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The translation of moral panic into misogynist e-bile: the case of Turkish singer Gülşen

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine a recent incident involving Gülşen, a Turkish singer who was brutally attacked on Twitter (now X), and demonstrate how moral panics translate into misogynist e-bile and violent cyber-attacks, both of which reinforce a polarized political environment. We analysed tweets posted 24–August 30 2022 and show that e-bile was used distinctly more often by opponents of Gülşen who are characterized by religiously conservative norms and values. We suggest that Gülşen’s subsequent criminalization by state institutions (she was detained and arrested in the aftermath of #arrestgülşen) effectively validated the violent attacks of Gülşen’s opponents while leaving her supporters intimidated and paralysed. Our study contributes to the understanding of e-bile by suggesting that cultural intelligibility and political hegemony make space for and legitimize the graphic language of online communities. By the same token, misogynistic and homophobic invective turns into an instrument of symbolic violence that is exercised by culturally and politically privileged segments of society.

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Introduction

In recent years digital media technologies have been doing what the mainstream media has done for so long, namely, silencing women. Such silencing in the form of “gendered cyberhate” is done via e-bile rhetoric, echoing Emma Jane’s concept, that is conceived as “the extravagant invective [and the sexualized threats of violence” (2014b, 532) particularly prevalent in social media. E-bile, she argues, has become a mechanism for “internet users [who] wish to register their disagreement with and/or disapproval of women” (Emma A. Jane 2014b, 531) and share those views (usually) anonymously. This range of discourses created in the form of texts or memes aimed at women relies on “profanity, ad hominem invective, and hyperbolic imagery of graphic—often sexualized—violence (. . .) [and] manifests as a direct threat, but most commonly appears in the form of hostile wishful thinking way” (Jane 2014b, 533). Cyber-attacks aimed at men are directed at their

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manliness and masculinity or involves attacks on the “physical appearance of [their] female partners or family members” (Jane 2014b, 533), which in return supports gender stereotypes in an antagonistic manner.

Conceived in this way, this paper questions how e-bile rhetoric derives from moral panics and the implications of this online hostility for political polarization and gender-based violence. This question captures the primary focus of the study on understanding the dynamics of e-bile rhetoric driven by moral panic and their broader social and political resonances. Moral panics are the anxieties in the general populace by shaping a narrative of good versus evil, thus lending credibility to their beliefs (Stanley Cohen 1972). From that vantage point, we examine the case of Gülşen, a Turkish singer who was attacked brutally online, and we interrogate how moral panics in conservative circles in Turkey translate into e-bile and the ways that violent cyber-attacks reinforce Turkey’s polarized political environment.

On August 24 2022, a TikTok user uploaded a video from a concert by Turkish pop singer Gülşen, where she humorously remarked that a musician’s “perversion” was due to his education at an Imam Hatip school—a type of religious school in Turkey. This comment quickly sparked a furor on Twitter (now X), leading to widespread calls for legal action against her.¹ By 25 August, Gülşen was detained, and she was formally arrested the following day. Her arrest intensified the Twitter debate, making her case a focal point for significant online discourse characterized by deep political and cultural polarization.

The backlash against Gülşen stems from several cultural and political factors inherent in Turkey, exacerbated by her controversial joke. Imam Hatip schools are not only educational institutions but also symbols of religious identity and conservatism, holding profound significance in debates over secularism and religiosity in Turkey. Criticism of these schools is often seen as an attack on the religious and moral values they uphold, a highly sensitive issue in a nation marked by longstanding tensions between secular and religious factions under the increasingly polarized climate of AKP (Justice and Development Party) governance. Gülşen’s predicament highlights the intricate dynamics of culture, religion, and politics in Turkey, where the limits of acceptable public discourse are stringently controlled. This can frequently result in significant social and legal repercussions. By examining these discursive patterns, the primary aim is to explore how digital narratives contribute to the construction of imagined communities through digital storytelling.

The concept of “digital storytelling” refers to a collective means narration within the participatory cultures of digital media, which introduce “the ability to represent the world around us—using a shared infrastructure” (Nick Couldry 2008, 374). In this sense, social media sites like Twitter are techno-social spaces that facilitate the architecture of communication, in which the participants narrate their imagined collectivities (Danah Boyd 2010). The affordances of Twitter (hashtagging, tweeting, retweeting, and favouriting) generate a vivid site for the constant flow of media texts. By these means, participants engage in shared meanings and values, which gradually translate into the formation of networked publics (Mizuko Ito 2008). Yet these discursive formations are hardly monolithic and consistent; instead, networked publics are greatly segmented and tell widely plural and complicated stories (Eugenia Siapera, Moses Boudourides, Sergios Lenis and Jane Suiter 2018; Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles 2015). Thus, dissonance is highly prevalent in the digital communication of networked publics and the Twitter

activity around #Gülşen is not an exception. That is to say, the participants' engagements with the trending topic diversely drew upon associations/dissociations, harmony/dis-agreement, and dis/approval.

