In this chapter, I add to this work by demonstrating the ways this fragmented narrativity of Twitter can be leveraged to conceal risky political content through strategic deployment of information or contexts that are available to the intended audience. I argue that even though these contexts and meanings are not completely out of reach for the unwanted audiences, the ambiguity of these tweets allow for them to have multiple possible meanings which provide the account owner with plausible deniability.

In the final section of this chapter, I explore how these strategies intensify the intimacy between those who are in on the meanings and allow for affective bonding that reinforce a 'feeling of community' (Dean, 2010) by setting certain shared offline/online experiences as a prerequisite for engagement. With this in mind, I argue for the unique position microcelebrities hold in the narration of shared frustrations and grievances by leveraging these contexts and meanings that they share with their large number of followers.

6.1 Nicknaming and Subtweeting

Use of political parties' or politicians' names within tweets is an obvious identifier of explicit political talk which is why in repressive contexts people avoid direct references to politicians due to fear of being caught (Ncube and Chinouriri, 2016). Even though, I found a similar trend through qualitative coding of allusions in tweets, to understand the true extent of the avoidance of explicit references to the president, I ran all the elections related tweets (n=5520) through a word frequency tool. Word frequency tools process all the words in a text and list the words in the order from most frequently used to the least. Considering that 36% of all elections related tweets were criticising the government, the aim was to determine whether the names of the governing party or the president were coming up as frequently used. The results suggested that oy (vote) (n=527) and secim (election) (n =513) were the most used words alongside the name of the main opposition candidate Muharrem Ince (n=512). The references to the governing party (AKP) or President Recep Tayyip Erdogan were significantly low, and they were used 180 and 162 times respectively, which is at odds with the high number of tweets that criticise the government (36%) within the dataset. The prevalence of Muharrem Ince's name among the most used words in the dataset also shows that politicians' names are otherwise commonly used when discussing politics, and thus, avoidance was specific to the instances of referring to the president.

Qualitative analysis of these tweets showed that microcelebrities were using indirect expressions when talking about the governing party and the president. In their work into teenagers' tactics for negotiating context on social media, Marwick and boyd (2014) frame this strategy as subtweeting, in reference to the practice of concealing names while still conveying a specific message or criticism about someone. This is a self-preservation tactic that mobilises the contextual knowledge of the audience while providing the account owner with plausible deniability (Marwick and boyd, 2014). I find that alongside subtweeting, occasionally, nicknames were also used in reference to the president. Both these strategies worked by mobilising shared subcultural cues and awareness of past and current events to decode the meaning communicated in tweets. I will first explore the

less frequently used strategy of nicknaming before moving onto the more popular subtweeting.

6.1.1 Nicknaming

In Turkey both affirmative and derogatory nicknames for politicians are commonly used by citizens and politicians alike (Oguz, 2018). Particularly, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has accumulated many nicknames given to him both by his supporters and opposers in his long tenure in Turkish politics. On social media platforms where information is organised via tags (hashtags, usernames etc.), use of nicknames that are known by a group of users can also be considered a form of tagging. Nicola Bozzi (2020) discusses the identity building function of tags in terms of their capacity to evoke cultural avatars that are politically critical or stereotypical representations of identity figures. Even though Bozzi's work focuses on tagging via mentions and hashtags, use of nicknames that are culturally or politically meaningful can be similarly useful in alluding to a cultural avatar as much as the use of hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter. For instance, when communicating anger towards the president, the use of derogatory terms and nicknames that are known and used by other dissidents, functions as tagging the president, which is recognised by those who are in the know. On the other hand, using the nicknames given to the president by his supporters works in a similar way to the tagging tactic known as hashtag manipulation, which refers to the practice of using prolific hashtags regardless of relevance to piggyback on the mass attention they gather. Mimicking the ways pro-government users refer to the president disguises the critical content among pro-government content and creates ambiguity around the intention of the tweet which protects the user from those who may not have the necessary familiarity with the account to decode negative meanings.

These two types of nicknames demand different sets of knowledge to decode correctly. The derogatory nicknames for the president demand the audience to have socialised with the groups and people that use these nicknames to have the necessary background knowledge (Vasilieva and Prokofeva, 2015). Some of these that appear in the dataset are

"badem" (Almond: in reference to the specific facial hair style of the President and other party officials which is called an "almond moustache"), "Gurcu" (Georgian: nationalists who claim his lineage is not Turkish often use this) and "dictator". Even though the main function of tags on social media is to categorise information, contrarily these nicknames can be useful in making the criticisms unsearchable as they mostly draw from words that can also be used in different contexts. Nonetheless, for microcelebrity accounts relying on lack of searchability is risky as their content already reaches a lot of users due to their status on the platform. Thus, these are very rarely used in the dataset, specifically, I found four tweets that use these terms most of which appear at times when the account owner is communicating anger. For instance, screenshotting a news article about a work accident in a factory where people died because there weren't enough guards, an account tweeted:

> "If the money for those guards isn't pocketed by those almonds who should have employed them, I don't know anything!!" (Row 19572)

Use of these pejorative nicknames can also be considered an act of retaliation for the increasing commonality of name calling ordinary citizens in Turkish political talk under AKP government. Delegitimising others' authority by ridiculing their names or by calling them names is a common way to undermine opponents in Turkish political talk which is frequently practiced by the government officials. Supporters of the government also adopt these nicknames and use them as an in-group joke to claim superiority over their opponents. Thus, in turn these practices become retaliatory as can be seen in this tweet:

> "As godless infidels, Israeli offsprings, Armenian seeds and perfidious terrorists we should really stop using an othering language against the government supporters." (Row, 5912)

Reappropriating such derogatory terms are tactics to achieve temporary reversals of power (Scott,1990) by downplaying the effectiveness of them as insults. For instance, during the Gezi Park protests when the then Prime Minister Erdogan called the protesters 'looters and low-lifes' (Capulcu), this derogatory term was reappropriated by the protesters and resulted in many changing their names to looter on social media platforms (McGarry et al., 2019).

Similar transgressive acts can be seen in the appropriation of nicknames given to the president by his supporters such as, (reis (chief/captain); uzun (tall); Sultan, Dunya Lideri (World Leader) etc.). Even though the original intentions of these nicknames are flattery and support, when used by accounts who are against the government, they take on satirical meanings. Familiarity with the account plays a key role in these tweets as the use of such nicknames requires the audience to recognise the satirical intentions. The tweet below exemplifies the necessity of understanding intentions behind the use of nicknames very well:

> "NASA stop wasting money in search for a habitable planet, The Chief has sorted it out!"
>
> [Screenshot of a tweet by Cumhuriyet newspaper about the President saying "We are building a new habitat for the youth with tea, cake, pastries and Internet"] (Row, 11635)

If read as sarcasm, this tweet is clearly meant as a criticism of the President and alludes to finding his election promises unimpressive. However, overexaggerating the significance of social welfare projects by the government coupled with the use of a favoured nickname could also be seen as flattery, especially considering the anti-American sentiment that is common among government supporters (Zengin and Ongur, 2019). Thus, a familiarity with the account is essential to decode this tweet as the tweet is intended for an audience that recognises the sense of humour of the microcelebrity. In other cases, nicknames are used in contexts that allude to subcultural connections. Such as the tweet

below addresses the audience as “we” to signal that those who are considered within this collective are also those who can understand these meanings.

> “We know that the tall man will feel very comfortable about the second round of the elections if the opposition parties are not on good terms. Because of this we will keep on “giving the thin” again and again.” (Row 4261, emphasis is added by me)

In its original, the second sentence contains an expression that directly translates to “giving the thin”, “thin” (ince) in Turkish slang refers to a nuanced observation and when phrased as “giving the thin” it refers to criticising someone/something through precise and smart observations. Even after this explanation, the intentions of the tweet are unclear without familiarity with the account and the oppositional subculture. For the accounts who are in the know, this phrase gains another meaning as coincidentally, Ince is also the surname of the main opposition candidate for presidency. Therefore, the message here can be decoded to mean that they will “give” their vote to “Ince” to disrupt the plans of the president. It could also mean that to thwart the President’s divisive plans, they will keep on sharing Muharrem Ince’s content that promotes unity between opposition parties. In the end, even though the tweet does not convey an explicit criticism, additional interpretations of this statement which hide a subtle criticism of the president are available to those who are aligned with the ideological position of the account. Furthermore, for those who are familiar with the account, the use of this particular nickname in the tweet also communicates a mockery of the flattery that the president enjoys from his supporters which strengthens the negative sentiment. All in all, the tweet speaks to an audience that is referred to as “we”, indicating subcultural connections with those who supposedly can decode these multiple meanings.

These nicknaming practices can be seen solely as political satire but in a repressive context they also underline the self-preservation efforts to avoid prosecution. The practice of using nicknames that are favoured by the president and his supporters falls

under what De Certeau (1984) calls people's tactics in which people make use of the imposed cultural codes to cloak dissent. If the imposed codes here are the nicknames that are meant as flattery, using them in satirical ways is a tactic that helps communication between those who are in on the joke and may block those who only see the tweet in passing from understanding the underlying criticisms. How successful these nicknames are in accomplishing this task, however, is debatable.

Ncube and Chinouriri (2016) argue that the nicknaming of politicians is a form of Scott's (1990) "weapons of the weak" as in tactics that are employed to express discontent without reprisal from the authorities. This doesn't entirely work in the Turkish context, as thinly veiled expressions that can be easily decoded by the authorities may result in dire consequences even if the meaning was inexplicit (Scott, 1990). If discovered, these tweets aren't always successful in blocking out those who are addressed – since they would know exactly who these nicknames target– but they lower the risk of being caught by avoiding easily discoverable keywords associated with oppositional speech. Thus, even though they are less risky than the derogatory nicknames, these affirmative nicknames also deem the tweet unsearchable but not entirely undecodable which makes them risky to use under constant surveillance. For example, in 2015, a popular Twitter account got blocked for insulting the president and the account owner was prosecuted. During the hearing the owner was also questioned about the more indirect commentaries they have made about the president using alternative names (reis (chief), uzun (tall), hirsiz (thief)). Therefore, even though these practices allow for these accounts to speak to an audience who is in the know, they do not protect the account from reprisals if they are prosecuted.

6.1.2 Subtweeting and Ambient Context

Considering the risks involved in the use of even the most benign nicknames when criticising the president, in most of the tweets, criticisms were communicated without using any names, which creates an even more complex context dependency. This can be defined as a form of subtweeting, which refers to the practice of concealing names while still conveying a specific message or criticism about someone. Subtweeting is found useful

in social situations as it allows plausible deniability if the subtweeter is challenged by those they criticise, while ensuring that the relevant audience gets the message (Marwick and boyd, 2014). In this sense, use of ambiguous phrasing in reference to the President such as “you know who”, “the one”, “this man”, or “he” indicates that these accounts were speaking to an audience that is familiar with the context and would understand the connotations. Another important factor to note is that Turkish language uses non-gendered pronouns which disguises the object of the tweet even further but in order to convey meaning more clearly, I will be translating the pronouns in tweets as “he” or “him” when they refer to President Erdogan and they/them will be used when the tweet is about AKP politicians or supporters in general.

