The Role of Digital Media Ecosystem in Forming Self-Identity of Imam Hatip School Students in Turkey

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Neoliberal economic policies implemented by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey empowered the modernization process which is one of the main dynamics of transforming traditional societies. As a result of this socio-economic transformation, new institutions and technical developments evolved, without any relation to religion or its institutions (Zubaida, 2011). In fact, this course has accelerated the individualization process of the religiously educated Generation Z in Turkey, whereas the significance of collective religious identity shrank (Kara, 2014). The expansion of social media platforms has influenced young people's relationship with religion and faith. However, after the Gezi Parki protests in 2013, the government started using a more populist discourse with regard to religious and nationalist symbols. This type of political communication had a crucial impact on the political arena. This research sheds light on the result of a qualitative analysis, based on interviews conducted with Imam Hatip school students in Turkey. The results of these in-depth interviews show how digital media is creating a new ecosystem based on self-identity (Giddens, 1991).

Keywords: digital media, self-identity, populism, modernization, education, Imam Hatip school, AKP

When the Justice and Development Party (*Ak Parti*, from here on I will use the acronym "AKP") was found in 2001, Turkey was facing an economic crisis, Turkish Lira lost its value, unemployment rates were high, and the rise of the inflation could not be controlled. In the same period, in global scale, 9/11 events created a negative image of Muslims and Islam globally. Current President and founder of the AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who left the Islamist Virtue Party of Erbakan in 2000 as a consequence of political and ideological disputes, had to consider both internal and external incidents into account in order to deliver a positive development and create a credible image in national as well as international political arena. Distancing from the previous political affiliation and also embracing neoliberal economic measures were the leading examples for developing a post-Islamist idea for the AKP, basically combining faith and freedom, in other words democracy and Islam (Bayat, 2010). AKP's willing to join the European Union (EU) membership, and all reform measures relatedly to this process developed a positive image of the party. It was not surprising why the Bush administration referred to the AKP as a role model for other Islamist parties and movements in the Middle East and the North Africa (MENA). Although the AKP could get rid of its "Islamist" image abroad, it was seen as the continuation of the *Milli Görüş* movement[1] in Turkey. It was a checks and balance situation for the ruling government to act

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[1] Milli Görüş literally translates as "National Outlook". However, although the name "Milli" literally means "national", in this context it is better understood in terms of Islamic values (Hale & Özbudun, 2010, p. 5).

carefully and consider the Kemalist[2] roots of the country, established in 1923. In conjunction with the so-called "postmodern coup" in 1997[3], which lasted with the dismantling of the coalition government and ban of Erbakan's Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*), compulsory eight-year education was introduced to limit the expansion of Imam Hatip schools, a religious type of school that was created with the intention of educating Imam's and Hatip's (preachers) (Cagaptay, 2017). Similarly, the headscarf ban in universities, imposed by the military memorandum, was part of the same process to control human rights and freedom of speech in Turkey (Hale & Özbudun, 2010).

AKP's pious base expected to solve in particular these two issues immediately when it came to power. In fact, both issues were affecting conservative families' children. However, Erdogan was not convinced that it was the right time to deal with an issue that could have an impact on their image, in other words, it could enhance the "Islamist" labeling. Thus the ruling government was reluctant to reopen Imam Hatip schools in their first two periods. In fact, it took 10 years of AKP rule before a fully functioning Imam Hatip school was opened. In 2017, Erdogan explained the importance of Imam Hatip schools with following words:

> The interest in Imam Hatip schools is high because it meets the demands and values of the students, their parents and the whole society […] We have never intervened in others live. We never force people how to dress and behave […] An Imam Hatip student is someone who protects his/her own country, flag, azan[4], and leads the struggle for independence and futurity. An Imam Hatip student can never come side by side with terror organisations[5], injustice, violence and illegal things.

