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Political persuasion and use of humor on social media: The case of Turkish Youth

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Abstract. While social media is creating a new ground for political debate, humor also appears as a creative tool for this new political communication language. The present study aims to investigate the use of humor on social media as a means of political persuasion based on a qualitative survey on the Turkish young generation. The present research is based on 64 semi-structured interviews conducted on Turkish young citizens. As a result, in the first place, it presumes that the convergence of humor on social media provides a possible counterforce to the digital evidence that allows disinterested users to avoid political information. Secondly, the present study shows also that humor on social media facilitates exposure to diverse political perspectives and becomes an effective persuasion instrument of political communication

Keywords. Humor, political humor, social media, persuasion, Turkish young generation

1. Introduction

The digital space had become the privileged place of political debate. Especially, the use of social media creates a privileged scene of innovative appearance for politicians who wish to recruit and persuade young citizens. In this way, social media have transformed the way people consume political information and the participation of ordinary individuals in political culture. Also, humor appears as a creative tool for this new political communication language. For centuries politicians, citizens and elites have used its powerful and persuasive influence of humor on public opinion. “Political humor” is an umbrella term that encompasses any humorous text dealing with political issues, people, events, processes, or institutions. Political humor usually takes the form of jokes, cartoons, satire, and parody targeting both candidates and political situations as well. As a recent and popular example of political humor, online memes, which are extensions of usually citizen-created viral content, are in use. The memes comprise photographs of political figures altered either by captions or image editing software and can be compared to more traditional mediums such as political cartoons and 'green screens' used in filmmaking.

The empirical work from the disciplines of communication, political science, and psychology has emerged on the impact of humor over the last decade. Also, with the increasing use of the Internet and particularly social media, media effects scholars began studying the

impact of non-traditional forms of political information on the audience. The present study aims to investigate the use of humor on social media as a means of political persuasion based on a qualitative survey on the Turkish young generation. The study particularly underlines the positive relationship between the use of online humor and political persuasion. Then, the research allows also obtaining a nuanced understanding of the political representations, attitudes, and values of this generation in the current social and political context of Turkey. How does this "digital generation" give new meaning to political persuasion? As a result, this research looks at the needs and uses that this particular generation makes of social media for accessing political messages.

Turkey represents the youngest population in Europe. According to the Turkish Statistical Institution (2019), 16-24 year old make up 16% of the total population and 91% of this generation is online. Provided with the socio-political situation of Turkey, the digital platforms represent a privileged space to access political information, to create certain interactivity, and to express itself in freedom. Social media might be ideal forums for political persuasion. The attributes of these platforms create a deliberative space that may facilitate persuasive outcomes. Internet access and the use of smartphones and social media is increasing in Turkey as in all over the world. We Are Social and Hootsuite's latest collection of Global Digital 2019 reports reveals that 93% of Turkey's population is active mobile subscribers; 72% have Internet access; 63% have social media, and they spend 2 hours 32 minutes on social media each day. The number of people using the internet has surged over the past year and the digital growth of internet users is +9.3%. Also, even though Internet access is not as widespread as traditional media penetration especially that of TV, the use of social media is extremely popular among Turkish Internet users. About 87% of adult Internet users (or those who report having smartphones) in Turkey state using social media, making Turkey one of the top five emerging countries regarding social media usage. One of the likely reasons for the popularity of social media in Turkey is the control of traditional media by the government. During the post-2002 period, pro-government businesses acquired many mainstream media companies, allowing the government to have a strong influence (Çarkoğlu et al., 2014)

2. Literature Reviews

The humor has attracted the attention of scholars from many disciplines as social psychology, psychology, political science, and communication. Earlier studies have shown that humor, in general, has effect on attitudes. Annis (1939) compared the effects of editorials and editorial cartoons and concluded that "straight" editorials were more persuasive. However, Brinkman (1968) found that editorial cartoon caricatures aided persuasion. The relationship between humor and persuasion is used to explicate in Hovland's persuasion model (Hovland et al., 1953). In this approach, the processing of a persuasive communication includes sequential cognitive actions of attending to, comprehending, accepting, and retaining acceptance of persuasive communication. Research considering humor's persuasive impact is reviewed to determine the effect of humor on each of these stages.