In line with these ideas, we read the tweet activity about #Gülşen as "dissonant communication" (Barbara Pfetsch 2018) that is extensively characterized by noisy ambience, hostility and polarization. The stream of tweets truly refrains from deliberation, mutual understanding, and rational argumentation. Moreover, as gender and sexualities are the main axes of dissonance, a misogynist, homophobic, and violent tone comes along with the dissonant communication. As a good example of these processes, the narratives of #Gülşen constitutes a stream of invectives that we conceive as e-bile in the sense of Emma A. Jane (2014a, 2014b). We discuss e-bile and cyber hate both as tools to spread misogyny and as ways to further normalize the violent discourses towards women. Here, we define online misogyny as systematic online abuse aimed at women with the goal of creating significant obstacles in their private, public, and political lives. As Stellamarina Donato, Hande Eslen-Ziya and Emiliana Mangone (2022) put it, online misogyny turns into a form of online violence that reproduces symbolic violence through the lenses of victim-blaming by neglecting the gravity of image-based sexual abuse.

In the next section, we will explain the theory of moral panics, which argues that misogyny is triggered by the re-curent presentation of decadent women who corrupt society (Kenneth Thompson 1998), and show how moral panic is used to legitimise claims leading to violence against women in online spheres. In addition, we will introduce the singer Gülşen and set the context for her specific case. This background will be followed by a section detailing our choice of data and analyses. We will conclude our paper by arguing that these online attacks legitimized Gülşen's criminalization, and that e-bile language generates open consent for such violent attacks.

Moral panics of anti-gender movements

In recent years, the theory of moral panic has focused on the "recurring usage of the image of an innocent and endangered child" (Thompson 1998, 10) employed by anti-gender activists for the purpose of triggering moral panic. Recent discussion has argued that they stir up anxieties in the general population by constructing the perception of a good vs. evil and establishing a certain validity for their beliefs. These activists use both online and offline media mechanisms to attract attention and broadcast amplified claims of threat (Cohen 1972). In turn, as we will argue, such provocative rhetoric has been used to justify violence. A similar pattern can be discerned in the recent the anti-gender mobilisation across Europe when the introduction of the "gender theory" challenged common-sense understanding of sex as a biological category, and the reaction against gender theory, according to David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar (2018, 8), "counted on people's deeply rooted anxieties about (homo)sexuality and gender roles, thus creating the desired populist effect: aversion, but also anger and moral panic."

Though the moral panic theory suggests that the disasters constructed by the public soon disappear, we argue here that, once a moral panic is followed by the state, that panic can metamorphose into an altered institutional form. In other words, ruling bodies that acknowledge the discourses of moral panic allow for furthering the hostility and dislike of a targeted group; at the same time, continual

denunciation by ruling bodies of a target group reinforces institutional recognition of the moral panic. According to Michael Welch, Eric A Price and Nana Yankey (2002, 5), state support for the development of such moral panics “symbolizes not only a threat to society at large but also to a prevailing political economy that thrives on racial and economic inequality.” The case we analyse in this paper is unique as it combines moral panic with cyber violence, where the online misogyny, by putting women at the centre of attention in the moral panic created, functions similarly to a witch hunt: “while witch hunts were [once] used to violently and systematically coerce women to conform with the requirements of the then emerging industrial capitalism, online misogyny can be seen as seeking to prevent women from participating in building the forthcoming technological future” (Siapera 2019). Siapera argues that online misogyny is used as a tool to exclude women from online spheres. In the Turkish case, we will discuss how the reactions towards a popular figure’s choice of clothing and her jokes served to legitimize violence against women in a highly misogynist political environment.

In her recent work, Hande Eslen-Ziya (2022) studied how religiously conservative groups in Turkey use digital platforms for online activism that is contrary to the Istanbul Convention and its gender equality mission. Eslen-Ziya focused on dialogues of anti-Istanbul Convention groups, showing the broader context of anti-feminism and the anti-gender movement of the government in power in Turkey and arguing that, in this case, online misogyny puts forward an anti-gender political agenda. Eslen-Ziya (2022) concluded that networked misogyny contributes to gender inequality and gender-based violence as Turkey pulls away from the Istanbul Convention and as the Islamist groups achieve their desired goals.

However, digital storytelling—including the anxious narratives of moral panics—is hardly a linear process and always needs to be re-articulated (Couldry 2008). For that reason, anti-gender campaigns in online media platforms immediately re-told the story of Gülşen in novel ways. Gülşen’s case is one example of something that was put on social media platforms and blamed all concerns (i.e., promotion of homosexuality and the possible end of the traditional Turkish family with a man as the head of a household with a submissive wife and children). By the same token, attacks on Gülşen become showcases of online e-bile and violence.