This practice relied on similar connections between the audiences and the microcelebrity as the use of nicknames, but due to increased vagueness, the decoding process required even deeper familiarity with both the account and the events or subjects that were being referenced. I focus on two forms of subtweeting that were commonly used by these accounts, which are memetic phrases and live subtweeting. I argue that both of these relied on shared online and offline contexts which signal subcultural connections.

Before moving on another subtweeting format that needs to be mentioned here is subtweeting by engaging with tweets and news articles through screenshots, which was the most common way these accounts engaged with particularly the news media accounts. Tufekci (2014) calls this form of subtweeting “engagement invisible to machines” and observes it as a common practice by high-visibility accounts on Egyptian and Turkish Twitterspheres who wish to talk about controversial articles or tweets without giving the writer undeserved attention while partaking in conversations with others who are in the know. However, I will not discuss this form of subtweeting here in detail, as during the election period this was mainly used either to avoid direct confrontation with authorities, circumvent potential loss of context due to the commonality of deleting tweets or to deny mass media channels further attention. As my focus here is to discuss the ways microcelebrities circumvent peer surveillance, which is the most common surveillance practice on Turkish Twitter (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017), this

type of subtweeting is not necessarily relevant as it mostly concerns denying attention to a political opponent or news media and not evading attention by unwanted audiences. Nonetheless, I would like to explore this practice further in future research.

6.1.2.1 Memetic Phrases

Subtweets about the president can often be seen in the communication of common grievances through memetic phrases. By memetic phrases, I refer to the expressions that have become common knowledge in the online subcultures of those who oppose the government through repetition and appear in different formats across settings. Memetic phrases are indicators of a subcultural vernacular that allow for insiders to identify one another based on familiarities established through subcultural connections. Recognising these repeatedly used phrases or nicknames require exposure to oppositional subcultures which is essential to establish the connections needed for decoding the strategies I will discuss in the next chapter that weaponize subcultural literacy. Therefore, as set formats, memetic phrases serve an important function as contextual anchors for positioning these accounts within the oppositional subcultures but their capacity for becoming discursive weapons is limited due to their lack of exclusivity as commonly used phrases. For example:

> "Afraid of writing his name in this tweet 😊" (Row 19188)
>
> [Screenshot of a tweet that says: "Afraid of comics, afraid of posters, afraid of university students, afraid of intellect."]

> "For 15 years these hopeless romantics have been keeping up with this dumb opposition. Yeah sure, he is very afraid. I heard that he is secretly crying himself to sleep. Dude, this man can disappear anything that annoys him even a little. What fear are you talking about?" (Row 19190)

These tweets are a two-part response to the tweet in the screenshot. In the screenshotted tweet, the underlying message is that the president is afraid of a list of things which is why he tries to subdue them. So, the Quote tweet, uses the exact same phrase to point out that the person who is tweeting is also afraid of addressing the president directly. None of these tweets mention any names but those who are acclimated to the oppositional subcultures know that "they (he) are (is) (very) afraid of […]" is a memetic phrase that is commonly used which appears in other tweets in the dataset (Row 357, 8971, 11309). In fact, the second tweet points to the commonality of this phrase and criticises it by calling it a weak argument. These types of expressions are memetic because they get repeated across contexts and in slightly different forms by subcultural insiders.

"We will not allow you to become president." (Row 1217, 3801, 4535)

"Seems like he is not going to die." (Row 19095, 20921)

As seen above these phrases as repeated by different accounts, in fact the memetic phrase in the first tweet is a quote from a speech by Selahattin Demirtas (leader of HDP) from 2015, who was addressing President Erdogan. These types of memetic expressions are called "phrasal template memes" and considered mainly in the ironic quotations from public figures that are used for the purposes of ridicule (Zappavigna, 2022). This case shows how quotes from public figures can also become phrasal template memes to convey dissent by leveraging their vagueness when used out of context. Quotes from public figures may not be as useful in disguising the message but as they are the words of another person, using them they may disguise the messenger from harm.

On the other hand, seeing "he is not going to die" on Twitter may not mean much to a passer-by but those who in on the oppositional subcultures are familiar with this phrase getting repeated several times a year. It refers to the belief that there is no hope for the

president to be replaced via elections and they will just need to wait until he dies (Row 20921). However, even though the context in such memetic phrases is seemingly well hidden, because of how often they are repeated across platforms it becomes possible for unwanted audiences to recognise these as markers of oppositional talk. Like nicknames, they allow for plausible deniability, but their lack of exclusivity weakens their potential to protect the account from reprisals. Therefore, just as nicknames, memetic phrases are also more useful as signifiers of subcultural connection than disguising criticism.

On the other hand, there are expressive formats that are used in commenting on the suppression of dissent which become recognisable memetic formats by following the same sentence structure. This structure often appears as beginning a sentence as if setting up for a criticism of the government and then referencing the symbols of state oppression such as laws, prisons where dissidents are held and the police.

> "I want to say so many more things but there is the Turkish Penal Code…" (Row, 13783)

> "Off they will pardon all the killers and mafia members again…but anyway, I don't want to deal with the police now." (Row, 13069)

One of the most popular uses of this expressive format can be found in potentially incriminating tweets that stop mid-sentence to say "anyway… Silivri is cold" instead of concluding the argument (eg. Row 6003). Silivri refers to a prison in Istanbul where many dissenting politicians (including the Presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtas), journalists and academics are being held. This type of subtweeting has become so common on Twitter that it is now used widely among dissidents when criticising the government across settings (Kenefici, 2018) and in different forms outside of this expressive format. For instance, in response to a microcelebrity account who shared a funny picture of the president, another microcelebrity responded with only a screenshot

of a car navigation set to Silivri Prison (Row 20741) as a reference to this memetic phrase. The primary purpose of these types of memetic phrases is to signal a connection between insiders through a commentary about state surveillance because they signal criticism without actually criticising the government. The section of the sentence that contains the criticism is replaced by the memetic phrase or the recognisable symbols of oppression.

6.1.2.2 Live Subtweeting

Live subtweeting refers to the practice of subtweeting during televised events, speeches or rallies by relying on the assumption is that the audience of the tweet is also watching or participating in the same event. These subtweets mimic the social setting of sitting together in the same room and watching TV which strengthens the connections between microcelebrities and audiences through the intimacy of shared experiences. Live subtweeting brings new opportunities to convey criticisms because the ephemerality of televised speeches and events enhances the plausible deniability provided by subtweeting, which means the criticisms could become less nuanced or measured. For instance, the first two tweets below that were sent during one of the televised speeches of President Erdogan in May 2018 were quoting a speech by the main opposition candidate during a parliamentary session in 2013. Whereas the last two tweets were sent shortly after the president appeared on TV to announce the election results.

> “There is a great quote from the main opposition candidate that I’d like to repeat “SHUT UP YOU GOD’S PUNISHMENT TO ALL OF US, JUST SHUT UP”” (Row 4145)

> “SHUT UP, YOU GOD’S PUNISHMENT TO ALL OF US, JUST SHUT UP” (Row 4249)

> “Shut Up!” (Row 15739)

> “Ugh he is speaking again, I am terrified” (Row 15724)

These tweets were leveraging the ephemeral temporal context created by the televised event to hide these otherwise risky statements. Live tweeting is discussed under different names in previous research such as 'audiencing' (Highfield, Harrington and Bruns 2013) and 'second screening' (Gil de Zúñiga and Liu, 2017) which often focused on hashtagged discussions where fans of TV shows and other audiences get together. However, in this dataset the hashtag use was negligible and limited to only 382 tweets among the 5.6K elections related tweets. In fact, other than the hashtags about mobilisation against electoral fraud (40%), most of the hashtags in the dataset appeared in retweets from politicians and party accounts which shows the microcelebrities' avoidance of using explicit political markers when conveying political messages to make them less discoverable (Zappavigna, 2011).

As the context was not conveniently provided by hashtags, these tweets based on live events rely on the intimacy and the alignment of interests between microcelebrities and followers. Within this context, microcelebrities were able to talk about a shared experience without the need to specify actors or topics because the assumption was that they were all "here" together, witnessing the same situation. Such assumptions reinforce the feeling of community and togetherness as it gives the illusion of sharing the same space online and offline (Dean, 2010) thus complementing the shared connections that are formed through subcultural vernacular. These subtweets are publicly private (Lange, 2007) as to an outsider they resemble eavesdropping into a conversation between friends and for those who are in on the conversation these tweets are 'humorous' in the sense that they create "a sense of shared conspiracy in the context of illicit activities like gossiping or joking about superiors" (Kuipers, 2008, p. 366). This ambiguity in tweets created by assumptions on shared context makes them difficult to contextualise after the fact. For example, in this tweet that was sent after the elections were won by the AKP, the microcelebrity account was Quote retweeting a tweet they sent a few months back when watching a Muharrem Ince rally:

> "It seems I unintentionally became an AKP supporter! How am I gonna explain this tweet to my children??" (Row, 16078)
>
> [Quote RT: "Look how lovely and cute our 13th President looks when speaking"]

In addition to the intimacy that emerged from the assumption of being among the audiences of a media event, some subtweets were formulated in a way that allows them to be correctly decoded only when they are viewed together with the other tweets that talk about the same event. I refer to this as the ambient context, context provided by the other tweets in the vicinity. Ambient context is always 'imagined' as it relies on assumptions about how audiences' timelines will look when they encounter this tweet. Relying on ambient context creates opportunities to hide true meanings, as only those who have a similar social network on Twitter will be able to understand the tweet in all its meanings. This capacity for ambiguity that allows for tweets to have multiple possible meanings, protects the microcelebrity from backlash without alienating the intended audience. For example, below is a tweet from 2013 by the former President of Turkey, Abdullah Gul that was retweeted during one of the televised speeches of the president:

> "We really liked this movie. I congratulate the actors; they did an excellent job." (Row 4892)

The purpose of retweeting this five-year-old tweet may seem ambiguous outside of the context provided by other tweets that it appears among. Within that context we can deduce that the retweeting account was using the words of the former president out of context to imply that President Erdogan is not genuine about his campaign promises. This assumption about how the audiences' timelines look at the time this was retweeted, supports Sadler's (2017) argument that chronological presentation of tweets allows Twitter to be read as narrative. This is particularly possible for microcelebrities as even if their audience has opted for their timelines to be organised as "top tweets first", there is a strong likelihood for microcelebrity tweets to still appear within the correct context due to the attention they command. This narrativity was weaponised to disguise dissent as

these accounts were relying on the overarching narrative provided by other tweets and media experiences to fill in the blanks in their messages. This also shows that the audiences who mattered were those who had this context available to them, either by connecting the retweet to the speech they were watching or by utilising the ambient context provided by subcultural affiliation.

