Abstract

Responses to crises can highlight and exacerbate class inequalities. Seemingly neutral policy measures taken during the COVID19 pandemic that aim to protect highrisk groups can lead to a shift in the public discourse that deprives citizens of their agency based not only on their age but also their class. In this article, we focus on the case of Turkey, one of the countries with the fastest growth of novel coronavirus cases in late March 2020, where the government introduced a curfew for people over the age of 65, while actively encouraging the rest of the workingage population to stay at home. An intersectional analysis of the Twitter campaign Stay at Home (EvdeKal) and the media outlets news coverage of the policy implementation show that both platforms circulated humaninterest stories of workingclass men who defy the curfew predominantly. Both the stories and Twitter user comments often defined the subjects of those stories as rulebreakers and, therefore, as mischievous uncles. They became the scapegoats, while upper and middle classes avoided the label. These findings have implications for the framing of policy outcomes and welfare provisions as well as oppositional politics that push for the expansion of labor protections during the pandemic.

Keywords

COVID19, intersectionality, age, class, and gender, Turkey, Twitter and news media

Introduction

While many studies highlight the effect of power structures that lie at the intersection of gender and the construction of the public sphere on social media (Lutzky & Lawson, 2019), the intersection of ageism and its class dimension is often overlooked. And yet, the discourse that deprives the elderly of their agency has severe consequences for policy outcomes (Calasanti, 2020). Moreover, extant research shows that responses to crises can highlight and exacerbate class inequalities Furthermore, social media such as Twitter take an increasingly more prominent role in crisis communication (Spence et al., 2015) in interac tion with traditional media outlets. However, workingclass organizations are represented significantly less on Twitter (Schradie, 2019). Given these differences in power relations, as policies and media narratives focused substantially on the elderly during the COVID19 pandemic, how do age, gender, and class intersect?

Our analysis focuses on the case of Turkey, one of the countries with the fastest growth of novel coronavirus cases in late March 2020. The government initially introduced a curfew for people over the age of 65, while actively encour aging the workingage population to stay at home without a nationwide quarantine. An intersectional analysis of the Twitter campaign StayatHome (EvdeKal) and media out lets news coverage about the policy implementation show that media outlets humaninterest stories often depicted the workingclass men who defy the curfew as irresponsible citizens. At the same time, middle and upper classes were able to avoid the labeling, and women strangely disappeared in the background. As a result, at the intersection of all these differences lie the mischievous uncles. This was a trope used in one of the most retweeted comments in our dataset, it captures news stories and Twitter users denial of agency agency to a segment of the population in their depiction of the social problems that arise with COVID19.

Curfew for the Elderly

When the first COVID19 case was announced on 10 March 2020 in Turkey, media campaigns emerged to encourage people to stay at home and avoid public gather ings and places as much as possible, similar to many countries. TV stations, newspapers, and social media cov ered calls to remain at home widely. Users on Twitter chose to StayAtHome to participate in the campaign to flatten the curve. As the number of COVID cases in Turkey quickly rose (confirmed cases doubled every day during the first 10 days since the first case was announced; see Ahn, 2020 for details), public demand for a curfew also increased.

The president announced the strict lockdown for the citi zens over the age of 65 on 21 March. Elderly citizens were not allowed to leave home under any circumstances except for hospital visits. Not surprisingly, responses to the pan demic measures reflected the political divide in Turkey. Pro government media outlets gave their full support to the government, which opposed a blanket curfew even in the cit ies that were hit the hardest. Leftwing/oppositional media in tandem with opposition parties demanded a nationwide lockdown. While both sides of the political spectrum endorsed the curfew for 65, they remained polarized regarding the expansion and implementation of such measures. Nevertheless, these discussions reflected the power relations at the intersection of class and gender.