The Nascent figure of Gülşen as a Threat to anti-gender sentiments in Turkey

Gülşen rose to fame in the mid-1990s as a prominent pop singer and was primarily recognized for her musical achievements and was not a topic of political debate. She has received numerous musical awards and released several hit records, and she had a strong position in the pop cultural scene in Turkey. However, in recent years, Gülşen has become the focus of public debate because of her daring deeds on the stage, such as dressing in an (allegedly) immodest outfit, engaging in flirtatious interactions with the audience, and LGBTQI+ advocacy. Although she received heavy, and typically critical, responses, she has never been intimidated, but instead built on a language of personal choice and individual empowerment. For instance, in 2022, in response to critiques of obscenity because of an allegedly hypersexual outfit on the stage, she stated that:

... I am a daughter to parents, indeed a wife to a man, and a mother to a child. Beyond being someone's daughter, a man's wife, or a child's mother, I am a person with a mind and the ability to think, possessing free will. I am more than these labels. I am not a slave to any descriptor. I belong to no one. I am myself. I belong to myself. . . (Duvar, 20 Jan 2022)

In the same year, in a concert that coincided with Pride Week in Istanbul, she raised the rainbow flag in support of LGBTI+ communities and said:

Let's not be afraid to show our colours, friends. Everyone's colour is their own, and colours are beautiful. Everyone's sexual identity and life belong to themselves. No one else can decide that for them. We are the owners of our lives. We determine what we want, what we will do, what we love, what we want to be, and what colour we are. . . That's who we are. No one else can decide that. (Duvar, 27 June 2022)

Considering her valiant and gallant tone in the endorsement of individual liberties, we suggest that Gülşen has become a bearer of post-feminist sensibilities that are increasingly prevalent in popular cultural currents (see Angela McRobbie 2004). That is to say, Gülşen has re-praised sexualized representation of the body as a medium of freely chosen individual empowerment. As Rosalind Gill (2007) suggested, post-feminist imaginary draws upon a particular view of embodiment that stays away from sexual objectification. The "sexy body," in this imaginary, rather engages in actively desiring subjectivity. Thus, sexualized representations of the body put into practice the autonomy of the subject, rather than objectified embodiment at the service of heterosexual male gaze. They simultaneously undermine the traditional image of femininity mostly associated with heterosexual marriage and motherhood. By the same token, Gülşen has turned into a celebrity figure subject to political and cultural polarization in Turkey.

Over the last decade, a set of discourses and practices have permeated into the public life in Turkey, leading to polarization in society and culture along religious and secular lines (Deniz Kandiyoti 2012; Burak Özçetin 2019). This atmosphere has resulted in the (re) interpretation of social and cultural practices, especially those related to gender equality, through antagonistic formations. Indeed, both traditional and digital media are the ultimate domains in which cultural and political polarization is created and maintained (Ergin Bulut and Erdem Yörük 2017; Haktan Ural 2023; Ozge Ozduzen and Aidan McGarry 2020). Even the intricate details of everyday life can be informed by the overtones of political polarization and become the nexus of heated debates.

Ergin Bulut and Başak Can (2023) set forth the gendered character of these debates and suggest that women (journalists in their case) become the immediate targets of online mobs. When women deviate from culturally and politically revered ideals, they are frequently subjected to online rape threats, humiliation, and attacks. Ozge Ozduzen and Umut Korkut's (2020) research on online debate surrounding a singer, whose images of lesbian relationship were exposed, reveals that such online mobs directly contribute to the discursive construction of political identities. Alongside these online debates, the eruption of homophobic and misogynistic discourses is immediately intertwined with Islamist and/or nationalist sentiments. Similarly, online outrage against women who challenge conventional notions of femininity within the confines of heterosexual and monogamous family life often stems from Islamist nationalism.

Prior research concentrating on the statements of state officials illuminates the active involvement of governing bodies in this process that explicitly endorse

gendered roles and violence against women (Eslen-Ziya 2022; Umut Korkut, Kesi Mahendran, Gregg Bucken-Knapp and Robert Henry Cox 2016). According to some studies, these discourses that are indifferent to gender equality lay the groundwork for the populist, majoritarian and masculine patriarchal understanding of politics that characterize the ruling party, the AKP (see Eslen-Ziya 2022; Deniz Kandiyoti 2016; Umut Korkut and Hande Eslen-Ziya 2016). Such discursive governance, while paving the way for an authoritarian political environment in Turkey, encouraged conservative and violent sentiments towards women and LGBTI+ communities. Moreover, these discourses seamlessly manifest in a series of political practices and implementations like pro-family policy frameworks (Ayhan Kaya 2015), the regulation of women's bodies and sexualities (Feride Acar and Gülbanu Altunok 2013; Dilek Cindoglu and Didem Unal 2017), the marginalization of women's activism (Hande Eslen-Ziya and Nazlı Kazanoğlu 2022), and the recent withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention (a legally binding international treaty addressing gender-based violence) (Eslen-Ziya 2022).²

