

**ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE**

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**SELF-REPRESENTATION OF WASTE PICKERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA:  
SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF TWEETS OF @atikkagit DURING THE COVID-  
19 PANDEMIC<sup>1</sup>****Öğr. Üyesi Şeyma Esin ERBEN**\*İstanbul Gelişim Üniversitesi Yeni  
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**ABSTRACT**

Waste pickers have been excluded from society because of their appearance due to working conditions and poverty, as well as being deprived of fundamental human rights such as the right to health and the right to education. Moreover, the advocacy of the waste pickers is presented as a spectacle in the mainstream media content (whether online or in the mass media) that protects the interests of the dominant ideology. Therefore, waste pickers, who are neither visible on the street nor in other public spaces, try to construct a self-representation through social media. The institutional form of this self-representation is the Recycling Workers Association, which was established in 2013, and the social media accounts of this association. Waste pickers looking for recyclable materials in dumpsters or working in waste yards faced a vital threat by not being able to earn their daily income due to both the risk of disease caused by COVID-19 and the curfews/restrictions in 2020. This study aims to discuss the self-representation of waste pickers, who strove at moulding public opinion during the curfews, on social media. This study is important in terms of understanding the efforts of others to gain visibility in society by using social media. The study is limited to the content shared on the @atikkagit Twitter account during the curfew, and the semiotic analysis method is used in the study. According to the research findings, the self-representation of waste pickers in an emergency due to the COVID-19 epidemic is seen within the framework of poverty and social aid rather than a struggle for rights.

**Keywords:** Self-representation, Twitter, COVID-19, waste pickers, social media**Jel Codes:** L26, O18, R11, B21.**ATIK KÂĞIT İŞÇİLERİNİN SOSYAL MEDYADA ÖZ TEMSİLLERİ: COVID-19 SALGINI SIRASINDA  
@atikkagit'ın PAYLAŞTIĞI TWITTER İÇERİKLERİNİN GÖSTERGEBİLİMSEL ANALİZİ****ÖZ**

Atık kâğıt işçileri yıllardır sağlık ve eğitim hakkı gibi temel insan haklarından mahrum olmasının yanı sıra yoksulluk ve çalışma koşullarından kaynaklı görünüşleri sebebiyle toplumsal dışlanmaya da maruz kalmaktadır. Dahası, egemenlerin çıkarlarını koruyan anaakım medya içeriklerinde (çevrimiçi veya kitle iletişim aracı fark etmeksizin) atık kâğıt işçilerinin mücadeleleri birer gösteri malzemesine dönüştürülerek tüketime sunulmaktadır. Dolayısıyla ne sokakta ne diğer kamusal alanlarda kendine bir görünürlük alanı açabilen atık kâğıt işçileri, sosyal medya aracılı bir öz temsil oluşturmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu temsilin kurumsallaşmış görünümü ise 2013 yılında kurulan Geri Dönüşüm İşçileri Derneği ve bu derneğin sosyal medya hesaplarıdır. Çöp konteynırları veya çöp yığıntılarında çalışan atık kâğıt işçileri hem COVID-19 kaynaklı hastalık riski hem de 2020 yılında uygulanan sokağa çıkma yasakları/kısıtlamaları sebebiyle günlük gelirlerini elde edemeyerek yaşamsal bir tehditle karşılaşmıştır. Bu çalışma, sokağa çıkma yasaklarında çalışmaya devam edemedikleri için kamuoyu oluşturmaya çalışan atık kâğıt işçilerinin sosyal medyadaki öz temsilini tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Toplumda öteki olanların sosyal medya kullanarak toplumsal görünürlük kazanma çabalarını anlamak bakımından önem taşıyan bu araştırma @atikkagit Twitter hesabından sokağa çıkma kısıtlaması süresince paylaşılan fotoğraf içerikleriyle sınırlandırılmakta ve çalışmada göstergebilimsel analiz yöntemi kullanılmaktadır. Araştırma bulgularına göre COVID-19 salgınına bağlı acil durumda atık kâğıt işçilerinin öz temsili işçi hareketinden çok yoksulluk ve yardım duyurusu etrafında gerçekleşmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Öz temsil, Twitter, COVID-19, atık kâğıt işçileri, sosyal media**Jel Codları:** L26, O18, R11, B21.**Geliş Tarihi/Received:** 07.03.2022**Kabul Tarihi/Accepted:** 24.05.2022**Yayın Tarihi/Printed Date:** 30.06.2022**Kaynak Gösterme:** Erben, Ş. E., (2022). "Self Representation of Waste Pickers on Social Media: Semiotic Analysis of Tweets of @atikkagit During COVID-19 Pandemic". *Nişantaşı Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 1(10) 1-8.

