

## **Value Priority and Humor as a Defense to Cultural Schism: Analysis of the Istanbul Gezi Park Protest**

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The Istanbul Gezi Park protest started as an environmentalist action at Taksim against the uprooting of the park's trees for the replacement of the military barracks that were demolished in 1940, and it turned into an uprising against the government after a police attack. This article turns the spotlight on a unique protest in the context of the protestors' value priority preferences and the humor they used as a defense to cultural schism. It investigates the protestors' cognitive mental frames, cultural and ideological positions, their demands for self-actualization and more freedom, and the changing methods of protest against the authority within the context of value change hypothesis and humor theories.

*Keywords: Istanbul Gezi protest, value priority, humor, critical discourse analysis*

### **Background**

A group of about 50 environmentalist activists started a sit-in protest on May 28, 2013, at Taksim Gezi Park to protest the uprooting of the park's trees and the replacement of the park with the reconstruction of the historical artillery barracks, which would include a shopping mall, hotel, and residences. The peaceful sit-in protesters initially had no ideological intention other than preventing the Istanbul Taksim Gezi Park's trees from being uprooted—until they were attacked by police with tear gas and all their tents burned down without warning early in the morning of May 29, 2013. The unconscionable attitude of the police and Erdoğan's ("Başbakan Erdoğan," 2013) comments on the events and the protesters changed the course of the protests, and an environmentalist activism turned into an antigovernment demonstration. Initially, it evoked the most fury in big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Antalya, Muğla, and Eskişehir and then spread across the country. At around 3:00 a.m. on June 1, thousands of protesters started walking across the Bosphorus Bridge from the Asian to the European side of Istanbul. Some people joined the protests from their houses, flicking their house lights on and off or banging pots and pans to support the protest.

During June 2013, the protests went on with music shows; dances; humorous graffiti, banners, and slogans; silent standing protests against the uncompromising attitude of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (the current president); and the disproportionate use of police force against the protesters. Erdoğan had recently played a leading role in passing legislation curbing the sale of alcoholic drinks and

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had taken a stand by laws, words, and hints against secular, private, and multicultural lives of citizens, press, and speech freedom and republican reforms. Thousands of protesters—including journalists, doctors, and lawyers who joined the protests or helped the injured—were arrested. Seven young citizens lost their lives, and hundreds of people were seriously wounded.

Humor has always been a critical instrument (except in protests) in Turkey to reflect the feelings of the oppressed against the authority by breaking social and sexual taboos, uncovering many contradictory realities and thus portraying the country's cultural and social climate. Principal humor magazines such as *Girgir*, *Limon*, and *Penguen* were subjected to different punishments by the government. *Girgir*, which had a secular, anti-Soviet, and apolitical perspective, became an instrument of opposition after the 1980 military coup and thus was forced to close after two years. Left-wing *Limon* was an instrument for political opposition and bravely tackled some social taboos, such as depictions of violence and pornography. The popular satire magazine *Penguen*, issued in 2002, created a calendar in 2015 called "The World of the Tayyips," which featured different animals with Erdoğan's head to express its solidarity with a cartoonist of the daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, which had been sued by Erdoğan for portraying a cat with the head of the prime minister. Today Turkey has almost 20 humor magazines, and reading humor magazines is a widespread phenomenon, especially among young urban residents from 10 to 35 years old. The magazines' cartoonists and authors frequently portrayed Prime Minister Erdoğan, infuriating him very much. Sociologist Boylan's (2014) comment on the place of humor and laughter in contemporary Turkish political life describes the situation created by the 2013 Gezi Park protest:

Humor and laughter are generally regarded as disrupting order, as if the only force that holds society together is seriousness . . . though the Anatolian geography of Turkey has one of the richest heritages of humor in the world and this is ironic. (p. 1)

The socioeconomic climate of Turkey and the demographic picture of the protesters are much more likely to embrace postmaterialist values elaborated by Inglehart's (1977) value change hypothesis. The hypothesis states that every individual places the greatest subjective value on the needs that are in short supply in a given socioeconomic environment. According to the International Monetary Fund (2012) World Economic Outlook Database, Turkey had the world's 17th largest nominal gross domestic product and 15th largest gross domestic product by purchasing power parity. These data overlap with Inglehart's theory of postmaterialism and can be presumed as a starting point to posit that the emergence of a population experiencing much more formatively satisfactory conditions than older generations could give more priority to self-expression and quality of life. In addition to socioeconomic conditions, changes in the country's sociopolitical and cultural climate because of authoritarian governance contributed to the shift in younger generations' value priorities. Not happy with the new cultural climate, they were seeking more democratic and individual freedom rather than security and economic freedom. Among the primary variables in value change is the Internet culture, which helps promote alternative public spheres and constitutes a landscape for freedom of speech and self-actualization and plays a crucial role in changing value priorities. As Dahlgren (2004) states, alternative developments such as a more optimistic renewal of democracy outside the parliamentarian context might create new forms of alternative lifestyles or new politics.