Gülşen's public presence has profoundly resonated with this particular political and cultural climate. Her mode of self-representation has effectively fuelled political discord by actively opposing the cultural glorification of traditional motherhood and heterosexual marriage. Indeed, her recent on-stage joke about religious schools has shifted the focus of political debates surrounding Gülşen. Religious schools called *imam hatip* in Turkey have not only been widespread since the 1980s, but have become a nexus of Islamist movement (Halil Buyruk 2021). Indeed, as Demet Lüküslü (2016) states, along with the rise of ruling party AKP's "pious generation" discourse, religious schools have increasingly been the key institutional apparatus that will help raising religious generations adhering to Islamist conduct of life. For this purpose, AKP implemented a set of educational policies seeking to put greater symbolic value at *imam hatip* schools. As a result, not only did the number of *imam hatip* schools increase, but they were also made academically more reputable and competitive. These schools began to be seen as bearers of "pious generations" and as a means to attain the highest level of religiosity.

For that reason, Gülşen's sarcastic manner (i.e., when she joked that such a school had turned one of the musicians into a pervert) was interpreted as an insult to the Islamist movement in Turkey and religiosity in general. After the incident, Gülşen's public apology on social media, saying "I should have found another language, I will find it" did not suffice to calm the controversy. As mentioned previously, critical voices among pro-Islamist intellectuals and politicians were followed by a legal case that ended with Gülşen's arrest. Although she was released shortly afterwards, later (May 2023) she was tried and sentenced to 10 months in prison for "openly insulting a section of the public based on social class, religion, sect, gender, and regional differences" (although the announcement of the verdict was postponed).³ At the same time, Gülşen also received broad support from secular segments of society, including football fans, artists, LGBTI+ activists, and some opposition politicians. Following that incident, Gülşen performed her first concert on New Year's Eve in the city of Izmir, which is a stronghold of the main opposition party CHP, and was hosted by the local government governed by the same party.

Consequently, the celebrity figure of Gülşen has been transformed into a battleground where Islamist and secular factions vie for dominance. Gülşen's remarks about religious schools marked the pivotal moment that ignited heated debates. However, as we will

discuss in the following sections, the subsequent polarization around Gülşen's story is not simply a matter of opposing sides struggling for dominance. Instead, the polarization reflects a moral panic largely fuelled by religiously conservative norms and values, legitimizing harsh criticism while intimidating Gülşen's supporters.

Data extraction and methodology

Using the free and open source tool Mecodify (Walid Al-Saqaf 2022), we extracted the Twitter data including #Gülşen and other relevant hashtags (such as #ArrestGülşen and #FreeGülşen). The software retrieved 360,025 tweets posted between 24–August 30 2022. Within this data corpus, we identified the data set that consists of all tweets posted during two peak times that are shown in dark colour (see Figure 1). These are the time slots in which activity is distinctively more intense due to the emergence of specific events in the story about Gülşen. The first peak happens at the time of the release of the story about Gülşen's joke on the stage, thus consisting of immediate reactions. The second and higher peak corresponds to the arrest of Gülşen, thus including diverse comments, not only about Gülşen's offense but also the turning points of Gülşen's story. In total, the data set consists of 120,029 tweets that make 33% of the data corpus. In pursuit of generating suitable data for a qualitative study, we randomly extracted 1000 tweets from the data set. The data extract proportionally includes the data items of the first peak (25.8%) and the second peak (74.2%) in accordance with their weights in the data set. Most tweets were posted by individual users, while a small number (23 total) came from news sources. As a result, our sample mostly reflects the networked discourses of individuals rather than journalistic or organizational narratives.

Focusing on the heightened activity allows us to analyse the dynamic nature of Twitter discourse. Specifically, analysis of the two peaks during the times when Gülşen was an