Ambient context was also quite useful in challenging the government by revealing misconduct or engaging in retrospective accountability, which refers to the practice of holding the government to account by referring to their past deeds. For instance, during the speech that the snap elections were announced, multiple accounts have retweeted old news articles and videos of the President Erdogan saying, “Announcing an early election is treason” (Row 55, 70, 89, 103, 114, 122, 193). Without any further comments other than relaying an old statement by the president, these retweets were decoded as criticisms because they came at a moment of contradiction. Similarly, as Erdogan announced that AKP was getting into an alliance with the right-wing nationalist party MHP, several accounts have retweeted old tweets by MHP leader and Erdogan calling each other names (Row, 4816, 6032 until 6043, 6237). These tweets allowed for these accounts to point out contradictions and convey criticisms by using the words of politicians and leveraging the specific context provided by the discourse around televised or reported events.

6.1.2.3 Ambient Context and the Emotional Echo Chambers

Even though the extant research suggests that live tweeting during presidential debates and speeches allow for the expression and understanding of topics that are of interest to the public (Zheng and Shahin, 2018), I find that in microcelebrity tweets, affective reactions to the speech, such as the ones presented in the previous section, were more common than discussions on the content, which the previous research only acknowledges as a supplement to live tweeting about the content (see. Maireder and Ausserhofer 2012). Televised events give the rare opportunity to have the illusion of directly confronting authorities without actually being face to face (Mascaro and Goggins, 2012). In the case of the tweets I analyse, this opportunity was not used to strengthen the

democratic process through deliberation as the previous research finds but rather to communicate rage and dislike that otherwise could not be said without repercussions. In this sense, it could be claimed that televised events are opportune moments when subordinate groups can almost confront authorities without the veil of infrapolitics.

These practices of live subtweeting based on emotions rather than content during political events can also create feelings of belonging and solidarity (Papacharissi, 2015) by intensifying the bonds between similarly minded audiences and microcelebrities. Political events create an environment where intimacy is capitalized to reinforce affective experiences and is simultaneously generated through them. Understanding the subtext in these affective expressions imply a degree of "sameness" between the microcelebrity and the audiences, a shared, in-group experience that relies on familiarity and like-mindedness.

Looking at the hope and affective motivations of the protesters in Gezi Park, Eslen-Ziya and her colleagues (2019) have described the connections built between diverse protesters as an emotional echo-chamber. They argue that an emotional echo chamber "gets created through the emotions (and not opinions) that are shared by the protestors, and the 'chamber', […] allows the emotion to 'echo' back to the protestor as it is also shared by others" (p.1). They observe that during the protests these shared emotions acted as the glue that held those diverse protestors together. Within the emotional echo chambers protestors manage to stand in solidarity and overlook their differences to build a collectively imagined utopia that is fuelled by anger but also compassion (Eslen-Ziya et al., 2019). This has many similarities to the microcelebrity discourse during the election period as the commentaries were fuelled by the anger towards the government and hope towards a brighter future felt by diverse voters. During televised events, it is the ambient context created by the discourse around mutually experienced emotions may also create emotional echo chambers on a smaller scale than what is experienced through hashtags in Eslen-Ziya and colleagues' (2019) research.

The scale of the event may also affect the possibilities to hide affect in the ambient context, as televised events that are followed only by a section of the Twitter users may only create a sufficient volume of tweets in specific networks as opposed to events that are nationally experienced such as the election day. Incidentally, there was a lot more reliance on ambient context during the election day, especially when communicating feelings. For instance, the tweets below show how the anger and despair was communicated after the elections were once again won by the President Erdogan and the governing party:

> "We all are hanging onto our phones waiting for someone to say that all is not lost" (Row 15828)

> "We don't need long sentences, in short, we are screwed!" (Row 16104)

> "That massive difference between not being able to sleep last night and tonight....." (Row 16116)

> "I don't believe in a better future anymore" (Row 16184)

I consider these tweets as live subtweets because of the underlying implication that they communicate the fear of a future where the current president holds totalitarian power in the ephemeral context provided by the election day. These tweets were products of viewing Twitter as a conversational space, and they were imagined to be situated in a timeline of similar tweets or seen by those who share that moment, which provide the necessary ambient context. During the election day, as timelines are saturated with elections related content these tweets create and exist within emotional echo chambers by referring to a collective "we" as the ones experiencing these emotions. Understanding the frustrations and the subtext in these affective expressions rely on the fact that the

narrator (microcelebrity) and the reader (audience) are on the same page and experiencing something that invokes similar feelings.

These intimate, affective expressions of dissent indicate that microcelebrities take on roles that go beyond amplifying the reach of oppositional voices and content. Their position as focusers of attention within the oppositional subculture expands these responsibilities to the narration of shared frustrations and feelings that are difficult to convey for ordinary users due to the apparent risks. By strategically using their position within these the oppositional subcultures and the ambient context, these accounts were able to cater for many users who understand and relate to them without having to share too much background information. Therefore, strengthening the subcultural connections by inviting those who are in the know to a secret meeting held in plain sight.

6.2 Conclusion

This chapter explored the ways microcelebrity accounts signalled subcultural connections when communicating dissent through the strategic deployment of shared contexts and familiarity between audiences and microcelebrities. To lower the chances of detection, microcelebrities often resorted to using nicknames or avoiding names all together in their criticisms of the president which required shared understandings of these conventions to decode meanings communicated in these tweets. I argued that these two strategies relied on operationalising the subcultural connections and familiarity between microcelebrities and their intended audience which exist in the backstage of political talk. As discussed in Chapter 3, unlike in Goffman and Scott's works, this backstage is not one that refers to the private interactions of likeminded individuals but one that is more akin to Ditchfield's (2021) idea of a rehearsal stage that happens in the editing and formulation of tweets. These subcultural connections and familiarity that are manifested in the formulation of tweets created space for ambiguity to distract unwanted audiences away from the correct interpretations of meanings.

I have first explored these connections through the nicknaming practices which emerged from shared social codes as understanding the object of the tweet required familiarity with these naming conventions and the intentions of the account. The practice of avoiding names, on the other hand, which was referred to as subtweeting, was discussed in relation to its use in the formulation of memetic phrases and narration of live events. While memetic phrases were alluding to a backstage where vernacular expressions were created to signal subcultural affiliation, live subtweets exemplified instances where momentarily shared offline and online contexts between audiences and microcelebrities were used to cloak expressions of anger and frustration. Finally, I argued that these strategies that relied on intimacies and familiarity, help in creating a feeling of community between subcultural insiders through shared understandings that are unknown to outsiders.

Chapter 7 Internet Culture as a Weapon: Intertexts, Memes and Other Devices of Resistance

In this chapter, I will explore how microcelebrities weaponised their Internet culture literacy for disguising dissent and achieving temporary reversals of power through social media rituals. This is an addition to and a divergence from the previous chapter in which I focused on the tweets that leveraged the markers of political subcultural connection such as shared temporal contexts and vernacular codes to hide dissent. On the other hand, the practices I will discuss here do not leverage vernacular codes or experiences shared specifically among oppositional groups, instead they use expressive formats of everyday online cultures such as memes, intertexts and parodies that require more than contextual and temporal alignment to decode. I describe the ability to understand and partake in these vernacular communicative styles as Internet culture literacy which is becoming increasingly more important for meaningful engagement with political talk in online spaces.

I argue that these playful expressive formats work in disguising dissent because in Turkey Internet culture literacy is consistently coded as a skill unique to those who are in the opposition subcultures. This is firstly because the forced confinement of dissent to online spaces (Hintz, 2019; Tufekci, 2017) necessitated adapting the conventions of anti-government political talk to the communicative styles afforded by the Internet. Secondly, because by vilifying and forbidding any meaningful engagement with Twitter or more broadly the Internet culture, the AKP government has unintentionally made these cultures into devices and sites of resistance (Irak, 2017; Gorkem, 2015). Therefore, the expressive forms and rituals of social media and Internet cultures became the communicative styles of these subordinate groups, and the literacies of Internet culture and digital skills became competencies through which in-group and out-group actors could be understood.

The ways microcelebrities partake in this interplay between the platform vernacular and political talk is important because the attention economy of online platforms makes the voices of those who can successfully produce these cultural products the loudest (Morva, 2016). This is why this chapter pays specific attention to the intertextuality of these tweets drawing from Kristeva's definition of intertextuality as a text's relationship to other cultural products that creates a mosaic through which a text can be understood (Orr, 2010). In this case this mosaic consists of a shared media diet, sense of humour and political alignment between the creators and readers of these tweets. In the rest of this chapter, I will first discuss how the perceived gap in digital cultural capital between pro and anti AKP accounts (Irak, 2017) were used by microcelebrities to create criticisms of the government that are intertextually constructed through the appropriation of pop-culture references, memeification of government supporters and political content. Then, I will discuss how Internet culture literacy and digital skills being used to claim superiority over a political opponent that dominates all other areas of life led to a struggle for keeping up appearances on social media by producing good content. The ability to produce good social media content is equated to good politics which engenders a climate in which creativity and "getting Twitter" are necessary skills to claim agency.

7.1 Social Media Rituals: Intertextual Humour

7.1.1 Appropriation of Popular Culture

Intertexts, as in texts that explicitly reference other texts, are an essential part of the Internet vernacular, which applies to political talk as much as everything else online (Highfield, 2018). A common way intertextual humour appeared in the criticisms of the government was through strategic references to media texts from Western popular culture. Intertextual humour through period-specific pop cultural references in opposition to the state power can become a unifying ideological tool that determines in-group actors (Morva, 2016), in this sense intertexts are inherently infrapolitical (Scott, 1990). Secondly, Western pop cultural phenomena are weaponised as tools for dissent in Turkey because

they are often boycotted by AKP supporters as they do not align with the values endorsed by the government (Hintz, 2019). Therefore, references to these media texts allow microcelebrities to leverage the perceived knowledge gap between the government supporters and the dissidents of the regime and through this they are able to distinguish their voice from that of their political other.

The role of intertexts in hiding dissent is, therefore, linked to their exclusivity and implicitness which has generative power to actualise surreptitious in-group political talk on social media (Milner, 2014). After all, intertextual references can only be decoded by those who are in the know and thus, the hidden meanings communicated through intertexts allow for claiming relative zones of freedom for these insiders.