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## INTRODUCTION

Waste pickers earn their daily income by collecting recyclable waste – especially cardboard and packaging – from garbage containers or other garbage piles and selling them to warehouses. Since there is an unregistered area regarding how many people work as waste pickers in Turkey, the related data are presented through only the results of the reports. In the report titled “The Last Link of Labour Exploitation in Turkey: Solid Waste Collection Workmanship at the Focal Point of Attacks” by Republican People's Party Ankara Deputy Tekin Bingöl, it is mentioned that there are over 500 thousand waste pickers in 2021 (Atık Kağıt, 2021). Waste pickers, who have been working in an unregistered business in Turkey for nearly 50 years, purpose to transform into an organised labour movement by announcing that the Recycling Workers Association was officially established in 2013 (Emek, 2013). Waste pickers, who can only take place in the traditional media through the laws and regulations that are vital for them, use social media effectively to convey their demands and calls for solidarity.

Waste pickers are almost ignored by people (components of the dominant culture) due to their appearance (work clothes/clothes) and poverty (continuing inability to access basic resources and rights) while collecting paper (working) in garbage heaps (in workplaces) through their squeegees (with work tools). Waste pickers fall into the vortex of poverty and marginalisation as a result of the fact that the work itself cannot provide the necessary cultural and economic capital to live in better conditions (Özsoy, 2012). However, considering the rights-based struggles and social media activities carried out under the umbrella of Katik Magazine, which was founded in 2007, it is seen that waste pickers are not the other in passive silence.

### 1. Methodology

Waste pickers use different instruments (text, photograph, video, visual etc.) in their self-representation on social networking sites. It is aimed to evaluate the self-representation of the other on social media through the semiotic analysis of the photos shared by waste pickers on social media. While Schreier (2012: 51-52) states that semiotics is concerned with producing cultural meaning through signs, he also emphasises that different researchers can make different interpretations of signs in semiotic analysis. According to Barthes, one of the prominent figures in semiotic studies, the signifier and the signified must be for the sign, and signifiers play a role in narration, and the signified in content (Barthes, 1993: 40). In Barthes' approach, denotation (first-order semiotic system) is a signifier of a more inclusive connotation (second-level semiotic system) (Barthes, 1979: 87). In particular, deciphering the connotation is the opening of the representations and therefore the meanings to the discussion. In this study, a self-representation semiotic analysis attempt is made in line with the approach of Roland Barthes.

While the research is limited to the visual content shared by waste pickers on Twitter during the curfews/restrictions implemented throughout the country in 2020 due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the content of first aid distribution shared with four photographs is analyzed in this study.

#### 1.1. Other and (Self) Representation

According to the Waste Control Management Plan dated 2011, which was put into effect in 2016, heavy fines were imposed on licensed companies that buy paper from waste pickers (Sendika.org, 2016). Even though these bans on licensed companies were stretched as a result of public opinion-building efforts by waste pickers, especially in the online media, and purchases from waste pickers continued, no long-term gains were made in favour of waste pickers. Stating that this field of business started with the homeless people collecting paper wastes from newspapers in the 1960s, Mendillioğlu mentions that recyclable wastes are more common with increasing urbanisation in the 1970s, that the number of waste pickers has increased with urban migrations, and that the number of waste paper pickers is constantly increasing in Turkey as a result of economic crises and war migrations (Özkan, 2021). The inability of paper pickers to continue their daily earnings during the curfews/restrictions in the COVID-19 outbreak and the operations to waste paper warehouses after the decision taken by the Governorship of Istanbul in 2021 to ban paper picking posed a vital threat to hundreds of thousands of waste pickers and their families.