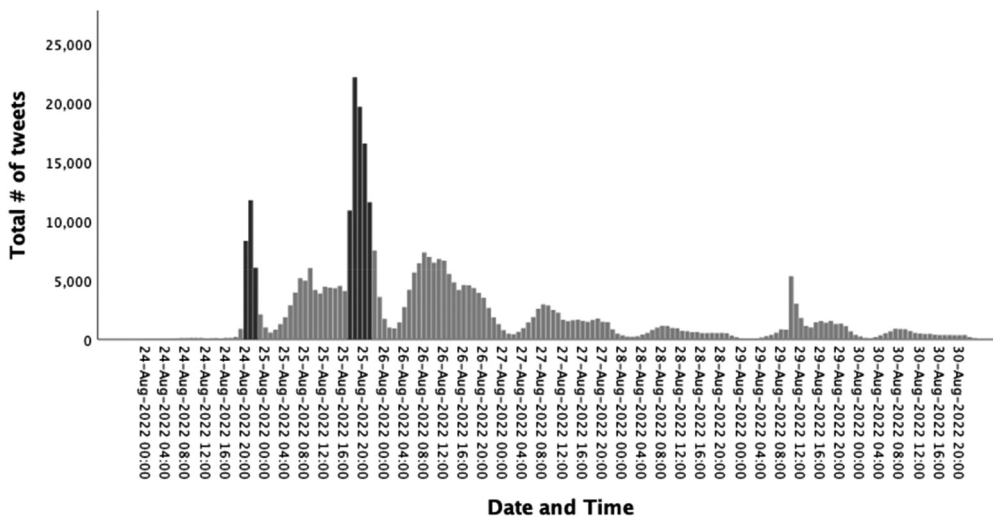


Figure 1. Histogram of the total number of tweets by date and time. The earlier peak of dark bars (24 Aug 2022, 20:00) corresponds to the initial release of the story about Gülşen's joke about the musician and *imam hatip*; the second peak of dark bars (25 Aug 2022 20:00) corresponds to her arrest.

active topic of discussion provides an insight into the discursive shifts over time and the dynamics of struggles over the meanings. Our sampling strategy helps give particular attention to the shifting meanings and the change of rhetorical constructs in networked discourse.

Our methodological approach is based on discourse analysis of Twitter data, and accordingly we regard Twitter data as a corpus of networked discourse that is built upon collective storytelling (Couldry 2008). Twitter serves as a discursive site for the aggregation of individuals engaging in conversations. We conceive networked discourse as a communicative space cultivating multiplicity of meanings with which diverse subject positions are contingently articulated (Natalie Fenton 2011). From that vantage point, we examine tweets as discursive practices that create, reinforce, or dislocate networked narratives of #Gülşen and similarly relevant hashtags.

This analysis is built on Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) framework on thematic analysis of discourse. First, we generated the codes that identify certain features of data items; next, we collated the codes within themes and generated code families. In this way, we defined the overarching thematic patterns that help us examine the overall narratives. These procedures revealed several themes such as (i) denigration, (ii) criminalization, (iii) accusations of hypocrisy, and (iv) re-celebrification, all of which stem from the structures of meanings that the tweets convey. In addition, we also looked at the rhetorical constructs and generated code families based on the style and tone of these tweets. This analytical strategy helped us examine the differential uses of vitriolic communication and revealed two additional code families, namely (v) vitriol and (vi) paralysis.

Results: e-bile in the networked narratives of #Gülşen

The intense Twitter activity surrounding Gülşen's joke cultivated a discursive site for people to reimagine themselves in relation to others. In the stream activity, posts re-signified the image of Gülşen as a cultural symbol of identity politics articulated with gender, sexualities, and religiosity, and thus the bulk of Twitter activity came to inform knowledge production dealing with the gendered, sexual, and religious ideals. Accordingly, the structure of storytelling was built upon the contesting images of Gülşen, ranging from a sacrilegious and criminal figure to re-celebrification of a pop icon.

The binary character of storytelling deals with such figure of Gülşen bearing individually empowered, sexualized femininity. Those portraying her as sacrilegious and criminal effectively denigrate her post-feminist sensibilities. As we show in the next section, Gülşen's image triggers moral panics that give voice to the claims of threats to gender ideals of chastity. Alternately, those glorifying her as a pop cultural hero imagine Gülşen to be of great influence and have prowess. Indeed, these narratives are differentially characterized by the uses of vitriol: e-bile language that legitimates graphic violence, rape culture and misogyny is distinctively more prevalent in the narratives of moral panic.

Misogynist denigration vs. re-celebration of post-feminist sensibilities

From the start of activity (on August 24 2022, Figure 1) surrounding this case, Twitter users who were discontent with Gülşen's joke disparaged her as an inappropriate cultural figure. Users made these judgments based on various motives, yet they have

some commonalities in their rhetorical strategies, namely they create moral panic. Although Gülşen's offense to graduates of religious schools in Turkey was the ultimate motive that attracted the critique, Twitter users mostly fastened their attention on the image of Gülşen as a celebrity figure. In this way, Gülşen largely became the target of *ad hominem* attacks emphasizing her as hypersexual and immoral, which is especially apparent in the tweets quoted below disputing Gülşen's public presence on the stage:

She knows nothing but undressing #arrestGulsen

She is a bitch who for years, had no other qualifications than to show her ass, and then she goes and calls a group a pervert. The country of Turkey is really becoming a madhouse.