Erdogan sent his children to the same sort of school; hence he attributed high importance on Imam Hatip schools. In this regard, AKP removed bans, a disgrace for the country for years, and expanded human rights limitations. However, this was seen as an opportunity for Erdogan to declare a new period where a more religious society and generation were preferred, and religious approach became part of his populist discourse. Gezi Parki in 2013 was the turning point in this regard where Erdogan sharpened his tone regarding religious and nationalist symbols. It could not be fulfilled earlier as AKP had to convince people who considered the party with suspicion. Another reason was the prioritized economic prosperity and development in all fields, from health service to transport, especially in the first two periods.

There is no doubt that Erdogan's aim is to lead a "pious generation" as revealed in Reuters' investigation (Butler, 2018). It is not only the reflection of Erdogan's personal ideology, but it is another way of achieving development and economic success for him. Moreover, a "pious generation" is the key for constructing a new civilisation that occupies areas from culture to politics, and from education to technology. Certainly one of the main missions of Imam Hatip schools is raising a generation with this spirit. Despite this aim, the researches on the one hand, and the perceptions on the other, clearly demonstrate that the Generation Z (from here on I will use "Gen Z") of Imam Hatip school students are not fitting in the goals of the president. In particular, the relationship

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[2] Kemalism is used in the context of Turkey as another name for "nationalism", "secularism". or "modernizing" (Sayyid, 2003, p. 52). It is a uniquely Turkish term, referring to the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa "Kemal", which emerged after the "overthrow of the Ottoman regime" (Sayyid, 2003, p. 52). The Kemalist elites were the founders of modern Turkey in 1923 (Keyman & Icduygu, 2005, p. 4).

[3] On February 28 1997, when Erbakan's Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP) and the True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi, DYP) joined the government, the pressure of military and secular institutions in Turkey led to the collapse of the government (Hale & Özbudun, 2010, p. 4). The main theme in this case was the anti-Kemalist politics of the government (p. 4). This is termed a "postmodern coup" as it involved secular-minded representatives of the military, the media, and state institutions (p. 4).

[4] Azan is the Arabic word for the call to prayer.

[5] Here he means in particular FETO (Fethullah Terrorist Organisation) which was labelled as a terrorist organisation after the coup attempt on July 15 2016.

of the new generation with digital media is important to highlight in order to understand how their identity is forming without interference.

Methodology

This article takes Imam Hatip school students in Ankara and Erzurum into consideration and analyses how their use of digital media, in particular Facebook and Instagram, influences the traditional way of thinking, and leads to form a self-identity. Students who were born in 2000 were selected, as they grew up during the AKP governance for last 17 years, and most of them were eligible to vote in June 2018 Presidential Elections. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 students. Gender and socio-economic and socio-psychological balanced approach were considered as 15 interviews were conducted at Tevfik Ileri Anadolu Imam Hatip school in Ankara, and 15 interviews were conducted at Oltu Anadolu Imam Hatip school in Erzurum. Whereas the former represents a more diverse and multicultural city, the latter speaks for conservative and traditional town in eastern part of Turkey. Difference in selection of location enabled a broad spectrum to the researched theme. Due to anonymity request of both school boards, this article uses coding. In other words, AFS represents female students in Ankara, EFS represents female students in Erzurum, AMS represents male students in Ankara, and EMS represents male students in Erzurum.

The Role of Digital Media in Forming Self-Identity

When Anthony Giddens (1999) explains modernity, he uses "Traditional culture" and "Post-traditional culture" in order to distinguish between the "Pre-modern" and "Modern". Societies which try to get modernized are in the process of post-traditionalism and favour "capitalist democracy" (Giddens, 1999, p. 105). Turkey can be mentioned under the "Post-traditional" society that is keen to be integrated into the globalized world. In particular, the AKP governance accelerated this process by introducing neoliberal economic policies, and insisting on the EU membership in the early years of its foundation in particular. The modernization process in ideological sense though can be recognized in Gen Z in particular, whereas the use of social media is the main dynamic in this progress.