The news content of the traditional media transforms the struggle of the waste pickers into a demonstration material in line with the dominant ideology. Waste pickers, who gain (relative)



social visibility while expressing themselves without intermediaries through the content they create on social media, have been drawing attention with their struggle to exist as socially and others since the beginning of the 2000s.<sup>2</sup> Schnapper (2005: 25-28) expresses that the other is accepted by being positioned below 'me' in a differentiating attitude, and even that the difference between 'me' and the other is excluded and ultimately destroyed. This is such a situation that the other continues to exist as it is accepted, in other words, as the one below. Although the studies by Stuart Hall on being the other are often racially focused, the subject he underlines is being different and the other exists because of difference (Hall, 2002: 232-234). Therefore, the culture of waste pickers, who are different from the majority in terms of economic conditions and all related social appearances, differs in terms of culture, so that they cannot be assimilated due to poverty and systematic exclusion in the social marginalisation process.

According to Hall (2002), the difference is indispensable in creating meaning. Whereas culture is shaped by shared meanings, a representation that works through language also plays a dominant role in the production of meaning, and therefore in the formation and maintenance of culture (Hall, 2017). By imitating Hall's explanatory method, it can be said that the association of waste pickers with poverty and otherness is related to how they are represented in the public sphere and especially in the media through language (visual, textual, etc.). In his study in which he discusses how poverty is represented in the Turkish press, Aksoy (2010) states that the traditional media makes poverty taken out of context a spectacle and presents the poor as the ones responsible for the poverty. Therefore, the life of the other as the other is reinforced by the traditional media language.

The representation of waste pickers in the traditional media, which is positioned in line with the dominant social culture and ideology, is moving away from reality. In this respect, unlike the presentation of an unrestricted self that does not need to be a mandatory process (Thumin, 2012 as cited in Dobson, 2015: 9), a deliberate, conscious, and limited self-representation (Dobson, 2015) is created by waste-paper workers in social media and is offered. Upon the opening of the @atikkagit account on Twitter in April 2014, the current problems of waste pickers, their defence of rights, and calls for solidarity have been brought to online social networks. Founded in 2013, the Recycling Workers Association aims to increase the social visibility of waste pickers and to advance in the defence of their rights, while creating an area of self-representation through social media. This organisation marks a step from being a picker to becoming a worker with a rooted social movement history.

## 2. Research Findings

Curfews/restrictions in 2020 due to the COVID-19 epidemic were first officially announced on the website of the Ministry of Interior Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, and these restrictions were arranged to cover different age and occupational groups with different circulars until the end of the year (December 27, 2021). During these dates, seven visual content posted from the @atikkagit account, representing waste pickers who could not go to work and earn their daily income due to curfews, included the aid given to waste pickers and their families. The donations made by AMM (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality) and different citizens were shared through photos by the @atikkagit account.

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information on the population of waste pickers in Turkey: the interview of İslam Özkan-Ali Mendillioğlu: <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/ali-mendillioğlu-depo-baskınlarının-geri-donusum-sirketlerinin-kurulusuna-denk-gelmesi-manidar-makale-1538239>