Use of images and short clips from movies and TV series were a common practice in the intertextually constructed criticisms. For instance, after a trailer for the Marvel Studios film Venom (2018) was released, an image of the main character Venom, who is the archnemesis of the Marvel superhero Spider-Man, was often used without captions in response to tweets about President Erdogan. This was an in-joke among subcultural insiders and the exclusivity of the correct interpretation of this image as a reference to the president helped in hiding dissent in plain sight. The most explicit indication of this connection between the president and the Venom was when an account shared the picture of the Venom with the caption “My candidate for presidency” and tweeted “Spam for AKP supporters” indicating that Venom was Erdogan (Row 2605). These types of intertextual references become useful in Infrapolitical interactions as they create ambiguity of meaning, giving the author plausible deniability if challenged (Papacharissi, 2015).

In the case of Venom images used for Erdogan the connotation was accessible only to subcultural insiders who knew what the image represented; this knowledge could have been acquired without necessarily knowing about the film the image references. In other examples, intertextual references often demanded the audience to understand the

cultural text. For instance, a still image from Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange (1971) in which the protagonist (gang leader) and his ultraviolent gang of teenagers were drinking milk in a milk bar was shared with a caption "They are eating cake and drinking milk at the people's lodge." (Row, 11344). The people's lodge here refers to Erdogan's campaign promise of building state-managed social spaces called people's lodge where youth can come together and get free tea, milk, and pastries. Here to understand what this image connotes is directly linked to understanding the cultural text it references. Korova Milkbar in the movie is a space where these ultraviolent teenagers get together to plan their assaults, so by referencing this text the author equates pro-AKP youth (referred to as "they") with sadistic characters. However, outside of this frame of reference provided by the film, the image alone would be meaningless to passerbys.

In other instances, the images used did not necessitate knowing the cultural text that was referenced but correct meanings became more accessible for those who understood the reference material. An example of this was when a still image from the movie Mad Max: Fury Road (2015) showing a leather-clad biker gang driving through the desert was used with a caption "Istanbul before Erdogan" (Row 13153). This was a criticism of Erdogan's recurring inferences that he made Istanbul better by exaggerating how bad the life-quality was before AKP government, during the election period, for instance, he claimed people didn't even have fridges and ovens in their homes before (T24, 2018). In this case the ambiguity of meaning was maintained by multiple possible interpretations of this image based on the cultural knowledge, value system and political alignment of the audience. First condition of decoding the satire in the image is to know which movie it comes from and that the movie depicts a post-apocalyptic wasteland where people are living in abysmal conditions due to the moral decadence of the elites. With or without this context, however, the image can be interpreted on its own accord. For a pro-AKP audience, it can mean that Erdogan rid the city of delinquents and brought prosperity, whereas those who oppose the government can recognise this as satire of Erdogan's outrageous claims about how bad life was before his government.

Surreptitiousness and ambiguity of such intertextual references to popular culture are especially important for subverting lateral surveillance by AKP supporters, as failure to do so may have significant consequences. For instance, in 2015, when Dr. Bilgin Ciftci shared a collage of pictures that compared President Erdogan to Gollum, a creature from the Lord of the Rings books (written by J.R.R. Tolkien, 1954) and film series, on his social media account, he was reported to the authorities by an anonymous social media user. The case was widely criticised as a violation of freedom of speech rights as the court gave Dr Ciftci a suspended one-year jail sentence and stripped him of parental custody rights under "insult to the president" charges (CNN, 2015). The case illustrates the risks involved in drawing direct parallels between the president and popular culture phenomena. However, it was later pointed out that the reason for arrest was not that the cultural reference was understood by the anonymous informant, as whomever looked at a direct comparison to Gollum could tell that it is not a flattering one. In fact, the court had to call in an expert to evaluate whether Gollum was evil, which was seen as a testament to the informant's lack of knowledge into what that reference entailed (CNN, 2015). This case had shown that when intertextual humour is used to criticise the government, the hidden meanings are not always correctly decoded by the authorities or the pro-AKP accounts who are responsible for most of the police reporting (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017).

Furthermore, the ideas communicated via intertextual references used similar motifs and tropes to communicate certain ideological standpoints. Scholars argue that this is a function of intertexts, as they may bring audiences who coherently interpret their meanings ideologically closer to the viewpoints communicated through these references (Tsakona, 2017; Fairclough, 1992) and encourage resharing (Miltner, 2014). For instance, the tweets below both framed Erdogan and the AKP government as the mutual enemy by referencing different texts, thus promoting the same ideological standpoint. The first tweet below was sent around the time the opposition parties (CHP, Iyi Parti and SP) decided to form an official alliance and were debating the most appropriate name. The author here makes a reference to the Harry Potter book series (by J.K. Rowling, 2007) in which the spell "Piertotum Locomotor" was used to bring the stone statues surrounding the wizarding school Hogwarts to life to protect the school that was under attack by evil forces. Referencing that iconic moment in the book in relation to the newly formed

alliance between opposition parties hides several meanings. It makes a commentary about the polarisation within Turkish politics in which an alliance between these parties with different ideologies is seen akin to the awakening of centuries old stone statues. Secondly, it communicates the necessity of coming together for the shared aim of changing the AKP government, in which the AKP is equated to the evil forces.

> "The name of the alliance should be Piertotum Locomotor" (Row 3518)

> "Muharrem Ince is coming like Gandalf who said look to my coming at first light on the fifth day. At dawn, look to the East". (Row 4226)

Similarly, the second tweet likens the main opposition candidate Muharrem Ince to a saviour by using a pop culture analogy based on The Lord of the Rings book series (by J.R.R. Tolkien, 1954). It references a line by the wizard Gandalf that signposts the moment he arrives in the battlefield with additional forces that makes the difference between life and death for the heroes battling against their evil opponent. This tweet is also a play on Muharrem Ince's campaign slogan 'Muharrem Ince is coming' indicating that Ince would be the new president after the elections. In fact, using the same reference, on the election night, another account tweeted that they were

> "Awaiting the results like awaiting Gandalf who said he would come at dawn on the fifth day" (Row 16052).

In both these tweets, Muharrem Ince was clearly equated to Gandalf who rallied unlikely allies and turned the tide in the fight against evil, and the election day was seen as the day of the big battle against evil forces (AKP).

In all these examples, microcelebrity accounts illustrated a clear separation between opposition parties (forces of good/heroes) and the government (evil forces/villains). The election (battleground) was depicted as a space in which everyone else comes together against the AKP government and their supporters. A similar metaphor could be seen in a photoshopped poster for the movie Captain America: Civil War (2016) in which the two main characters (representing the two main sides of the conflict) were replaced by Ince and Erdogan and the tweet was captioned "Early Elections: Civil War" (Row 5688). These tweets framing the AKP government and President Erdogan as the mutual enemy through intertextual references foster narratives of unity among those who are in the know while obscuring these meanings from the authorities who lack the cultural capital to decode them.

From these examples we can argue that there were three functions of intertexts that were at play in the veiled communication of dissent on Turkish Twitter. Intertexts allow exclusivity and those who do not know the reference "are excluded not only from enjoying its meaning, but also from the affective reward of feeling part of the elite who shares that intertextual system of reference." (Adami, 2012, p. 134). Strategic use of intertextual expressions demands the audience to recognise the references to pop and internet cultures, to understand the political subtext (Highfield, 2018) in addition to following election campaigns and the daily news. Therefore, a combination of these multiple layers of meanings attest to how a shared cultural memory can be weaponised to criticise the regime without making these intentions explicit to outsiders.

As a second but highly relevant point, as Tsakona (2017) notes intertexts serve a hegemonic and elitist function by setting barriers between those who can or cannot interpret these texts. Therefore, their exclusivity achieves more than only cloaking criticisms. Political criticisms conveyed through intertextual references may create temporary reversals of power when the oppressors lack the necessary knowledge to decode such content, but they also may create power inequalities between those in opposition based on their cultural literacy. Finally, as popular social media formats, intertextual references are also appealing to audiences who have the means to decode

them, which increases the salience of the content (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2015; Miltner, 2014) by making content more spreadable (Jenkins et al., 2013). This is evidenced by how similar references and tropes emerge within microcelebrity tweets in communicating the same ideological standpoint, which shows the popularity of these allusions. This characteristic of intertexts make them suitable strategic communication tools for microcelebrity accounts by both amplifying the visibility of tweets and ensuring that the correct audience decodes them.

7.1.2 Appropriation of Political Content

Intertextual references to political content were often used to present content by politicians' out of context for ridicule or tactical frivolity (Kingsmith, 2016). Such political content included but was not limited to the pictures from political events, excerpts from interviews with politicians and the statements of party officials and ministers. I consider these intertextual references as a form of memeification. Even though Internet meme is often associated with mostly image-based templates (image macros) that are repurposed by many users online, in cultural context, memes or memetic products can be used in reference to other forms of cultural units that exhibit replicability such as the phrasal template memes I discussed in the previous section. In the memes I discuss here image macros are replaced by these quotes or excerpts from political speeches and presented with a different text each time they are reproduced. One of these instances can be seen below:

> "When I try to make weekend plans and my date comes to me with excuses:"
>
> [Video of Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaking about the opposition] (Row 1389)

In the video shared in this tweet, President Erdogan says "A really weird scenario is at play, and we will see how it will play out until the weekend. Thankfully we don't have any issues like that [we don't need to do schemes]; after all, we have taken all the necessary steps." Here, Erdogan was criticising the opposition parties and claiming that they were

scheming behind his back. The tweet used this video in a way that is common to see on Twitter in which vague quotes get repurposed through humorous reinterpretations. In this example, the account owner was reinterpreting Erdogan's words into the dating context which frivolously undermined the accusatory tone of the video. The same video cut to different sections of the excerpt above appeared in other tweets as well:

"My friends: You still didn't forget her, did you? Me: …" (Row 1153)

"When they ask me do you have a girlfriend, me: …" (Row, 1503)

"Chief, what about the economy?" (Row 6836)

These frivolous takes on political videos are subversive because they undermine authority in a way that is not explicitly irreverent, therefore cannot be easily branded as dissent. They do not have an accusatory tone that challenges the sentiment in the video but by taking it out of context they allow for subverting power dynamics through laughter (Lynch, 2002; Bakhtin, 1985). In this case, these accounts leveraged their Internet culture literacy not to capitalise on a perceived gap in the cultural knowledge as seen in popular culture references but instead to capitalise on their command over the playful discursive styles and formats of Twitter to create inexplicitly subversive content.

Another factor that allowed for these tweets to remain under the radar was that this practice was not solely used to undermine the president but was a common ritual of frivolous engagement with politics that applied to other politicians as well. For example, when the leader of Saadet Party tweeted "You don't realise this, but you are in a pitiful state" in reference to AKP voters, several tweets quoted this to say:

"When I wake up early" (Row, 14023)

"When my ex starts dating the girl, he once introduced me as a friend" (Row, 14025)

"When he met my ex-girlfriend and her friend group" (Row, 14474)

Commonality of these memeification practices liberates this format from being a distinct practice of oppositional talk and rather frames it as a part of the rituals of the platform and draws the attention away from whose quote is being ridiculed. Therefore, once again, understanding the platform culture and the ability to cater for it becomes a device to surreptitiously undermine authority.