A KONDA (2014) survey conducted on the identity of the Gezi protestors found that their average age was 28, and most of the protestors fell within the 21 to 25 and 26 to 30 age groups. Just over 16% of the protestors were in the age group older than 36. Most of the protestors were high school and college/university graduates or students. Only 0.3% of the participants were illiterate, and 2.7% had only primary school education. KONDA also found that, while only one-tenth of Turkey's population are college/university graduates, half of the Gezi protestors were college/university graduates. Some 78.9% were not affiliated with a political party or a nongovernmental organization, and 49% of the participants joined the protest after seeing the police violence. As for the demands of the protestors, KONDA found several reasons that protestors joined: 58.1% were there to protest the restriction on freedom, 37.2% to protest AKP policies, and 30.3% to voice their indignation with Erdoğan's statements. "The vast majority (93.6%) identified themselves as 'ordinary citizens.' . . . 'Politically affiliated' individuals do not make up the majority of the protestors" (p. 19). The survey also found out that "nine out of every ten protestors in the park considered their rights and freedom to be under threat, and nine out of every ten protestors had demands in relation to the policies of the state and the Government" (p. 21). Another important finding of the KONDA survey was that "Internet use and social media activity are greatly influenced by age, educational attainment level, level of income and lifestyle. Thus, the source from which the first news of the protests were received varies in relation to these characteristics" (p. 26). Based on findings that 69% of the protestors first heard about the protests on social media and that 15% first heard about the protests from family members or friends, KONDA drew the conclusion that "84% of the protestors possess individualized networks outside traditional media networks" (p. 85). KONDA's concluding remarks overlap with this research focus:

The Gezi Park protests is the first time when groups with such different identities, political opinions and traditions came together for a common cause. . . . The new age, new life, post-modern life or information society; no matter how we name it, life today is quite different than what it used to be. (p. 93)

Another survey conducted during the protests by Bilgiç and Kafkaslı (2013), supporting the KONDA findings, found that most of the protestors were young and libertarian. A total 70% said that they did not feel close to any political party, but the prime minister's authoritarian attitude and police violence was influential for 92.4% of people attending the protests. A large majority of participants (91.1%) said that the violation of democratic rights influenced them to attend the protests. The silence of the mainstream media on the demonstration influenced 84.2% of the survey respondents to attend the protests. A full 64.5% of the protestors defined themselves as "secular," and 75% did not define themselves as "conservative." The composition of the protestors included almost all sections of society who were against the government.

This study investigates whether the value priorities and the humor practices of the young Gezi Park protestors are compliant with the value change hypothesis and basic humor theories. In the light of the above data and the following studies, the analysis focuses on investigating what kind of world protestors are configuring in their cognitive mental frames and how they are revealing it.

## Literature Review

### *Value Priority*

The postmaterialistic theory elaborated by Inglehart (1977) is based on two main assumptions: Maslow's pyramid of needs and socialization theory (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's pyramid of needs states that individuals give maximum attention to their unsatisfied needs in a hierarchical order. Drawing on Maslow's theory, Inglehart bases his theory on the scarcity hypothesis, which states that every individual places the greatest subjective value on the needs that are in short supply in that socioeconomic environment. Research after Maslow appears to validate the existence of universal human needs (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). However, the order in which the hierarchy is arranged, with *self-actualization* described as the highest need, has been criticized as being ethnocentric by Hofstede (1984).

The socialization hypothesis of Inglehart (1977) predicts that the Internet environment changes value priorities during childhood and youth. In other words, value systems are highly dependent on time, and younger generations tend to have less materialistic values than older generations and ascribe more priority to values such as freedom and quality of life. Until the 1970s, it was almost universal for individuals to prioritize so-called materialist values such as economic growth and maintaining order. After 1970s, postmaterialists gave top priority to such goals as environmental protection, freedom of speech, and gender equality, because generations were born into relatively more advanced industrial conditions, and the shift from physical to more humanitarian demands also changed the sociopolitical climate of countries. Postmaterialist researchers have found that younger generations tend to emphasize postmaterialist goals to a far greater extent than older generations (Inglehart, 1997). The postmodern shift causes a shift in a wide variety of basic social norms, from cultural norms to those linked with the pursuit of individual well-being. For example, postmaterialists and the young are more tolerant of homosexuality than are materialists and the elderly, and they are far more permissive in their attitudes toward abortion, divorce, and extramarital affairs.