Figure 1. Twitter content shared by @atikkagit on March 23, 2020



Figure 2. Twitter content shared by @atikkagit on March 23, 2020<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Whereas the faces of the children were clearly displayed in the first photos shared by the @atikkagit account regarding COVID-19 aid, their faces were censored by blackening in the tweets shared in the following days. The relevant photo is taken from @atikkagit, whose profile is public.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In general, there is a strong effort to make the invisible visible through the @atikkagit account, and the experiences stemming from the social and political structure are expressed in the interviews of the association in the news media. In research by Ögülmüş (2011) on the perception of social assistance and the culture of poverty, the data of both charity foundations and aid recipients were evaluated, and it was revealed that poverty was explained through the social reasons rather than fatalism. Therefore, the representation of the association in the online media, except during the COVID-19 epidemic period, is in line with the result of the study by Ögülmüş. According to Barthes and Hall, the visual in the semiotically-analyzed content cannot be evaluated independently of the text. With reference to Barthes, Hall (2002: 296-297) explains this situation by the fact that the discourse of written language and photography together produce and fix meaning because, according to Barthes (1977), texts are “what is this?” in semiotics and have a function that answers the question and refers to one of many different meanings. In the aid photos shared by the @atikkagit account, whereas the emphasis on documentation/thank you and the text stand out together, they record poverty and openly present it on social media at the same time. In another saying, at a time when there is a life challenge and urgent action is needed, it is a matter of honouring the people or institutions that help rather than deciphering poverty and its source. In the analyzed photograph, the pose of those who received aid through the packages in their hands strengthens this meaning. Therefore, it can be stated that there is a need and embarrassment in this self-representation. Along with this study, new questions arise about how and in which groups the struggle for social rights is carried to material solidarity in emergencies – by necessity.

Considering the results of this research, it is seen that local governments and people in solidarity with others should not only focus on the organisational context when helping those in need. Whether in mainstream media messages or in social media content, precautions should be taken to prevent the re-othering of the people in poverty. One of these rapid and short-term precautions is to provide educational assistance about how to emphasise solidarity instead of the victimisation of poverty to the holders of social media accounts where others represent themselves. In the long term, local governments, city councils or non-governmental organisations should organise up-to-date workshops and training on content generation and the use of social media for the components of social movements/yorum/tartışma kısmı eklenmeli ve yukarıda verilen önerilere dikkat edilmelidir.

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

### GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

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## SELF-REPRESENTATION OF WASTE PICKERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA: SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF TWEETS OF @atikkagit DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Introduction and Research Purpose:** This study aims to discuss the self-representation of waste pickers, who strove at moulding public opinion during the curfews, on social media. The study is limited to the content shared on the @atikkagit Twitter account during the curfew, and the semiotic analysis method is used in the study.

**Literature Review:** Waste pickers have been excluded from society because of their appearance due to working conditions and poverty, as well as being deprived of fundamental human rights such as the right to health and the right to education. Moreover, the advocacy of the waste pickers is presented as a spectacle in the mainstream media content (whether online or in the mass media) that protects the interests of the dominant ideology. This study is important in terms of understanding the efforts of others to gain visibility in society by using social media.

**Methodology and Findings:** It is aimed to evaluate the self-representation of the other on social media through the semiotic analysis of the photos shared by waste pickers on social media. According to the research findings, the self-representation of waste pickers in an emergency due to the COVID-19 epidemic is seen within the framework of poverty and social aid rather than a struggle for rights. While the research is limited to the visual content shared by waste pickers on Twitter during the curfews/restrictions implemented throughout the country in 2020 due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the content of first aid distribution shared with four photographs is analysed in this study.

**Conclusions and Recommendation:** Çalışmada Considering the results of this research, it is seen that local governments and people in solidarity with others should not only focus on the organisational context when helping those in need. Whether in mainstream media messages or in social media content, precautions should be taken to prevent the re-othering of the people in poverty. One of these rapid and short-term precautions is to provide educational assistance about how to emphasise solidarity instead of the victimisation of poverty to the holders of social media accounts where others represent themselves. In the long term, local governments, city councils or non-governmental organisations should organise up-to-date workshops and training on content generation and the use of social media for the components of social movements.

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## KATKI ORANI BEYANI VE ÇIKAR ÇATIŞMASI BİLDİRİMİ

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