7.1.3 Memeification of Government Supporters

I have explained how intertexts serve an elitist/hegemonic function by implying the superiority of those who are in the know over those who are not. Hegemonic function of intertexts can be most clearly seen in the memeification government supporters in which both the ability to understand cultural references and the command over social media practices are weaponised. I will explain this through the example of "secularism is lost grandpa", a meme that emerged during the election period after a street interview with an elderly AKP supporter went viral. The references to this video became a cornerstone of the criticisms that were aimed at the government supporters.

In the video, an elderly AKP supporter was complaining about the main opposition supporters and calling them traitors; he was then interrupted by a passer-by opposition supporter who was offended by his comments. The man in the video was dubbed "Secularism is lost grandpa/uncle" due to his attempt in impersonating and ridiculing

those who are concerned with a decline in secularism during AKP's tenure. Memeification of this 'character' is significant in terms of both the platform culture and the political discourse. As John Fiske (Reading 2 cited by Michalik 2014, p.2) notes "derivative texts exist in relation to other texts and current power structures, resisting or proliferating social structures of dominance and subordination." In this sense, the virality of this video and the meme "secularism is lost grandpa" can be considered as a way this text is appropriated to make sense of and critique the culture that led to its emergence.

What this man represented and why he went viral was quite clear for anyone who understood the pro-anti AKP polarisation within the Turkish society. The main point of his virality was the implications of the anger he projected in the video, as he was accusing the intervening woman of treason for being against the government and threatening to call the police on her. He was seen as an embodiment of the violent pressure the dissidents have been feeling under the AKP rule caused by the extended powers given to the AKP supporters. The entitlement to call the police to report a harmless expression of dissent was seen as a testament to those powers (Row, 5729; Row, 17133). Secularism is lost grandpa meme shows the anger towards the surveillance culture and the disproportionate power given to government supporters over other sections of the public:

> 'In the "secularism is lost grandpa" video, how did this uncle think of saying "Look, I will call 155 (the police)"? A person who has not made calling the police in every political disagreement a habit would never say this. It seems to me that he has found excuses to report others to the police for treason before.' (Row 5729)

> "I am not going to feel sorry for a guy who labels anyone crossing his way as a traitor and who would rip my head off with his bare hands if he got the chance" (Row 6202)

"The real owner of this country is the secularism is lost grandpa" (Row 17133)

Especially the second tweet above that was sent as a response to those who claimed that the ridicule and memeification of this man was cruel, exemplifies the power marginalised groups find in online spaces that they cannot exert elsewhere due to apparent risks. Whereas the other tweets provide a glimpse into the motivations for the ridicule directed at this man. The potential these types of memes hold also go beyond retaliating for the divisive attacks and extend to commenting on the broader issues in the ways government supporters are favoured by the political elite as seen above. The video was also edited to label various people in the video as different political parties (Row 5643) and was used to comment on the government's tendency to label anyone who defends the government as a "hero":

"I expect "them" to make him into a "hero" in a few days" (Row, 6203)

Here, the tweet is addressed at an ambiguous 'them', which can be identified as the government by those who share similar grievances. Even though the criticism of a government supporter cannot be framed as criminal and can be communicated openly, the sections of the tweet that directs the criticism to the government is hidden behind a discreet language due to the apparent dangers that are associated with it. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, in the case of the above tweet, the discreet criticism of the government is made meaningful through the specific context that it appears in. But for the other tweets ridiculing or criticising this man, the implicit criticism of the government was mainly hidden in this man being seen as an embodiment of the oppression of dissent.

In the past decade, ordinary citizens reporting disagreements to the police under false pretences that equate criticism of the government with treason has created an atmosphere of fear in public spaces (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017), especially, on social media

where the criticisms are documented in a written format. In online spaces, content removals, lawsuits, account closures and even arrests over anti-government content have been becoming increasingly more common due to the ease of lateral surveillance by AKP supporting accounts on these platforms. Therefore, these practices of memeifying government supporters can be considered a retaliation achieved by weaponizing the platform culture that these sections of the public vehemently oppose and refuse to engage with (Hintz, 2019). The subversive power that is achieved through these practices may or may not be intentional (Fiske, 2017) but they bring opportunities to express collective resentment by using a language familiar to social media savvy sections of the public.

Subsequent tweets that referred to the "Secularism is lost grandpa" meme have produced meme mashups by including him in other popular meme formats (Row 5666, 5943, 5967, 5969, 6170, 16936, 16945), to ridicule his intelligence, self-presentation, and worldview. He was included in a fake poster for the The Avengers (by Marvel Studios, 2012) in which the main characters were replaced with different government supporters who were memeified on Twitter in the recent years (Row 5961). These tweets required an internet culture literacy that surpassed the video that was being referenced and extended to the literacy of a selection of other memes and popular culture texts. Using a cornucopia of cultural texts that are known to social media savvy users to ridicule a political opponent, these tweets manifest the powerplay between those who hold the cultural knowledge and those who hold the political power. In this sense, microcelebrity accounts assume that their followers will have the necessary cultural literacy to decode these messages, therefore, present these intertexts as in-jokes.

This implies that such inferences demand what Werner (2004) calls "shared cultural memory" for the interpretation of these texts, which has consequences for who is included and excluded from these conversations. For instance, people have used quotes from the video in various contexts expecting their audience to remember the source (e.g My boyfriend: I want to break... Me: LOOK SERIOUSLY I WILL CALL 155 (Row 5883)) or used references to this meme months after it emerged (Row 16936, 16945,17133).

The images that were created around secularism is lost grandpa meme also used extratextual cultural codes such as the jokes about the "AKP supporter look/fashion" (e.g 5931, 5943). These shared understandings are also evidenced in other tweets ridiculing government supporters. For example, one account quoted a tweet that included a picture of the computer software WinRAR's founder with a caption "What do you think this person does for a living?". In response, the account commented that he was probably doing a rice dish that is customary in conservative Islamic religious gatherings (Row, 5780). The comment was purely based on the alikeness of WinRAR founder's personal style in the picture to those associated with the pious AKP voters. Another set of tweets were commenting on the shoes worn by a columnist for the government supporting newspaper Yeni Safak. The shoes were argued to connote his devoted AKP supporter identity better than the man himself, to the degree that if only the shoes were visible in the photo everyone would know "who" is wearing them (Row, 5944, 5958, 5959, 5968). Similar arguments were made for certain t-shirt designs (Row, 6910), which desserts people like (Row, 7693), wearing chequered jackets (Row, 8350), one's fitness level (Row, 19351) and many others.

These tweets, albeit are not explicit criticisms of the government, demonstrate how these inferences and stereotypes about the AKP supporters can be used to communicate political disdain towards the government through a less incriminating target that symbolises the cultural hegemony of the AKP regime. The surreptitiousness of such tweets become apparent as a majority of these do not explicitly say that they are criticising AKP supporters and rely on others' literacy of these cultural codes. Therefore, through the use of humour and internet culture literacies these tweets address a familiar crowd who are "in on" the joke and signal their dissent through these hidden meanings.

7.2 Ugly Memes Mean Bad Politics

Internet culture literacy being coded as a skill of those in opposition conflates political alignment and the ability to produce good content. Agreements on judgments about good or bad cultural products imply shared cultural structures and affiliation as each social field has a distinct way of identifying quality content (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2015). However, as Thornton (1995) says, these "are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others" (p. 201). Especially when these assertions are communicated through humour and ridicule, as Dagtas notes,

> "[...] what connects the makers and users of humor is the fact that they share not only the joke but also the distance they establish through the joke, between themselves and the object of ridicule […] while those who are laughed at supposedly lack the cultural capital to understand them" (2018, p.123)

I have so far explored this through memeification of government supporters in which microcelebrities used their literacy of internet cultures to ridicule and assert superiority over government supporters. In addition to this, grievances about the government and their supporters were also communicated through humorous criticisms of the bad quality content they produce and these claims to their ineptitude in producing good content was used to delegitimise and resist their hegemony. These not only required the audience to recognise poor quality content that shows a lack of Internet culture literacy but also understand the hegemonic underpinnings of such low-quality content. An example to this can be seen below:

"Dogs are already on the top anyway":

["To the girls who take pictures with their tongues out: if taking your tongue out was good, dogs would be on the top"] (Row 1414)

Here, the tweet functions as a double criticism. The "dog" is used in this tweet in its secondary meaning in Turkish, which is a derogatory term, in reference to a person who acts out of self-interest and/or behaves badly. Therefore, in one way, this tweet is contesting the shaming of women based on religious morality, as the shared meme contains religious imagery and refers to women taking selfies with their tongues out as dogs. Secondly, the author responds to the image by saying that "The dogs are already on the top anyway" referring to the government (the top of the state) as "the dogs", which requires a deeper understanding of the platform culture to decode.

Unlike the subtweets I have discussed in the previous chapter, this time the latent meaning is understood not only because of its context but also because of the style and the content of the meme that it accompanies. This style of meme, due to its poor aesthetics (font, colour and image choice) and the criticism of a common online phenomenon (selfie), is often associated with the AKP supporters who allegedly lack digital cultural capital, hence, produce lower quality content and lack appreciation for digital phenomena. As the idea communicated via the image also resonates the type of

conservative morality that is imposed upon the more liberal sections of the public by the AKP government and their supporters, it becomes clearer that the reaction was towards the regime that supports the message in this image. In fact, the responses to this tweet in the dataset included jokes about AKP supporters and moral values endorsed by the AKP which affirm that the audience of the tweet was able to decode the message by looking at the meme.

The issues around the quality of digital products produced by pro-AKP accounts could also be seen in the tweets that criticised the fake images and information that pro-AKP accounts disseminated on Twitter. A tweet, for instance, shared several badly photoshopped pictures of Ince piloting a passenger train in a mosque, dancing in a mosque and driving a tractor in a mosque. The tweet was captioned "What a shame, Ince!" in an effort to surreptitiously criticise the absurdly photoshopped images that disseminate in pro-AKP circles to claim that the main opposition candidate has no respect for Muslim values. These images were not the actual ones taken from pro-AKP networks, but ones created by other users to imitate and show the hilarity of these accusations in an exaggerated way. Such content that was produced to mimic those of pro-AKP accounts serves the purpose of putting a distance between themselves and the badly produced content that exist on pro-AKP social media.