Recently a growing body of work insists on the increasing popularity of Internet based humor and particularly insists on a clear intersection between humor and politics online. (Davis et al., 2018; Highfield, 2017; Wells et al., 2016, Baumgartner and Morris, 2012; Young, 2017). Shifman et al., (2007) assess online humor in the context of the 2005 UK election, exploring the motivations of different actors and show the way that humor is used is paradoxical, since it often attempts to encourage participation but means leaving the rationale for political participation. Using data from the 2012 presidential campaigns in France and the United States,

Wells et al. (2016) find that while political and media elites maintained a disproportionate hold on public attention, parody and joke accounts—those depicting humorous versions of public figures and/or accounts that tweet primarily “silly” content—were highly retweeted and generated substantial interaction. Some studies have conceptualized the relationship between politics and humor such as “LOLitics” (Tay, 2014; Klein, 2019). “LOLitics are a category of digital texts created by ordinary individuals that, like most political humor, are usually responses to news events or gaffes committed by political figures” (Tay, 2014). Study based 2012 US Presidential election data shows that ordinary people have the potential power to agenda-setting through humorous viral texts such as internet memes (Tay, 2014). The recent study based on the 2016 U.S election compare humor style between partisan cases and show that partisan patterns reveal that the meeting of humor and social media leave neither unchanged (Davis et al., 2018). Indeed, both humor (Hariman, 2008) and social media (Bode, 2016; Harlow, 2012; Mossberger et al., 2017) have been separately touted as means of lowering barriers to political participation. While humor “softens” discursive style, digital social platforms provide an alternative to elite-controlled broadcast conglomerates. Intersecting digitality and humor thus holds promise for increased access to political discourse and debate among diverse publics (Highfield, 2016; Milner, 2013).

Some studies focused particularly the relationship between young people political attitude and humor effect. Baumgartner (2007) reports the results of a two-pronged experimental analysis of the influence of online political humor on the attitudes of 18- to 24-year-old college students. Consistent with the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion, the study shows that online political humor viewership had a negative effect on trust in political institutions. However, it had a positive effect on candidate evaluations. Using data from research conducted among undergraduate enrolled at two major public universities in the U.S, Becker (2011) offers evidence o a positive relationship between exposure to network political comedy and youth political engagement.

Theories suggest that humor may hold the power to increase the overall persuasive effect of messages by grabbing an audience's attention (Sternthal & Craig, 1973) by bringing issues or ideas to the top of people's minds (Young, 2006) by increasing source likeability (Markiewicz, 1975; Sternthal & Craig, 1973) or by creating an association between a message's underlying argument and the audience's jovial spirit, or positive affective state (Fedorikhin & Cole, 2004). Each of these theories suggests that the use of humor in persuasive messages affects the cognitive processing of the arguments being presented.

In Turkey, there are few studies on social media political campaigning and particular academic research on young people's political persuasion process. In the survey conducted on 200 Turkish undergraduate students, the role of social media on political participation and impacts on democracy and political attitudes are examined (Çildan et a.l, 2012). Another study conducted at a particular University in Turkey has shown that the use of social media by political party leaders has not a significant influence on young voters (Aydın & Gülsoy, 2017). A study based on March 2014 Local Election manifests the way that Turkish young generation Express their use of social media as a political source, political preference, and political action (Mengü et al., 2015). Ministry of Youth and Sports has published research about the young voting behavior in the local election (Karabulut & Önder, 2017). Another recent find explores the relationship between political knowledge and the use of online sources for news and political information by analyzing original data from the 2015 Turkish Election Study.

3. Methodology

The present research is based on 64 semi-structured interviews conducted on Turkish young citizens. The youngest participant was 18 years old and the oldest was at the age of 24. The research took place over two different periods: First research period included 34 semi-structured interviews place over the period from September 2017 until February 2018. The second period covers the period from November 2018 to January 2019. In this second stage of the study, the corpus has increased with the participation of the graduate student social network. In this stage of the study, 32 semi-structured interviews which include interviews with Kurdish youngs are integrated into the research. Age is the main research variable, but the research has also included cultural differences as an independent variable. The educational and occupational distribution are as follows: 29 undergraduate students, 19 graduate students, 2 associate degree graduates, 5 high school graduates, 4 high school students, 3 primary school graduates, 2 second school graduates. While 11 participants are both studying and working, 6 low-educated interviewers only work in various professions.

Each interview lasted approximately half an hour. The interviewees were asked first general questions about their media usage attitudes. The questions about their social media usage, such as the frequency and purpose take place also in this part. Then the questions about their political interest and political participation are asked to the participants. The questions were assessed to determine the relationship between social media campaigning and attitude change. Questions about social media campaigning expectations are situated in this discussion. The questions about the attention- retention of the message, source credibility, and acceptance and resistance against persuasion were discussed also in this part.

One obvious limitation of this study is the fact that the semi-structured questions have concerned any specific questions about humor effect. However, almost all the interviewee gives a place in their discussion to the humor effect as a form of persuasion. Otherwise, the interviews on which this study is based mainly seek an answer to the question of what should be the new effective political communication that can have an impact on young's political attitudes and behavior. This general question has found a clear answer that humor and especially humor created on social media have a persuasive effect on young people.