Unless the necessary lessons are given to lgbt perverts like Gülşen, more and more of this sorority will be born in this country. #arrestGulsen

Pervert is not the graduates of imamhatip, but the lgbt community she advocates in her concerts

As someone who groans, "Are you in Gülşen's arms," don't say the people from imam hatip are perverted, don't even take imam H's in your filthy mouth, go put on your transparent clothes, shake your hips, open your flag whatever normalizes perversion, look at the liking of the free kicks you gave

Twitter users frequently saw Gülşen's joke as a despicable example of her public self, sometime coupling her humour to her dressing style, typically characterized by low-cut, backless or form-fitting costumes. Others mentioned her flirtatious onstage interactions. In this context, a video record of one particular moment, which shows Gülşen sitting on an audience member's lap, particularly drew attention. Tweets also commented on Gülşen's previous public utterances advocating for LGBTI+ rights. These narratives depart from the particular joke Gülşen made onstage, and re-position Gülşen as a sacrilegious celebrity. In this sense, they bear the marks of e-bile relying on *ad hominem* invective. Echoing Jane's (2014a) account, the narratives are built on a diachronic perspective that convey remarkably stable meanings of chastity and modesty. That is to say, these rhetorical constructs denigrate Gülşen as an inappropriate character that does not conform with the gender ideals of chastity and modesty. The narratives also emphasize Gülşen's post-feminist sensibilities that allegedly pose a threat to the traditional gender regime.

Firmly upholding ideals of post-feminist imaginary, Gülşen became a cause of moral panic. By the same token, the misogynist and homophobic epithets targeted Gülşen's post-feminist sensibilities. What was being denigrated was not only about her presence as an "unchaste" and "immodest" pop icon, but also her tenacity in deliberately invoking hypersexual embodiment as a key source of individual empowerment, and the Twitter users portrayed Gülşen as a loathsome and sacrilegious image. Indeed, such a portrayal easily translates into the statements that actively criminalize Gülşen.

Long live hell for all the enemies of Islam... #Arrest Gülşen

#ArrestGülşen who commits hate crime thereby attacking people's values, who stirs up discrimination and hatred under the guise of artist identity, who causes moral degeneration by means of lifestyle and dress going against TURKISH family structure

People like Gulsen should be banned from singing in public places. #Arrest Gülşen

#Arrest Gülşen I think this person should be banned from being an artist, it would be disrespectful to other artists if this continues

Shortly after Gülşen's story came out, Twitter users immediately started another hashtag, #ArrestGülşen, calling for and legitimizing Gülşen's arrest. Moreover, the tweets also maintained *ad hominem* attacks: Twitter users not only legitimized the criminal case on the grounds of her joke, but also her lifestyle and values. Some even called for "cancelling" actions that would have effectively annihilated Gülşen in the popular cultural scene. Thus, the crime attached to Gülşen went well beyond the particular joke; her unapologetically tenacious image was deemed to be a criminal act. Her criminalisation, we argue, was the turning point that marked the panic-driven narratives; the acute anxiety of Twitter users effectively called for and legitimized criminalization at an institutional level. Gülşen's subsequent arrest effectively validated and furthered the Twitter user's public demands. On the grounds that she was an active threat against the gendered ideals of familial order, Gülşen turned into a despised figure to be punished and annihilated.

After her arrest, a second stream of Twitter activity (August 25 2022, [Figure 1](#)) refuted the narratives denigrating Gülşen, and the time period after Gülşen's arrest was the climax, forming the second and larger spike in activity. Unlike the first activity peak the day before, many of these tweets strongly supported Gülşen:

You also know what was done and decided was not right. Your wheels of justice by man, may one day be needed by all of us. YOU WILL NEED IT ALSO. Will you be able to sleep well tonight? #Gulsen #Gülşen

She is arrested for being a #pervert, while the real perverts and rapists are walking freely in the streets.

You had to kill, you had to steal . . . you had to rape, you had to defraud, you had to do drugs, you had to smuggle, if necessary, you had to take a gun and go to the mountains 🏔️ Damn! what have you done #Gülşen

These Twitter users truly questioned how just Gülşen's arrest was and expressed distrust in the judicial system. Their narratives repeatedly made accusations of hypocrisy. These accusations constituted a rhetorical challenge to the storytelling that criminalized Gülşen on the grounds of her sense of humour. By that means, the narratives denied the idea that Gülşen's deeds posed an actual threat to religious sensibilities. Some tweets used irony to sarcastically comment on the criminalization. Humour and irony are effective elements of discourse that not only unmake truth claims, but also broaden horizons to create new meanings (Umut Korkut, Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eşlen-Ziya and Olu Jenzen 2022). In this way, playing with the arguments of criminal acts performed by Gülşen, these narratives undermined the denigrated image.