7.2.1 Resistance through Internet Culture Literacy

Claims to superior Internet culture literacy and digital skills were also used in resistance to pro-AKP accounts that were tasked to undermine dissent on Twitter, I will demonstrate this by using the Tamam vs Devam conflict as a case study. On May 8, 2018, when Erdogan has announced in a party meeting that if the electorate says "Enough" (Tamam) he would step down in peace, Twitter was quick to respond. Major international newspapers reported that within a few hours TAMAM (Enough) hashtag and related keywords had been used two million times (BBC News, 2018) and the DEVAM (Carry on) hashtag which was initiated by government supporters as a response to the insurgence of Tamam had reached 300,000 within the same period (CGTN, 2018). This was dubbed as

one of the largest hashtag wars in the Internet history (BBC News, 2018) and Tamam tweeters were praised by the international media for their courage in participating in an anti-government campaign under Turkey's surveillance regime.

Microcelebrities used this campaign as an opportunity to show how detached pro-government segments of the public were from Internet culture. Erdogan's speech altogether was seen as a "rookie mistake"; an account pointed out that, on Twitter using the word "tamam" as a kneejerk reaction has been a running joke for about 6 months, so Twitter users were ready for this. In addition, even though I translate 'Tamam' as 'enough', it is a flexible word that can also be used as "okay" or "understood". This flexibility and the popularity of that Tamam joke among social media savvy users allowed for ample opportunities to playfully engage with the campaign. To communicate their intentions in using this word for political criticism, they have often stylised Tamam differently than the rest of the tweet, with spaces between letters (T A M A M) or by using capital letters. Unlike most Devam tweets, which consisted of one word, microcelebrities were weaponizing discursive styles of Twitter culture to create subversive content:

> "Oh, isn't it so enjoyable to see that we are writing so many creative things over here and they can't think of anything. Look, I don't mean they are unable to write good content, I mean they can't even begin to imagine it." (Row, 5435)

This perspective of equating savvy Twitter users with those in opposition show how Internet culture was seen as something within the domain of oppositional subcultures. Those who were able to produce good content were considered as insiders whereas pro-AKP trolls and bots were identified through judgments of content quality. This is not to say that all AKP supporters fit this description but the tweets by Pro-AKP accounts that appear in the dataset are selectively chosen and they are used as a means to draw these distinctions between pro and anti AKP accounts. The criteria for these judgments included grammar, sentence structure and the level of creativity in the tweets which were the

common ways to criticise Pro-AKP accounts (other examples included: Row 19111, 19114, 4786, 16982):

> "Haha, this one was probably thinking 'oh these guys care so much about this suffix I must use it" and then used it incorrectly. This account is guaranteed to be a Chief supporter. Please report." (Row, 5461)
>
> [Link to a now deleted fake account for the main opposition candidate]

> "Opened Tweets: 920 TAMAM: 916 That other word: 4 (2 bots, 2 typo)" (Row, 5494)

Both these tweets show that producing low quality content with lots of typos were seen as a characteristic of tweets supporting Devam. They were also careful in not using the word Devam in any of the tweets they sent about the fake accounts, some referring to it as "the other word" (Row 5589). For instance, the use of "that other word" instead of "Devam" in the second tweet is a testament to their digital skills as these accounts understood that even the use of this word for mockery would contribute to its virality on Twitter. On the other hand, the tweet below shows how pro-AKP accounts lacked this understanding:

> "Ahaha, as these sheep started replying "Tamam" (okay/understood) to their shepherds to show that they understood, our side has gained a lot" (Row, 5527, clarification added)
>
> [Screenshot of responses to an AKP MP asking for their followers to tweet Devam]

Later that day, Twitter blocked Devam as suspected spam; this was celebrated as a win both because the fake virality of Devam, legitimised Tamam as an organic sentiment and because it was a testament to the subversive power of Internet culture literacy in resisting the hegemony of AKP as articulated in this tweet:

> "I wish the elections could have been held over Twitter, as not even all the money they spent on bots, buying new accounts and trolls was enough to triumph over us" (Row, 5590)

However, elections are not held on Twitter and temporary victories against a powerful political opponent on Twitter alone rarely translates to actual agency (Papacharissi, 2015), however, they may still allow for oppressed groups to assert their presence and collective will (Bayat, 2010). Tweets shared in this section, show how these accounts were asserting their superiority over pro-AKP accounts through their Internet culture literacy and digital skills. This not only helps in distinguishing their own voice from that of their political opponent but also in creating zones of relative freedom (Bayat, 2010) by leveraging a social field where they have significant advantage over an otherwise culturally dominant group.

7.2.2 Is Good Content All That Matters?

Previous section has established that microcelebrity accounts are particularly adept at deploying judgments on quality of content. Coming from these accounts, these observations on quality of content indeed have more persuasive power in asserting superiority over pro-AKP accounts, as their authority on the matter emerges from their command over the cultural conventions of Twitter. This command was illustrated by the ways microcelebrities were able to skilfully exploit platform specific expressive formats to gain advantage over pro-AKP accounts and protect themselves from reprisals. Therefore, they considered Twitter as one of the few spaces where those in opposition could gain

advantage against their political opponent, thus 'winning' against pro-AKP networks on Twitter was crucial.

However, what these accounts consider as good taste has implications not just for distinguishing their own voice from that of their political other but also for who among the subordinate groups get heard. The methods microcelebrities use in hiding dissent may serve as a roadmap for safer political participation and the attention they gather may amplify these messages but these solutions they offer to mitigate oppression come with their own form of restrictions on who can participate. For the very least, the ways that they mitigate the dangers of visibility may not be accessible to others who are less adept at producing witty and creative content. Secondly, even with social media listening (Crawford, 2009) and passive participation, the ability to decode these tweets demand a considerable amount of shared cultural memory which may exclude certain sections of the public from engaging with this form of political talk. And finally, the pressure to uphold this superiority over Pro-AKP accounts also increases the standard of content expected by those who oppose the government.

> "We (microcelebrities) are liking and retweeting terrible jokes and bad content just so the supporters of the Chief wouldn't think that the oppositional content is getting low engagement. After the elections, I just want to be left alone and not see these things" (Row, 12125)

> "I am retweeting the [party 1| on Twitter, sending hearts to [party 2] on Periscope, like [party 3]'s posts on Facebook and will vote for the [party 4]. Good luck to everyone, may God give power to our unity." (Row 11625)

As can be seen here, Twitter is considered as an important playing field, in which there is a need for keeping up appearances by amplifying the popularity of oppositional content. However, this doesn't mean that these microcelebrities were always this lenient. Other

criticisms of low-quality content produced by those in opposition also voiced many concerns and those who produced them were ridiculed (Row, 5728, 5777, 5778, 6493, 8522, 8523). These included others content about “secularism is lost grandpa”, “Tamam-Devam conflict” and parodies of political leaders. Therefore, even when others tried to partake in specific trends that microcelebrities used to communicate dissent, they were selectively amplified based on the dominant tastes about what is good content. This means that weaponization of Internet culture literacy as a tool to overcome hegemony also created a pressure to always outperform political opponents and appease prominent allies by not only creating diligent criticisms of their oppression but also to do it via witty, creative, and appealing content.

The emancipatory potential of creating a language of dissent online is, therefore, undermined by the limitations it sets for other in-group actors who lack the digital literacy to adopt these new conventions. For instance, when the CHP youth branch released a video to encourage voters, they were ridiculed in several tweets for not meeting the standards of good cultural product (Row 9440, 9441), values and campaign promises they endorsed took the back seat. Ambiguous definitions of what a good cultural product is, became a form of gatekeeping that rejects the voice of those who lack the intuition to recognise and produce good content. Therefore, giving the responsibility for amplifying oppositional voices to microcelebrity creates its own boundaries around who gets heard.

A similar phenomenon was also observed during Gezi Park, where those who had the capacity and literacy to produce good quality content considered themselves as the voice of opposition and the others in the group who were devoid of these skills became more passive actors (Dagtas, 2018). The cultural distance and superiority that is communicated through resistance to Pro-AKP accounts, then also applies to in-group hierarchies through which these leaderless interpersonal networks gain de facto leaders who are skilled in content production. This particular issue then favours popular accounts immensely as their popularity is a product of their skills in producing and recognising such content (Marwick, 2010). This is apparent in the ways they hold the power to pass judgments on which content is worthy of attention by strategically retweeting content that they

consider as “good”. This power dynamic as it applies to political content by AKP, and other political parties can be seen in the tweets below:

> “Kudos to whomever has convinced AKP that the “First Vote Movement” Twitter account would actually help them gain votes. They think speaking the language of youth is sharing photos of Dr. House holding a brain and I am sure they were paid a lot of money; what a waste of resources.” (Row 10444)

> “Now that the elections are over, let’s admit that AKP’s Phoenix advert was incredibly good. They really leaned into the modern remixes of old songs trend, and it worked for them.” (Row 16648, 16649)

> “CHP, Iyi Party, SP, HDP… All their supporters and teams were stakeholders of their campaigns. They all prepared, creative, innovative, and witty content on Twitter. Except for one party. Because when we were talking about science, intelligence and educated youths they were pushing for vindictive and religious youths.” (Row 14694)

> “When I read a serious tweet, I involuntarily stop and think for a moment “this is not funny, where is the joke?” This Twitter has made us all very silly, even the politicians are trying to make jokes.” (Row 6239)

Therefore, a major outcome of this pressure was seen in the content produced by the opposition parties which had to mimic the discursive styles of content that were deemed good in the Twittersphere to gain visibility (Lerner, 2018). One of the stark examples of this change in political rhetoric was seen in the Saadet Party’s campaign, which is a right-

wing Islamist party whose voter base is considered closest to that of the AKP's[2]. Their style of political talk that used to be formal, pious, and conservative has transformed during this election period into a more playful and frivolous language which was appreciated by these accounts. Thus, they strategically retweeted the content that satisfied their standards for intertextuality and playful irreverence which can be seen below:

> "Hahaha! Saadet Party supporters have prepared this instructional banner as their banners were being ripped apart frequently." [Picture of a banner by SP, featuring a guideline for how to take down the banner properly] (Row 14692)

> "I am listing the issues that may cause disagreement in a Saadet Party government. I think we can agree to disagree with due respect on these matters: Star Wars vs Star Trek – Barcelona vs Real Madrid – Zeki Demirkubuz vs Nuri Bilge Ceylan [Turkish Film Directors] – Android vs IOS… Yet we will always stand together in love, brotherhood, justice, merit, and tolerance" (Row 15223, a retweet from a SP MP, parenthesis added for clarification)

In addition to these, their animated election videos that used popular culture texts cherished by these accounts gained much attention. One has shown the party leader Temel Karamollaoglu as Superman and another one showed him as the Popeye as a clever reference to the Turkish translation of the cartoon in which the Popeye is called Temel. These references to popular culture as seen in the tweets and the professionally produced election videos that carry DIY and amateur video aesthetics (Vernallis, 2013) can be seen as efforts to get closer to the language used by those who oppose the government on Twitter. In fact, after these successful attempts at adopting the vernacular conventions of good content, one of the accounts in the dataset shared a

[2] Saadet Party and AKP both originated from the far-right Islamist Refah Party. In 2001, reformists that were led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan formed AKP whereas traditionalists rebraded themselves as Saadet Party and continued the legacy of their predecessors (Yesilada, 2016)

tweet they sent in 2013 in which they were suggesting that AKP supporters were just Saadet Party supporters who are adept at using the Internet and said they needed to make a correction as now the opposite is true (Row 11473).