4. Findings

The researches often discussed why young people are less interested and engaged in politics in contemporary democracies (Bastedo, 2015; Kitanova, 2019). Besides admitting that young people politically apathetic and disengaged, it is important to consider that their forms of participation in political affairs are changed (Farthing, 2010; Benedicto, 2013; Raby et al., 2018). The main question that all the political actors tried to answer how new political communication forms may reconnect with the interest of contemporary youth culture and capture their attention. The present study is primarily focused on the persuasive effects of entertainment media on political attitudes. As part of the approach, the present study underlines two aspects of humor use of political persuasion: In the first place, it presumes that the convergence of humor on social media provides a possible counterforce to the digital evidence that allows disinterested users to avoid political information. Secondly, the present study shows also that humor on social media facilitates exposure to diverse political perspectives and becomes an effective persuasion instrument of political communication.

4.1. Humor and Political Participation

Recent studies focus on the young's political communication forms and suggest that the web may be an effective mobilization tool and serve to increase interest and participation in politics among young people. The Internet and especially social media provide a means of socialization, expression, and participation autonomously from social groups and hierarchies (Davies, Coleman & Livingstone, 2014). Recently, Yamamoto, Kushin & Dalisay (2017) show that the affordances of online social networks enable dynamic information exposure and political experience and present unique opportunities for young adults to be involved in politics. Raby et al. (2018) shows that Canadian teen vloggers contend that some young people embrace and value political engagement through creating social change oriented videos online. Younger citizens are more prolific users of digital media than older citizens (Lenhart et al., 2010; Loader, 2007). Some studies suppose that social media interactive online communication is positively related to political participation (Bakker & De Vreese 2011). For example, Baum (2002; p. 91) argued that entertainment media could "expand the size of the attentive public" by exposing entertainment-oriented media consumers to information about politics and current affairs. Social media hold the potential to catalyze an even greater expansion of the attentive public through the viral video phenomenon.

The number of studies that have focused on the limited political participation patterns of the young citizens of Turkey showed that political activism is a very rare phenomenon among young adults (Erdoğan 2009, 2015, Yılmaz and Oy, 2014). Specifically, when political comedy is shared through social media and entertainment websites young people who may not follow politics may be exposed to political comedy.

The present research participant presents also their disinterest and also their lack of trust in political participation. Some of them precise that due to the political situation in Turkey, they express that they do not follow any figures on social media. However, Turkish young citizen affirmed also that they are interested in political comedy, even they are disinterested with political information. Almost all the participants declare their interest in online political messages which include humor.

I'm not following political accounts. But I'm looking for accounts with political humor. Humor represents my feelings. (İ., 18 years old, female, undergraduate student)

I like to follow funny political memes, images, and videos but I don't like to participate in political discussion. (H, 18 years old, male, working)

Some of the research participants declare clearly that due to the political situation in Turkey stated that they did not want to follow any political figure. Similarly, Lüküslü's (2005) research demonstrates that all the young people interviewed in İstanbul stated that they are not interested in politics and they do not trust political parties and political leaders. Also, the lack of trust in the political system is clearly expressed by young people of Kurdish origin, and it is the determinant factor in their political participation.

"I guess I'm not a political person. I do not follow political groups because I do not want to be blacklisted, this is about the political situation in Turkey's how it works." (Male, 20, secondary school graduate, native Kurdish)

“I am a political person, but I can not easily follow a politician's social media account or political social media account because I'm worried because of the situation in Turkey.” (Male, 20, high school graduate, native Kurdish)

“I do not participate in political action either in social media or outside because I am afraid of power. When you join the action, you will inevitably say a bad word and you can go to prison for life. So I disagree.” (Male, 19, secondary school graduate, native Kurdish)

“In Turkey, I'm afraid to express my ideas freely. I never participate in political actions. I am afraid of power and I do not think there is freedom of expression.” (Male, 20, undergraduate student, native Kurdish).

As Lüküslü states, humor generally appears more intensely during the repressive regime periods (Lüküslü, 2009;149). Participants clearly express their lack of trust and fear against the political system, while expressing their interest in humorous messages. Humor presents effective communication to deal with the fear and lack of interest in the system. The study focusing on the political use of humor in Turkey's Gezi protest (Dağtaş, 2016) has shown that humor is the form of resistance and symbolic violence, especially under the dominant regimes. This study also emphasized that political humor is not only the form of resistance but also is the form of solidarity. “For many intellectuals of the Turkish left, the young generations socialized after the 1980s are the apolitical or depoliticized generations (the terms “apolitical” and “depoliticized” are used alternatively by the Turkish press), born into the oppressive political culture of the coup d'état and its still existing oppressive institution)” (Lüküslü, 2005). Also, the young people in Turkey defined their generation more apolitical than the 80's generation. According to young people's view, while the generation with the least apolitical tendencies is the generation of the 80s, the generation with the most intense apolitical orientations is their generation (“Türkiye Gençlik Profilleri Araştırması”, 2013).