New politics created by the new media unveil questions about who are the partners of this alternative new politics in digital media and how it works during protests in the new millennium. Buckingham's (2006) investigation of the digital generation raises another question about the multigenerational and multicultural character of protests and provides some insight on protests of the new millennium. Technological change affects everyone, adults included. Drawing on Manheim's (2000) argument on generation, Buckingham (2006) notes that generation is not necessarily uniform and how people at a certain time respond to life chances is a matter of question, and, more importantly, "as the pace of social change accelerates, the boundaries between generations are likely to become more blurred" (p. 3). Although it is the subject of another explorative case study, we point out here that the internal and external impact factors, together with the use of the Internet and related applications, play a defining role in social movements (Cardoso & Neto, 2004; Wright, 2004). In the Gezi Park movement, the users of social media both organized the protests and warned the protesters not to get involved in illegal activities. They assumed this role because of the mainstream media's failure to comprehensively report the protests in a timely manner as the government had strict control of what could and could not be reported. During

the events, not only the youth in the streets but elders, mothers, and fathers joined the protests to support their children ("Mothers of Protesters," 2013).

### ***Basic Humor Theories***

Humor is a multidisciplinary field of research such as psychology, philosophy, linguistics, sociology, and literature resulting in the creation of many new definitions and terminologies (Attardo, 1989, 1994, 1997, 2002, 2008; Billig, 2005; Carrel, 2008; Christie, 1998; Davies, 2008; Goatly, 2012; Kuipers, 2008; Martin, 2007; Morreal, 1987; Mulder & Nijholt, 2002; Raskin, 1985; Ruch, 2008). Throughout history, from ancient philosophers and the Bible to contemporary researchers, humor has elicited discussion and has been viewed both positively and negatively. From ancient Greece until the 20th century, most assessments of humor and laughter were scornful, but beginning in the 17th century, to have a sense of humor was regarded as a basic natural human trait.

The conventional literature contains three classical humor theories: Superiority, relief, and incongruity. Although some scholars claim that the classical reduction of humor theories into three groups is an oversimplification, superiority, relief, and incongruity are still known as three basic classical theories on humor. Researchers use different terminologies for the subgrouping of the three basic theories relating to the winner and loser approaches. Attardo (2008), for example, reproduced the tripartite classifications of humor theories as hostility, release, and incongruity. The hostility theories involve superiority, triumph, aggression, derision, and disparagement. Under the group of release theories he put sublimation, liberation, and economy. Within the scope of the social character of humor are functionalist, conflict, and phenomenological approaches (Kuipers, 2008). The functionalist approach interprets humor as fulfilling social relationships between people, social control as a social corrective, and forging social bonds. The conflict approach sees humor as a weapon in conflicts, a means of defense. The phenomenological approach conceptualizes humor "as a specific outlook or world view or mode of perceiving the world and constructing the social world" (Kuipers, 2008, p. 376).

The classical superiority theory simply means that laughter and humor express our feelings of superiority over other people. We laugh about the misfortunes or shortcomings of others, and this psychological satisfaction reflects our own superiority. This theory can be found in the works of philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes (Billig, 2005; Bremmer & Roodenburg, 1997; Morreal, 1987; Mulder & Nijholt, 2002). For Hobbes, who developed the newest version of the superiority theory, humans are in constant competition with one another, looking for the shortcomings of others. He considered laughter as a passion, which is nothing but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others (Heyd, 1982). Gruner (1997), drawing on this thesis, reformulated the superiority hypothesis as the winner and loser hypothesis, supporting humor for superiority from an interesting perspective. Since the struggle to achieve social status through violence would have reaped enormous survival costs, even for victors, to laugh in response to the recognition of nonviolent superiority is the best way to gain superiority. The assumption of winner and loser is based on human nature, because throughout history, humans have used humor to compete with one another, making them the target of their humorous comment.