This aim to get closer to the "Twitter language" was also apparent in an animated video by the main opposition party. Textual analysis of the video revealed a strategic use of imagery to appeal to the internet cultures. The video was filled with pop-culture references (including characters such as Gandalf that are often mentioned on Twitter), made references to vernacular jokes on Twitter and talked about prioritising Internet access. Appealing to the internet culture benefitted politicians in many ways such as quotations from Muharrem Ince's speeches and rallies also often revolved around those instances when he used popular culture references that were popular on social media (Ahval, 2018). In fact, an important moment that signalled the symbiotic relationship that is forming between politicians and microcelebrities was when the main opposition candidate Muharrem Ince quoted a tweet from a microcelebrity in one of his rallies and started following others on Twitter. He said that he loves the way the youth is coming up with jokes on social media these days and referenced a tweet by one of these accounts at his rally in Izmir. This moment was celebrated by several accounts in the dataset; they said they felt like they were finally being acknowledged.

These instances have shown that as the political parties are increasingly migrating to social media for political communication, a new language that is informed by the digital culture is finding its place in formal politics. This resonates the global trends in candidates engaging with amateurism and cultivation of the authentic "one of us" image as election campaigns rely more and more on social media (Enli, 2017). In the case of Turkey, however, we are seeing this shift not just in the impression management techniques of politicians but also in the ways formal political rhetoric is converging with the Internet vernacular. The key practices in anti-government talk that include a strategic curation of pop-culture references, good visual aesthetics and everyday social media practices that demand Internet culture literacy are now observed in formal political talk. Therefore, the conventions and tactics of the anti-government political talk on social media have started

to define a new way of engaging with politics that is gaining acknowledgement in sites beyond the ones maintained by microcelebrity accounts.

7.3 Conclusion

On Twitter, the platform culture is built on creative strategies such as play and humour to overcome expressive restrictions imposed by the platform (Papacharissi, 2012). This chapter showed that these characteristics of the platform become tools to achieve temporary reversals of power (Scott, 1990) when the oppressors lack the necessary knowledge to decode such content due to their rejection to engage meaningfully with these platforms. Relying on this perceived gap in internet culture literacies, communicating dissent through the appropriation of everyday social media practices and the Western popular culture has become the cornerstone of this powerplay between those who hold the cultural knowledge and those who hold the political power.

Adoption of a playful language and "tactical frivolity" (Kingsmith, 2016) on social media and beyond (see. recent campaigns of opposition parties) shows that platform-specific literacies are becoming essential for those who want to be heard and also be safe when expressing political grievances. I argued that, in this restricted environment, the forced confinement of dissent in the online platforms and the need for visibility have given those who can command both the attention and the platform culture the power to shape the conventions of safe political discourse. Unlike the strategies discussed in the previous chapter which relied on knowledge that is available to all those who are socialised in oppositional circles, such as nicknames and expressions that derive from political subcultural connections, strategies that rely on internet culture literacy inevitably create a divide by giving the agency to those who are "in on" these online conventions.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

I developed this research project with the motivation to understand the expressive political participation of Twitter microcelebrities that have been a daily source of comic relief and information for me since the 2013 Gezi Park protests. In the context of Turkish Twitter and this thesis, Twitter microcelebrity specifically refers to the accounts who gain attention and fame through a relatable, creative, and humorous narration of everyday life, news and events in Turkey, which often but not exclusively include politics (Bolukbas and Kirik, 2020). These high-visibility accounts that gained significant attention during the Gezi Park protests occupy an important post-movement space on Turkish Twitter by appealing to a wide range of audiences who are in opposition to the government and have varying degrees of interest in politics. I positioned the importance of exploring the ways these accounts articulate anti-government viewpoints first by exploring the changing media and political landscape in Turkey and secondly by situating them in the wider debates on microcelebrity politics.

In the past decade, as the AKP government gradually consolidated power in their hands through various referenda, legislative decrees and business deals, dissent has been largely eradicated from the mass media and public spaces. This period has seen an increasing distrust to mass media channels by those in opposition to the government (Yanatma, 2018) which increased dependence to social media. Meanwhile, the gradual shift to a dominant party system in which the government is unlikely to be replaced through elections (Irak, 2016) has led to an increased distrust to the political parties in the opposition which were seen as ineffective in addressing AKP's hegemony. In this conjuncture, 2013 Gezi Park protests emerged as a visceral expression of the disdain towards the AKP government and attracted participants from all walks of life and across the political spectrum. At its core Gezi spirit defined the demand for pluralism and progressive politics that have long been ignored by the traditional political organisations (Ozen, 2015). The value system of Gezi was formed through the solidarities between otherwise fragmented groups who wished to oppose the authoritarian pressure by the

AKP regime that delegitimised any grievance that wasn't communicated through parliamentary representation (Bilgic, 2018). These connections based on values rather than ideologies instigated a politics of recognition among diverse groups as 77% of the surveyed protestors reported that they felt empowered and acknowledged through this solidarity (Damar, 2016). During the protests, Twitter became a key platform for information dissemination and expression of dissent and within this space, the accounts that managed to cater to the politically diverse protestors by creating imaginative, pluralist, and inclusive content gained much fame.

These ordinary accounts without any apparent ties to political organisations became microcelebrities during a time when grassroots solidarities between unlikely political segments were forming against the backdrop of an increasing distrust to media and political organisations. Similarly, other studies have also documented microcelebrity accounts emerging as alternatives to the mass media and political organisations in different settings (Badran and De Angelis, 2015; Lewis, 2018). This is because cynicism towards the intentions of public figures and politicians doesn't apply to microcelebrity due to the presumption that there is very little difference between the perceived and actual microcelebrity personas (Marwick, 2015). In this sense, microcelebrities that emerge from social movements who do not have any ties to political institutions become appealing political communicators and occupy a unique space in repressive regimes where dissent is criminalised, and political actors are distrusted. However, there has been a lack of interest in the current research on what happens to these accounts when the protests dissipate. I argued that those accounts that managed to sustain the audience they accrued on Twitter through the protests need further attention. In the post-Gezi context, they occupy a unique space for political deliberation in which the political reflections are made relevant not through ideological connection (like in political party networks) but based on shared values.

In chapter 3, I have also linked microcelebrities' fame to their ability to produce humorous tweets laced with social and political commentary that aligned well with the humorous language of resistance that germinated during the Gezi Park protests. Many

scholars (Aksan, 2016, Tufekci, 2017, Gurel, 2014) have claimed this language to be a re-enactment of the oral folk humour tradition in which jesters, poets and meddahs would criticise seemingly untouchable authorities by disguising political criticism in stories and tales. I argued that these parallels between oral tradition and the current language of dissent necessitates identifying Twitter microcelebrities as digital meddahs (public storytellers). A key characteristic of Meddah performances that resonate with online discourse was that their stories would find new lives in the retellings of their audiences (memesis), as they were skilled in articulating common grievances through engaging stories. Findings presented in chapters 5,6,7 further supports this parallel between meddahs and microcelebrities and establishes microcelebrities' role in Twitter discourse not as political spokespeople but as accounts that can strike the appropriate balance between political criticism and harmless entertainment so that the others could retell and mimic these without fearing reprisals from the authorities.

As argued in chapter 4, exploring microcelebrities' political talk also offers an important methodological contribution to the academic literature. In the aftermath of Gezi Park protests, the potential of Twitter becoming a platform for dissent did not escape the government's attention and they established their own base on the platform to promote their agenda and monitor dissent. This put further obstacles in the way of those who oppose the government to freely express their viewpoints on Twitter. The environment of fear and anxiety created by surveillance has pushed many to self-censor (Tanash et al., 2017). Yet, despite these pitfalls and obstacles, in claiming agency, social media still presents dissidents a necessary space for political deliberation in Turkey (Dogu and Mat, 2019) especially during political events. In this context where online dissent is penalised, but social media presence remains crucial to express oppositional views, exploring political talk that happens outside of explicitly political spaces becomes important. However, without the usual markers of political talk such as hashtags, finding discreetly communicated dissent in online platforms is a difficult task which creates a methodological problem. In this sense, I have argued that the digital spaces maintained by microcelebrities provide an ideal terrain to explore the ways dissident narratives gain visibility while remaining under the radar in repressive settings. Twitter microcelebrities who are connected to their audience not through political party affiliation but through

shared value systems offer eclectic narratives to explore dissent. In this restricted stage for those who are critical of the government, the evasion tactics employed by these popular accounts provide a unique window into the conventions of "safer" political talk. The risk of prosecution inevitably creates a need for inexplicit and indirect engagement with political issues to evade those dangerous consequences of being seen. Through this methodology, this thesis challenges the assumption that all attention-worthy political talk happens explicitly and offers a creative way to explore the use of social media for dissent in settings where open dissent is prohibited.

Considering the importance of visibility particularly during political events, this thesis explored the anti-government content shared by microcelebrities during the 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections and responded to the research question: How do microcelebrities partake in anti-government political talk on Turkish Twitter? What are the strategies they use to remain under the radar? In answering these, Chapter 5 presented the ways in which microcelebrities justified and moralised their political participation and the political identities they have exhibited in engaging with electoral topics. This chapter identified anti-government political talk as the main focus of these accounts. Thereafter, in Chapters 6-7, I discussed the strategies they used in mitigating the consequences of engaging in anti-government talk as highly visible accounts. I showed how they disguised their criticisms of the government by relying on subcultural connections and Internet culture literacies they share with their intended audience. In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss the main findings of this research and how they contribute to the existing knowledge. I will conclude by providing suggestions for future research.