It seems that young people are afraid to be interested in politics because of the reasons that vary in every period and past and present political experiences negatively affect young people. From this point of view, instead of claiming that young people are not interested in politics, it is necessary to understand their new forms (humor) and areas (social media) of political participation. From this perspective, political humor can assume different functions. Our survey data shows that despite their fear of insecurities and their polarized political attitudes, humor appears to be the only unifying factor that can pass through all negative political attitudes.

For Turkish young's the lack of trust is the main obstacle to political participation. It can be summarized in two main reasons; they should be afraid that they will not control the content which can injure their social and political identity, and something will happen to them such as the security problem. Otherwise, the young generation uses social media to get political information or to political expression in a limited way. But still, social media promise a new persuasion process for political communication like using humor.

4.2. Dealing with political disagreement

The Internet has increased the amount and the availability of political content and also facilitates selective exposure to the message. Diversity of viewpoints that circulate online has the potential to expose individuals to a wider range of information and perspectives than they might typically encounter in their face-to-face social interactions (Brundidge, 2010).

Particularly social media users are exposed in political communication environment to political views that are in line with their pre-existing opinions. (Boutyline & Willer, 2017). Otherwise, in the social media environment where there is a great variety of information, the difficulty encountered in ensuring the persuasion of young people is ensuring the acceptance of the message. All persuasive processes will be affected by the decision to appreciate or engage in the message or not. The cognitive engagement with politics and prior attitudes may serve as lenses that shape how youth interpret the messages they receive when exposed to political communications.

When humor is successfully involved people may be more willing to listen to as many mental defenses on “alert” (Meyer, 2015). Also, empirical research remains that topics treated humorously are often perceived as less offensive than when presented seriously. If humor can playfully present information or argument without eliciting a negative audience reaction, then employing it could be a promising way to incite attitude change. Indeed, research consistently indicates that humor reduces counter argumentation, or argument scrutiny, in response to the premise of that humorous text (Nabi et al. 2007; Young, 2008) with greater exposure to diverse viewpoints (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009). Politicians especially find humor a useful tool for uniting their audience behind them and dividing them from the opposition; thus, communicators use humor for various rhetorical purposes (Meyer, 2000).

The survey on Turkish young citizen has confirmed also that they are interested in political comedy even they are disinterested with political information. Humor not only promises to involve young people in the political communication environment but also creates a bridge between political diversity and young’s political participation by overcoming communication blocks created by a preexistent attitude.

If I find a message funny, I'll share it even if it's a politician that I don't like (U., 19 years old, male, undergraduate student)

“I follow the deputies outside of my own political if they are funny. I follow all kinds of humoristic online video”. (Male, 20, doing his military service, native Kurdish)

Becker (2020) based on political satire’s effect research suggest that humoristic message can mean different things to different viewers depending on their motivations, viewing orientations, or their politics, it is ultimately categorized first place as entertainment by the majority of viewers; politics comes in second place. Humor contributes to drawing attention to the message which is the first indispensable persuasion stage and even enables political communication by eliminating the blockage created by preexistent attitudes. Lee and Kwak, (2014) based on online experiment have also demonstrated that consuming political humor can indirectly increase the likelihood of political participation by eliciting negative emotions toward a government policy.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study based on Turkish sociopolitical context, support the researches that humor provides a determinant factor that allows especially for young people to avoid political information and to deal with negative political attitude. The new entertainment culture developed by young people in social media transforms also political persuasion directions. This hyper-connected generation forces political actors to review their communication strategies and take on new challenges. However, using their favorite communication tools is not enough to

persuade this digital generation, the politicians must also adapt their way of use, understand their motivations, their attitudes, and their values. In the words of Baumgartner (2012) “Political humor is taken more seriously than ever before”.

The research questions have concerned about how political actors should use social media to persuade young people. The Turkish young’s interview data have exposed humor expectations. However, the basic deficiency of the study remains incomplete in bringing an opening on the definition of humor which young people express with different motivations. The increasing popularity of new forms of Internet-based humor has raised questions about the significance of humor in campaigning. How to define news forms of humor in political discourse. In future studies, this entertainment culture created by young people should be defined.

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