In the 18th century, the superiority theory began to be weakened and countered by relief arguments. Most prominent relief theorists are Spencer and Freud, who assessed humor in the context of a hydraulic explanation (Attardo, 1989, 2008; Billig, 2005; Goatly, 2012). According to the theory, humor and laughter work in our nervous system just like a pressure-relief valve in a steam boiler. Freud (1905/2014) accentuated the psycho-physiological nature of laughter (or humor) that can release tension and "psychic energy." For him, humor was the expression of thoughts that society usually suppressed or forbade—in other words, it was the work of the superego allowing the ego to generate humor. As Goatly (2012) states on the Freudian explanation of humor, relief theories of humor can be regarded as a theory of liberation from the psychological tension between the subconscious desires, or the id, and the control over these by the superego. Humor, then, resembles a kind of rebellion against normal prohibitions. It may be regarded as affording us relief from the restraint of life, attitudes, and actions.

The incongruity theory is the most influential approach to the study of humor and laughter. The first comprehensible description of the incongruity theory is found in the following words of Schopenhauer:

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and the laugh itself is just an expression of this incongruity. (as cited in Mulder & Nijholt, 2002, p. 4)

According to the theory, humor arises from the sudden transformation of an expectation into nothing or into surprise. This is done by the abrupt intrusion of something that is felt not to belong there. An example from the humorous messages of the Gezi Park protestors is the suggestion that the police spurt gas as a "hobby." The humor comes from the mingling of two concepts or expectations that are utterly disparate. Humor is thought to be more penetrating when it connects two aspects normally regarded with quite different attitudes. In this sense, humor depends on the pleasure of finding unexpected connections between ideas. The intellectual pleasure of playing with words and ideas and of finding unexpected connections is the essential point of discussion regarding incongruity theories. A considerable number of researchers (Monro, 1988) on humor refuse to accept the view that humorous incongruity involves degrading something exalted by bringing it into contact with something trivial or disreputable. They hold that incongruity is quite distinct from degradation and insist that incongruity, and not degradation, is the central feature of all humor.

Over the past decades there has been a noticeable emphasis on the positive aspects of humor, such as in terms of "its enhancement of social relationships" (Billig, 2005, p. 10), generating intimacy (Cohen, 1999) or rapport (Hageseth, 1988), softening criticism, and mitigating threats (Attardo, 1994). Some theories of humor attempt to show a relation between wit, intelligence, and humor (O'connell, 1969; Wierzbicka & Younga, 1978) and positive effects of humor on readers or listeners (Apte, 1985). Anthropologist Mahadev Apte claims that there is an interactional kinship and social bond between the joke teller and the audience and that this relationship can mark group identity and solidarity. Linguist Victor Raskin (1985) acknowledges that "the scope and degree of mutual understanding in humor varies directly with the degree to which the participants share their social backgrounds" (p. 16). More recently, psychological theories have developed within different orientations emphasizing the creative and defensive

potential in humor (Barwick, 2012; Cardena & Littlewood, 2006). Cardena and Littlewood (2006) document research that discloses how humor enables a more favorable sense of selfhood and how disadvantaged communities can dispute "through strategies like verbal dueling and deprecation the negative attributes ascribed to them by the dominant culture. . . . Blacks in Trinidad, for example, have used humor for psychological survival since slavery" (p. 7). We understand that individuals make use of various discourse tools differently according to the situation and context, principally reflecting their mental frames. As Kuipers (2008) claims, "the topics and themes people joke about are generally central to the social, cultural and moral order of a society or a social group" (p. 361).

What makes the Gezi protest unique is the use of humor for the first time in Turkish protests. In contrast to Turkish protesting practices, humor was used as a social protest instrument even in the most authoritarian regimes in the past, such as Nazi Germany (Mergizer, 2008) and communism (Davies, 2008), in Australia against the Australian Imperial Force during world War I (Wise, 2008), in workers' protests in Vietnam (Huong, 2008), by the Women's Social and Political Union (Cowman, 2008), by Finnish working-class youth (Salmi-Niklander, 2008), by students in West Germany (Teune, 2008), and by Zapatistas in Mexico (Olesen, 2008).

To present the unique aspect of the Istanbul Gezi Park protest, this article analyzes the protestors' mental cognitions of a much freer world and the ways they express these cognitions to investigate whether they are compliant with the value change hypothesis and humor theories.

## **Research Approach and Method**

### ***Sample and Procedures***

Fifteen graffiti and banners (see Figures 1–15) used during the protests were selected from websites ("25 Examples," 2013) to examine how the protestors expressed their value priorities through humor in the context of classical humor theories. All the graffiti published in different websites either criticized the prime minister and the police violence or demonstrated the protestors' demands for more freedom and democracy. Considering space limitations and the limitations of translating Turkish colloquial expressions into English, I have chosen 15 of the 25 examples to better convey the protestors' mental cognitions in English for the benefit of international readers.