First, this research contributes to Gezi Park scholarship by showing how Gezi values are still the guiding principles of engagement with oppositional politics for microcelebrities. I identify these parallels first through the roles microcelebrities take on when justifying their increased engagement with politics during the 2018 election period. In a recent study, Mercea and Levy (2020) have discussed the important place online visibility held for Gezi Park protestors and through interviews with activists they revealed how social

media-savvy activists considered disseminating what was truly happening during the protests a moral responsibility. My findings show that this legacy of Gezi is still upheld by microcelebrities on Twitter. Microcelebrities consider online political participation during elections as a duty for microcelebrity accounts who command public attention. There is an expectation for them to leverage their visibility to hold government to account and mitigate the erasure of anti-government viewpoints on other media and spearhead the mobilisation against electoral fraud. This extends microcelebrities' role as focusers of attention within social movements (Tufekci, 2013) to the post-movement space by showing that ensuing political events revitalise the dormant structures of community level engagement with politics established during protests (Varnali and Gorgulu, 2015)

I contextualised this duty narrative as a part of microcelebrities' larger impression management efforts which furthers the others' work on the strategies for online impression management in politically risky settings (Pearce and Vitak, 2016; Mor et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2012). Considering the fear and anxiety around anti-government political talk on Turkish Twitter, for accounts who intermittently produce political content, it is imperative to engage in impression management to maintain audiences with varying degrees of interest in political topics. I introduced three strategies that work together to increase the acceptance of political engagement by microcelebrities in the Twittersphere. I have shown that by engaging in priming microcelebrities aimed to prepare the audiences for an increase in political content, while retargeting, and redefining roles strategies were used to present microcelebrity commitment to political talk as a testament to their authenticity and political participation as a condition of microcelebrity status which is out of the account owner's control. These culminated in the framing of lending visibility to oppositional content as a duty for accounts that command public attention and therefore the increase in the political content was justified as fulfilling a responsibility. Pressure to partake in political talk on Twitter extended to all microcelebrities regardless of genre which showed that in Turkey, the topical configuration of Twitter is policed by the politically engaged during political events. These pressures arose from the idea that visibility is fundamental for the dissemination of information online which naturally puts the onus on those that command the most attention (Tufekci, 2013).

As another contribution to the post movement literature on Gezi Park protests, I identified that an important part of microcelebrities impression management was exhibiting political identities that aligned with the value system that was established during the Gezi Park protests. They consistently distanced themselves from political parties and emphasised opposition to the government, pluralism and progressivism when creating eclectic political commentaries around election topics. This meant that a majority of their political content was criticisms of the government which may seem counter intuitive for high-visibility accounts operating in a repressive context. Because while popular accounts directly addressing the government's wrongdoings are necessary and demanded, their high visibility puts them in danger of being detected and penalised (Pearce, Vitak and Barta, 2018; Lokot, 2018). This situation creates a tension between the need and willingness to disseminate anti-government viewpoints and the desire for self-preservation by not being too overtly critical.

When engaging in anti-government political talk on Twitter, microcelebrities need to navigate a dangerous terrain where intended and unintended audiences collapse. Turkish Twitter is a space that is riddled with pro-government accounts and trolls keen on reporting instances of dissent to the authorities (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017). In response to this, I have situated microcelebrities' political talk within James Scott's (1990) framing of infrapolitics which refers to the measured and veiled expressions of dissent in spaces where subordinate groups interact with the dominant. I found that in formulating the strategies to disguise the correct interpretations of their tweets from unwanted eyes, microcelebrity accounts relied on two key characteristics which emerge from their status and strategic self-presentation on the platform. These were the familiarity and subcultural connections they shared with their intended audiences and their Internet culture literacy.

In Chapter 6, I argued that one of the key practices in microcelebrities' anti-government narratives was creating multi-layered ambiguous meanings by strategically capitalising on the contexts and familiarity they share with their audiences. I demonstrated this by

exploring the ways microcelebrities used nicknames and allusions in their criticisms of the president which required shared understandings of these conventions to decode meanings communicated in these tweets. I argued that these tweets implied subcultural connections between microcelebrities and their intended audiences which provided the backstage in which these shared understandings were established. I have also pointed out that unlike in Goffman and Scott's works, this backstage is not one that refers to the private interactions of likeminded individuals but one that is more akin to Ditchfield's (2021) idea of a rehearsal stage that happens in the editing and formulation of tweets. Memetic phrases were given as examples for vernacular expressions shared among subcultural insiders. On the other hand, the practices of subtweeting and using affirmative nicknames (such as Reis/Captain) demanded familiarity with the microcelebrity accounts and access to relevant contexts to correctly identify the tweet as a criticism of the government. These connections created space for ambiguity to distract unwanted audiences away from the correct interpretations of meanings. In this sense, I identify that microcelebrity practices of consistent engagement with audiences and creating a unique voice, provide an ideal terrain for veiled criticisms by coding tweets in ways that are legible to the loyal followers of these accounts who recognise their voice.

Furthermore, one of the key contributions of this chapter to the academic literature is the concept of "ambient context". I have introduced reliance on ambient context as a platform-specific strategy for communicating dissent and a signifier of the subcultural connections and the existing familiarity between Twitter microcelebrities and their audience. Content that relies on ambient context is often formulated in a way that allows for it to be correctly decoded only when it is viewed together with the other tweets that talk about the same topic. Ambient contextualisation of sentiment or message is platform-specific as it is afforded mainly by the fast-paced, in-the-moment and ephemeral logic of micro-blogging. I discussed how relying on ambient context created opportunities during televised events to communicate shared emotions which provided a space for affective bonding akin to the emotional echo-chambers that were formed during the Gezi Park protests. These showed that familiarity and subcultural connections microcelebrities share with their audiences create spaces of engagement with politics

that have a conversational nature in which analysing these tweets feel like eavesdropping into a private conversation.

Finally, this subculture I reference here is not something that is commonly acknowledged in the research on Turkish political culture. Beyond the studies that indicate a similar phenomenon during Gezi Park protests (McGarry et al., 2019, Damar, 2016, Varnali and Gorgulu, 2015) many scholars consider Turkish society as distinctly polarised into political factions formed around specific parties (Kalaycioglu, 2010; Esmer, 2012). The research on the use of Twitter during elections in Turkey has shown a similar trend with very little communication across partisan networks (Furman and Tunc, 2019; Kelly and Francois, 2018). I find this subculture in the afterlife of the connections and expressive styles that were formed during the Gezi Park protests. If we collate the findings I have discussed so far, I argue that the inclusivity and pluralism in microcelebrity narratives as well as the subcultural connections needed to decode their tweets allude to the capacity of these accounts for creating a post-movement space where Gezi-minded Twitter users can come together. In this way, I challenge the current assumption that community-based engagement with politics only happens in spaces defined by hashtags or party networks.

The final chapter of this thesis, responded to a gap in the academic literature on how shared cultural understandings and literacies are weaponised on social media as tools for dissent on Turkish Twitter. Existing studies on the topic are limited to the ones exploring the Gezi Park protests, and theoretical accounts such as Irak (2017) who pointed to a divide between pro and anti-AKP sections of the public in terms of digital cultural capital. In this chapter, I discussed how microcelebrities utilised Internet culture literacies and digital skills both to hide dissent and as tools to achieve temporary reversals of power (Scott, 1990) against pro-AKP accounts.

This chapter built on the discussions on resistance to repressive governments in Chapter 3, in which I have explored how Internet and pop culture literacies have become the latest frontier in infrapolitics that equip dissidents with tools to circumvent surveillance

on social media platforms. Research into repressive settings such as China, has shown that appropriations of pop culture, intertextual allusions and memes are used to evade censors as they are often coded as entertainment (Yang, Wang and Tang, 2014; Wu and Fitzgeralt, 2020). I have similarly identified that in disguising the criticisms of the government microcelebrities rely on platform-specific cultural capital in formulating a language that is understood by subgroups who are acclimated to the platform culture.

The key contribution of this chapter is that different to what was observed in other settings, weaponization of digital folklore, pop culture and digital skills is not just a way to circumvent surveillance in Turkey. They also constitute the ways in which anti-AKP groups claim superiority and distinguish their voice from that of their political other on social media platforms. This was particularly discussed through memeification of government supporters and the practices of identifying bot accounts and claiming victory within the Tamam vs Devam campaign. In Turkish Twitter, ability to produce good cultural products are politically coded as a skill within the domain of the anti-AKP groups which supports Irak's argument that digital cultural capital is weaponised as an anti-hegemonic tool in Turkey.

Finally, I argued that, in this restricted environment, the forced confinement of dissent in the online platforms and the need for visibility have given those who can command both the attention and the platform culture the power to shape the conventions of the political discourse. Adoption of this playful language on social media by political parties and politicians shows that platform-specific literacies are becoming increasingly more necessary skills in doing and understanding politics. The necessity of producing "good" cultural products to gain visibility on these platforms and secure 'wins' against pro-AKP groups inevitably create a divide by giving the agency to those who are familiar with and able to cater to these online conventions.

In sum, these three chapters have shown how microcelebrities partake in anti-government political talk and explored the strategies they used to remain under the

radar. I argued that while microcelebrity accounts create an eclectic post-movement space for politically diverse audiences and leverage their visibility to amplify anti-government viewpoints, the ways in which they articulate criticisms of the government puts limitations on who can meaningfully engage with these narratives. In their efforts to gatekeep access to correct interpretations of content, they cater to a specifically social-media savvy audience who has the necessary contexts available to them. Therefore, as microcelebrities are taking up more space in the political talk, the ways they mitigate expressive restrictions need further attention as the platform-specific literacies and connections they share with their audiences may have power to define who gets left out of these increasingly popularised modes of engagement with politics.

8.1 Recommendations for Future Research

The role of microcelebrity in political communication and the ways they express political views are developing areas of research that have been slowly gaining attention in recent years, which means much work is left to be done. First, we need more research that investigates the microcelebrities that emerge from social movements who do not have exclusively political personas in online spaces. These accounts may reveal post-movement spaces of political deliberation or mundane political reflection for the participants of protests with varying degrees of interest in and commitment to political topics. Secondly, in my data, I have encountered many instances of microcelebrities retweeting or quote-retweeting responses from their audiences. These interactions constitute an interesting site to investigate the potential of microcelebrity content in creating spaces for political deliberation. This type of engagement with audiences is a common feature of microcelebrity practice, therefore, future research may explore audience and microcelebrity interactions in the comment sections of political content shared by these accounts.

In this thesis, I have particularly focused on the ways microcelebrity accounts were articulating anti-government viewpoints in a restricted online space, monitored by a repressive government. This was a strategic decision to make this thesis manageable within the timeframe of a PhD. However, I have identified many more practices and themes in my data that I haven't been able to incorporate into my findings. For instance, even though I identify that microcelebrities were framing their political participation as a duty, I do not explore how this duty was fulfilled for the coordination of the mobilisation against electoral fraud on the election day. Therefore, microcelebrities' role in disseminating news from ballot locations and citizen journalism needs further attention. More broadly, in national Twitterspheres, microcelebrities' role in crowdsourcing aid for NGOs and persons who are in need is an underdeveloped research topic; considering their position as high-visibility accounts, future research can explore how they take part in aid campaigns.

Furthermore, framing partaking in political talk as a duty for microcelebrity corresponds with a trend that is not isolated to Turkey, recent research shows an increasing demand by audiences for microcelebrities to engage in political talk in the United States, which accounts for a much larger and globally influential market (Goodwin, Joseff and Woolley, 2020). This means that impression management of microcelebrities in catering to this demand while maintaining audiences with varying degrees of interest in politics needs to be researched in other contexts as well. Finally, future research may consider interviewing microcelebrities to further understand how they experience the pressure of surveillance in Turkish social media.

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