Some tweets supporting Gülşen praised her with great vigour:

Do you know why Gülşen is so brave and wonderful? What happened to her shows what will happen to all of you. And it guides you all. This is courage #gülşen

[quoting the lyrics of Gülşen's song] Tie my hand and my arm, come on/Imprison me in a room for a lifetime, come on/If you can handle it, come on . . . #Gülşen

The female century has begun, and women will rise in the homeland of Cybele. Keep laughing even in the darkness 🇹🇷#freeGülşen

Let's listen to Gülşen tomorrow 🎧🎵🎶

The celebratory and glorifying tone of these tweets frequently singled out an image of Gülşen as truly brave and of great influence. These narratives portrayed her as a cultural resource that provided inspiration for prowess and determination, and these users showed tremendous enthusiasm for listening to her songs. Unlike the opponents, those who supported Gülşen hardly referred to her sexualized image. Instead, they favoured the daring, empowered, and autonomous self. By that means, Gülşen was re-celebrated and glorified as a post-feminist figure.

Although her joke was the primary impetus behind the online dispute, Twitter users who participated in this incident effectively drifted toward a wider debate on what Gülşen represents as a celebrity figure. Celebrities are, after all, powerful artifacts through which cultural identities are remade and unmade (Elizabeth Barry 2008; Graeme Turner 2014). In this case, Twitter turned into a discursive space in which the cultural ideals of post-feminism were either denigrated or celebrated. Networked publics, as the “productive agents” (Chris Rojek 2001, 37) of this process, created and maintained a sense of self in relation to their cultural others. Gülşen thus turned into a contradictory figure who provided cultural resources for denying, as well as favouring, post-feminist sensibilities.

The imbalances of vitriolic communication

E-bile is, by its nature, gendered and sexualized, and in general, social media sites tend to become increasingly misogynistic and homophobic over time. These communicative spaces “[privilege] e-bile authors at the expense of e-bile recipients and audiences” (Jane 2014b, 539), which promotes asymmetries in rhetorical use, and this trend was clearly demonstrated in the case studied here. Tweets that used vitriolic and graphic language (e-bile) came disproportionately from the stream of Twitter activity that reflected the panic-driven narratives of Gülşen and the things that she (putatively) represented. Dissent against Gülşen gave rise to sexual violence or re-imagined her as a filthy and loathsome figure:

It would be best for everyone if we arrested this and others like her and throw them in the male prison. #arrestGulsen

Let Gülşen sit on the laps of the government

I swear to God she is jinxed, look at her face! #arrestGulsen

How much for one-night Gülşen?

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH has been said to those like the singer Gülşen who is taking on brutish lifestyle, humiliating muslims and provokingly terrorizing the people. She is now put in her place. I am giving an ovation.

Vitriolic communication is largely informed by “gaming speech” (Jane 2014b, 534) that fulfils a craving for pleasure and creativity. Drawing on a misogynist sense of humour, these speech acts are “a combination of desire and disgust” (Jane 2014a, 560) that legitimates sexual violence. Here, Twitter users not only approved the punishment of Gülşen, but also ridiculed her and re-imagined her arrest as a practice of sexual violence, harassment, or

rape. Others referred to her physical appearance, saying that she is a haunted, disgusting, and brutish figure. These moral panic responses immediately translated into an entitlement of suppressing the perceived threats that Gülşen posed to society and culture.

Compared to these anti-Gülşen narratives, her supporters were much less inclined to use e-bile. Their narratives were instead marked with affect-laden expressions that indicated that they were bewildered or paralyzed, which implies a fair amount of lassitude:

It's absurd, very absurd. Look at the hashtag we opened in 2022. #freeGülşen

Unbelievable, I am in shock! 😱 #gülşen

What does it mean to arrest? Unbelievable #gülşen

#gülşen is arrested, OMG! My beloved country

... #gülşen [see discussion below]

I am surprised that Gülşen was arrested with lightning speed, I would have said more, but I am exercising my right to remain silent.

Although these Twitter users actively aired their disagreements about the reactions (especially the arrest of Gülşen), most of the comments were far from vitriolic rhetoric. Unlike the e-bile showing deeply bitter dissent, the supporters of Gülşen explicitly expressed their bewilderment and sorrow. Indeed, the arrest of Gülşen caused consternation among some Twitter users, so much so that they used ejaculatory utterances, or they openly stated that they were remaining silent (as per the tweet above comprising only an ellipsis and hashtag). It is possible that the supporters of Gülşen were intimidated and therefore largely abstained from the use of vitriol.

Gülşen's story differs somewhat from Jane's (2014b) conception of e-bile in one sense. Unlike Jane's understanding that e-bile "cross[es] all manner of political divides" (Jane 2014b, 533), here, the narrative around Gülşen was only partially moulded by vitriolic communication and advanced graphic invective, which was used mostly by Gülşen's opponents. Such imbalances of vitriolic communication were a consequence of differential capacities for comprehending and imposing meanings to the social world. Apparently, Gülşen's opponents made sense of themselves having the ultimate authority and legitimacy to impose their vision of the social world. Moreover, they claimed the right to monopolize the exercise of textual violence.