Gee's (2011) discourse analysis tools such as situated meaning, social language, intertextuality, and figured world were deployed to examine the ironical, metaphoric, and metonymic structures in the selected graffiti and banners to make comments on the protestors' value priorities and ways of expressing them through humor.

### ***Gee's Discourse Analysis Tools***

The situated meaning tool was chosen to analyze the situated meanings in the graffiti and to discover how any word, phrase, or structure in the language can take a range of possible situated specific meanings in the context of the protestor's previous experiences, knowledge, feelings, worries, and hopes. The tool draws on a theory from cognitive psychology and focuses on the specific meanings of a word or

utterance, taking on a specific contextual use depending on how the language ties to the world and culture.

I selected the social language tool to understand how digital youth use language (with extreme intimacy, gentle sarcasm, wit, and conceptual irony) to enact their socially situated identities. This tool draws on a theory from sociolinguistics and explains how different styles or varieties of using language work to allow humans to carry out different types of social work and enact different socially situated identities. Gee (2011) calls them "collocational patterns" (p. 158). We speak and use language in various ways depending on our sociocultural status to enact different identities (Bucholtz, 2000). The language of the digital generations is taking on new forms and uses in constructing the identities. There is extreme intimacy, gentle sarcasm, wit, and conceptual irony in the vocabulary they use.

I deployed an intertextuality tool, which draws on theories from literary criticism, to comment on the open or alluding references disclosing clues about identity. Intertextual reference can be made by direct quotations or by alluding that the words are taken from other sources. Another type of intertextuality occurs when a text written in one social language is associated with a different identity. For example, when someone writes or speaks using Qur'anic words and phrases, he or she is alluding to an affinity with Islam.

The aim of choosing the figured world's tool was to understand how the protestors have depicted a picture of a simplified world (more democratic, more humanistic, more tolerant, more peaceful) depending on their culture and worldview. The tool is drawn on a theory from psychological anthropology and depicts a simplified world that is taken to be typical or normal. It varies by context and by the speaker's culture and worldview. For example, if we are asked to describe an "ideal citizen," depending on our culture and experiences, our figured world about an ideal citizen may be based on obedience to the state and belief in God or on incorruptibility and conscientiousness. Because this mental model deals in what is taken as typical or normal, it can sometimes become the means to judge and discriminate against people who are taken as atypical or not normal.

Assessing the linguistic meaning of political and social events through metaphors and metonymies not only widens the scope of analytic tools available to a qualitative research but also permits us to understand events and reactions to those events. Our conceptual system plays a central role in defining our everyday life and is largely metaphorical. The conceptual uses of metaphors (Catalano & Creswell, 2013; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a, 1980b; McGlone, 2007; Musolff, 2012) were analyzed, because they are the most significant elements of the messages conveying meaning and thus embodying the concepts in the mind of the conveyor. They are important because they reflect our intentions, hopes, and fears as one of the primary tools of language that help to categorize our world as part of our thoughts. Drawing on the claims of Wurmster (2011), the concept of conflict itself, for example, might entail a spectrum of warlike or violent metaphors, such as defense, antitheses, clashing values, or forces.

## Results

### *Analysis*

The purpose of this study is to explore whether the findings about the requirements, indignations, and mental cognitions of the Gezi Park protestors support the value priority hypothesis and basic humor theories. To carry out a systematic inquiry into the value priorities and humor of the protestors, Gee's four discourse analysis tools were employed. The protestor's defiance methods against the authority were evaluated through basic theories of humor: superiority, relief, incongruity, functionalist, and phenomenologist approaches.

*Figure 1: Oh enough, enough already! I am calling the police!*

**Value priority:** The actors, who have situated the police mentally in a traditionally defined positive position (just, helpful, merciful, protecting) are gently sarcastic about them for exhibiting the opposite traits. Their insinuation is for more humanitarian police to be deployed (**situated meaning tool**).

**Humor:** The protesters **situate meanings** in two different planes of content to show the contradiction of the desired and undesired actions (**incongruity**). Humor arises from the sudden transformation of an expectation into a surprise by verbal irony.