The interviews reveal that all interviewees in Ankara and Erzurum were using social media platforms. Whereas Facebook was leading with 80 per cent, Instagram was used by 70 per cent, and Twitter by 50 per cent. Snapchat had a lower popularity among Imam Hatip school students. 70 per cent of the participants underline that social media use is highly effective in their life as they are following the latest updates, news, and especially the "globalized fashion world", as AFS3 highlights, through social media. It is not only the main information source, but also the leading medium that opens their horizon to the world. The "Post-traditional society" generates clearly defined roles for the society (Giddens, 1999, p. 105). In this regard mass media is influencing individuals' perceptions and their relationship with the world in general (p. 107). Since digital media's development, the Gen Z is more under this influence as never witnessed before. In our interview, AMS2 attached importance on the way he is conceptualizing the virtual world in relation with religion. For him, religious authorities' presence on social media is the main cause for modernization of religious approach. He underlined that his family, in particular his parents, are too much dependent on the *fatwas*, a religious ruling on a point of Islamic law, issued by scholars on TV's and online platforms. AMS4 confirms this phenomenon, and adds that scholars are approaching in a moderate tone to satisfy the audience and ease religious practice so in particular young people are not afraid of. However, 80 per cent of the interviewee in Ankara are convinced that social media presence is

leading to a moderate Islam understanding. Students in Erzurum on the other hand have not indicated any position on the modernization process of religion through the mass or social media. Rather EMS1 suggested that media helps him find all the answers to his questions about faith and spirituality. In fact, the difference between a metropolis like capital Ankara, and a town in eastern part of the country, can be even distinguished through this example, as the opportunities and access in both locations have an impact on the perception of religion. Moreover, it shows that both cities, independent from gender, are not equal in connectivity to digital technologies.

The role of freedom of speech is another example to attach importance because it reveals the approach of the future leading generation. AFS1 marks that freedom of speech in Turkey is not an issue as "Western media outlets and politician" always criticize, rather she defends that the real problem is the tolerance of people from the same background.

> I am not able to share anything political or ideological on social media because my friends, family members and followers do not show any tolerance and accept criticism. Hence every time when I post something I have to defend my position which leads to clash of ideas in some cases. As a matter of fact, I prefer not to share anything which can light up discussions. (AFS1)

Yet EMS2 responded similarly in this case. He gave an example from the Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP):

> Although Selahattin Demirtas[6] is jailed, he is able to tweet and was even allowed to address public-funded broadcaster TRT's traditional election coverage in 2014, which is conducted with all presidential candidates. I do not believe that Turkey has a serious problem with freedom of expression; the real problem is the governing parties' and its supporters' confrontation with opposing and challenging ideas.

This is a thought-provoking example when bearing in mind that an 18-year old addresses such a complex issue from an "internal" critical perspective. Antonio Gramsci's (1993) "hegemony" concept sheds light on the relationship between the ruler and their subordinates. More important is how through images, texts and media the domination in society change. In the case of Imam Hatip students, political hegemony is dominating the digital media which forms a hegemony on its users, affecting the use of the audience.

EMS3, who was planning to study Primary Teaching, explained how lack of criticism in the country leads her to discuss critical issues at school with close friends. Smaller circle groups are not only a result of the decreasing tolerance of conservative base; it is a reality that increases day by day due to new institutions and practices, and the development of technical opportunities. In fact, this process is nothing else than secularization. Liberal societies diluted the importance of religious authorities, and increased the "self". The increase of "self-identity" is the same outcome of the above-mentioned process. As in the case of Turkey, when the collective increased its dominance, the interest in division and separation rose. In relation to the younger generation, other factors such as socio-political, socio-economic, and digital technology, are an entire process effecting the way issues are considered and perceived.