Mischievous uncles soon became a trope for the viola tors of the lockdown. Although Turkish has no gender dif ferentiation in the thirdperson pronoun, and the language of the policy was also genderneutral, the tweets often used gendered nouns to refer to the elderly. In the Turkish lan guage, informal qualifiers such as uncle or auntie are often used to refer to the elderly men and women, regardless of kinship ties, which reflect the level of affection. Yet, there is also a status distinction in these affectionate qualifiers. In the absence of familial or inperson connections, these words commonly refer to older adults of lower social sta tus. For those who enjoy higher status, as perceived by the speaker, the appropriate qualifier would be sir or lady. Combined with the material conditions of the news stories (using public transport or financial need to work), such linguistic differentiation highlights the discursive and material inequalities.

News Stories: WorkingClass and the Poor as RuleBreakers

News about the curfew included several humaninterest sto ries, both in the mainstream news media and the alternative oppositional media outlets. A keyword search conducted in news archives show two predominant tropes. News stories included cases where citizens warned those who violated the curfew or reporters interviewing elderly citizens who defended themselves for not abiding by the restrictions.1 For example, a progovernment newspaper with one of the highest circulation numbers, ran a story of a local reporter in Amasya, an agricultural city. The reporter, holding a microphone from her balcony warns an elderly man on the street: Uncle Mehmet, arent you 65 years old? Why are you on the street uncle? Lets abide by the rules 2 Similarly, ran stories about violations in, one of the more impoverished neighborhoods in.3 Sabah, another progovernment outlet ran similar stories. One included an old woman that could not get on the bus in Zonguldak, a mining city in northern Turkey, due to the cur few. Similar to the above cases, the reporter asks, Auntie, how old are you as she tries to get on the bus.4 Even though the news stories refer to the elderly in a neutral language, a photo could tell the story of workingclass/poor people, often men. Figure 1 shows the people waiting on the line to get subsidized bread, reported by the leftwing Cumhuriyet.

Following this narrative of rulebreakers, soon videos of harassment emerged on social media until a backlash stoped them. In a video from the capital city, Ankara, a young man pretended to be a policeman, while an older man tried to explain that he went to the hospital and was on his way home.5 This video led to public outrage and started a back lash against labeling the elderly. As a response, the ministers of health, interior, and justice all tweeted condemning the man who took the video,6 which brought fame to Uncle. His story as a workingclass man who weaved car pets for over 30 years in a 10squaremeter workshop was covered widely by leftwing outlets7 and both the rightwing and the leftwing media outlets covered his message to stay at home.8 While the news medias coverage underlined the class dimension with a tendency to cover the stories of older men, this gendered pattern has become much more visible on social media.

Gendered Patterns on Twitter

Twitter is a popular platform in Turkey: In March 2020, Twitter accounted for about 20% of the web activity in Turkey, putting it on par with Instagram.9 We used Twitters standard search and the rtweet package in R to stream tweets that include a list of coronavirus related hashtags10 in realtime, during 16 March21 April 2020

Figure 1. The news piece reads, The elderly were again on the street in Adana despite the warnings to stay at home. An elderly who told [the reporter] that they argued with their partner about not wanting them to sit at home said the following, I am passing the time at the park with my friends. Some citizens waited for hours to get subsidized bread ( 22nd March 2020).

period, the discussions around how the elderly were affected by the pandemic increased. This increase was trig gered by the news items that indicate that people who are above the age of 65 are the most vulnerable. However, the discussion in the social media took a decisively gendered pattern.

To highlight this gendered pattern, we further analyzed the tweets that specifically focused on the elderly. We fil tered tweets that include the Turkishlanguage hashtag (136,632 tweets) to analyze the development of public opinion about the curfew on Twitter. Figure 2 shows that the discussion had a gendered pattern since its beginning but it became much more pronounced after the introduction of the curfew.

In the first phase of the discussion, before the curfew was introduced, some users demanded a curfew for the elderly. Figure 2 demonstrates the total number of tweets (in bold) as well as the number of unique tweets once the duplicates (like retweets) are removed. The day of curfew indicates the day of the announcement of the curfew. In our sample, before the announcement of the curfew in the evening of 21 March, a majority of tweets that mentioned uncles or aunts complained about their unruly behavior. We then qualitatively analyzed the unique tweets.