This exercise of textual violence effectively draws upon the narratives of moral panic that legitimize denigratory truth claims. In addition, insofar as the criminalizing discourses digressed from the particular action of Gülşen's initial joke and dealt instead with a set of representations that Gülşen became associated with (namely post-feminist sensibilities), the uses of vitriol translated into gender-based violence. By that means, people using e-bile committed discursive violence demanding suppression of the sensibilities that transgress the ideals of women's inferiority.

Conclusion

This study examined the uses of graphic language by online communities, specifically focusing on the spread of moral panic that followed the pop singer Gülşen's joke onstage

in Turkey about graduates of conservative religious schools. Drawing upon discourse analysis of tweets that referenced the incident, we see Twitter as a discursive site that constitutes symbolic resources for re-imagining the self in relation to cultural and political others. This dissonant communication abstained from deliberative discourse. Specifically, there were two main streams of tweet activity, namely one group of Twitter users who gave voice to their moral panic and called for the criminalization of Gülşen, while another group actively glorified her as a pop cultural hero.

The research uncovered several key findings. Firstly, the vitriolic and graphic language used in tweets was disproportionately prevalent among Gülşen's opponents, primarily characterized by religiously conservative norms. This group used e-bile to legitimize the criminalization and marginalization of Gülşen, reinforcing gender-based violence through misogynistic and homophobic rhetoric. Secondly, Gülşen's supporters, while vocal, tended to express their dissent with less vitriolic language, often showing bewilderment or paralysis.

Although this seems to be a *prima facie* case of the polarization that is pervasively prevalent in online spheres, we suggest that there are some further intricacies in the discursive structures. Above all, disproportionate use of vitriol, graphic language, violent attacks, misogyny, and homophobia characterized the discussion to a great extent. On the grounds of this asymmetry, we suggest that religiously conservative people seeking to criminalize and marginalize their cultural and political others through instrumentalized (e-)bilious language. By doing so, they not only legitimized institutional criminalization, but also maintained and reinforced hierarchies in gender and sexual differences.

As the story of Gülşen reveals, the misogynist rhetoric of e-bile is structured by the wider political and cultural climate. For that reason, the uses of vitriol and the exercise of e-bile can be quite imbalanced and unevenly distributed. In our case, for instance, e-bile was distinctively prevalent among the opponents of Gülşen who were mostly characterized by religiously conservative norms and values. Given that, we suggest that the subsequent criminalization by a state institution (the detention and arrest of Gülşen) effectively validated those violent attacks on Gülşen, while those attacks might also have caused her supporters to feel intimidation and paralysis. From that vantage point, we show that the pervasiveness of e-bile is strongly concatenated with political and cultural structures.

Our study contributes to our general understanding of e-bile by suggesting that cultural intelligibility and political hegemony make room for and legitimize the graphic language of online communities. Women are more likely to be subjected to e-bile and vitriol (Melinda C. R Burgess, Felicia Byars, Leila Sadeghi-Azar and Karen E Dill-Shackleford 2017), and we argue that sexually explicit and aggressive contents on social media turn into an instrument of gender-based violence wielded by culturally and politically privileged segments of society.

Notes

1. It is noteworthy that the current president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is a graduate of Imam Hatip schools. Consequently, Gülşen's joke immediately sparked heated debate.
2. The Istanbul Convention, officially known as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, is an

international treaty that requires states to monitor and to take effective measures against gender-based violence. Turkey, the first signatory country, withdrew from the convention by presidential decree in 2020. Turkey's withdrawal coincided in the political context of a de-Europeanization process coupled with the rise of an authoritarian political regime centred around president Erdoğan's supreme authority. Government officials re-framed the convention as a security issue related to "gender ideology" that is promoted by feminists and LGBTI+ communities (Didem Unal 2023). This view was grounded in an essentialist notion of Islamic nationhood emphasizing heterosexual family life. Consequently, the belief that the so-called "destructive" effects of "gender ideology" posed a profound threat to the nation served as the primary justification for withdrawal from the convention.

3. This verdict is reminiscent of the strategic uses of judicial mechanisms aimed at destabilizing opposition to the AKP's political reign. While there were some improvements in legal regulations that expanded democratic opposition and freedom of expression in the 1990s and 2000s (aligning with Turkey's aspirations for cultural and economic globalization and EU membership (Miyase Christensen 2010), the late 2010s marked another turning point. Within this context, *the* rule of law was replaced by *a* rule by law that strategically employed judicial mechanisms in order to intimidate publics challenging the political regime (Zafer Yılmaz 2020).

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