In this regard AMS3 explains how he witnessed bullying on social media platforms, and decided to shut down his Facebook account for a period of time. Cultural difference is a point to highlight here, as Homi Bhaba (1994, p. 3) underlines, because it can lead to conflict, challenge boundaries "between the private and public; high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress". Clash of classes, both socio-economic but more important intellectual, create different kind of virtual classes that can lead up to conflicts on

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[6] Co-chairman of the HDP. 2014-2018.

social media. Whereas conservative people in Turkey were marginalized for years in particular after the postmodern coup in 1997, the same class created a new marginalized group, this time from within the same circle. Economy and power relations of the ruling government created a new kind of bourgeoisie that was critical of power, arrogance, and revenge of the Kemalists for years (Kentel, 2019). I prefer to use "a new kind of bourgeoisie" because it is not a matter of "conservative religious" or "secular Kemalist" anymore. It is a new class that can be differentiated between those who benefit from the government and those who are not (Kentel, 2019). In fact, it is the main reason of social division. This can only change the course when from cultural world to education system, from organizing religious to daily order in life can change (Dilek, 2019). This can be reached when politics as well as universities, and civil society work with and for the same aim.

Conclusion

According to Appadurai (2010, p. 6), "adaptation to new environments and the stimulus to move or return are deeply affected by a mass-mediated imaginary that frequently transcends national space". In fact, this research clearly demonstrates that cultural hybridity is an inevitable process among Gen Z in Turkey regardless of the ideological background or the type of schooling they go through. Although the high-school students who were interviewed for this research studied at an Imam Hatip school, their approach and analysis indicate that they are embracing critical thinking and are self-confident in expressing their personal and political views. On these grounds, AFS5 puts forward the view that she is not differentiating between a conservative and secular or Kemalist minded people, and has friends from different ethnic and ideological backgrounds. EFS2 on the other hand explains that the cultural hybridity was not a case for her parents' generation as the conflict between right and left was a deep-seated conflict in late 1970s and early 1980s in particular. She underlines the fact that education is still a central problem in Erzurum. Yet she argues that social media increases its influence in her younger brothers' life due to insufficiency of education program at school. Quite interesting is how AMS5 underlines that his 12 years-old cousin is getting homeschooling and spends the whole day at home. "Her plentitude of time is the reason why she spends more time on social media, and watches Korean series on Youtube and speaks Korean in elementary level", she highlights. It shows how in this case digital media creates new spaces for pupils in developing in an utterly different area. In fact, Meyrowitz (1985, p. 115) believes that "media create communities with no sense of place" which can be turned to an advantage as in this case.

Despite the fact that the current government is keen to fasten the process of the education of a "pious generation" through Imam Hatip schools in order to have a collective identity, the results of the in-depth interviews manifest that the new generation which has been grown with the AKP governance is balancing between religiosity, critical thinking within the frame of the digital technology world. Their relationship with social media is the main dynamic behind the modernization process as it leads to the formation of self-identity. Yet although AMS1, AMS2, and EFS3 claim that the religious rhetoric of Erdogan is based on elections, they do not recognize the politics of the AKP as oppressive and domineering; moreover, they observe it as an "alternative". As a matter of fact, they develop the claim that education freedom for conservative families' children was a long-waited process of their rights.

Zygmunt Bauman's reading on identity summarizes the way this research should be analysed. He emphasises that "the idea of identity was born out of the crisis of belonging" (Bauman, 2004, p. 20). The foregoing discussion implies that the era of the AKP is a transition period where education is a crucial part. Certainly every transition period has certain crises and confrontations. As a matter of fact, it is inevitable to

determine the direction of belonging to restrain these challenges because "power produces reality, it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production" (Foucault, 1977, p. 250). Despite emphasizing the importance of Imam Hatip schools and putting financial and political support, the lack of "transformative capacity", as Giddens (1985, p. 7) points out, is necessary to be able to "intervene in a given set of events to alter them". Yet to have the ability political power and economic development is not sufficient. Power needs to produce knowledge (Foucault, 1977) in order to be able to change the discourse and have an impact on the ideology of Gen Z. Nevertheless, there will be resistance when there is power for sure but this resistance needs to be studied as an exodus to develop a fundament in education system.

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