*Figure 1. Oh enough, enough already! I am calling the police!*

Figure 2: Brother police, you're literally bringing tears to our eyes

**Value priority:** The protestors are gently sarcastic with the "brother police" metaphor but are careful and considerate enough not to abase or violate the overall image of the police. The word *brother* is an example of social language used among the youth and elders as a sign of friendship, but it can also be used teasingly to understate the actions or words of the target. It is ironically used here to understate the actions of the police (**social language tool**). The protestors are looking for more humanitarian behavior from the police.

**Humor:** The position of the police is ironically overstated by the "brother police" metaphor to gently disclose the **incongruity** between the good and the bad as the same police do not act like a brother. The protestors' understating the damage of gas as merely bringing tears to eyes is their psychological defense (**relief and superiority**) against the police. There is a witty disguise of disparagement and criticism that accentuates their triumph.



Figure 2. Brother police, you're literally bringing tears to our eyes.

*Figure 3: I am not saying not to spurt gas, but do it as a hobby*

**Value priority:** To do something as a “hobby” is a metaphorical **social language** used among youth to make fun of an action. We see here how a phrase or structure (“do it as a hobby”) can reflect the protesters’ **figured world**, implying compliant cognitions, though gently sarcastic, in the context of their humanitarian feelings, worries, and hopes.

**Humor:** To spurt gas on the protesters as a hobby is an example of cognitive metaphor. To do something as a hobby is a metaphorical **social language** used among youth to make fun of an action. They mock the police violence, ironically overstating the **incongruity** between two irreconcilable contexts (spurting gas to harm the protestors/spurting gas as a hobby). The social language is used as a **relief** medium.



*Figure 3. I am not saying not to spurt gas, but do it as a hobby.*

*Figure 4: Pepper gas makes the skin beautiful*

**Value priority:** Pepper gas causes a severe burning sensation of the skin, but the protesters defy their oppressors without using any hate terms. We see here how a situational irony can reflect their **romantic cognitions** and **figured world (witty and humanitarian)**.

**Humor:** In this message, there is an **incongruous** and wittily sarcastic situational irony. The protesters ironically demean the harmful effects of pepper gas and imply that they are not frightened (**superiority**). The understatement of the damage of gas is also a kind of **relief and relaxation** against the violence of the police.

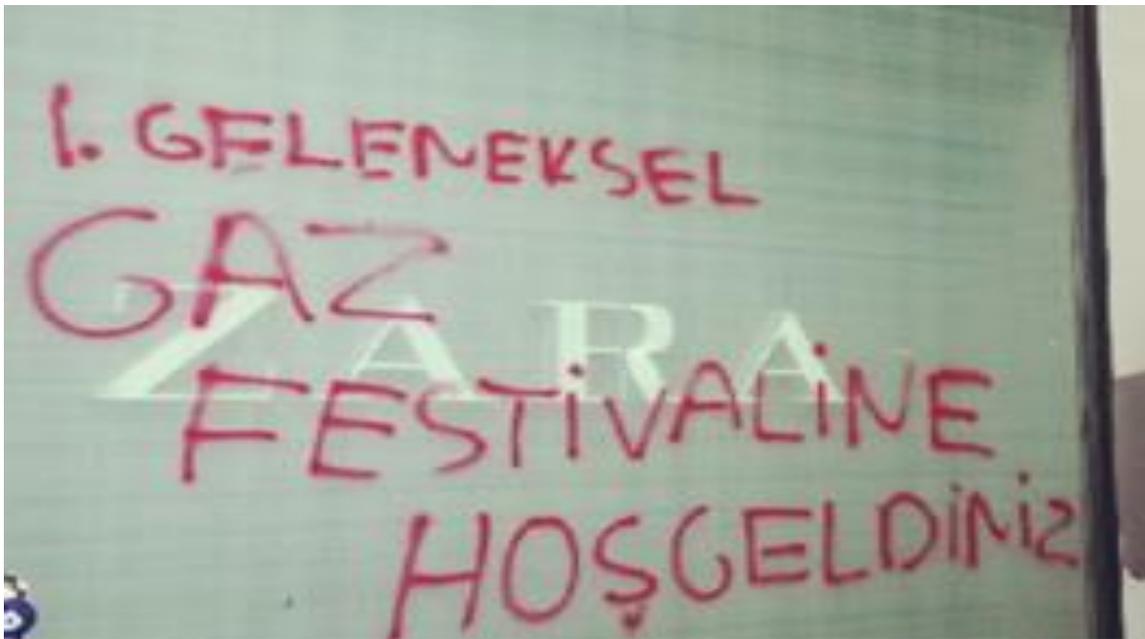


*Figure 4. Pepper gas makes the skin beautiful.*

*Figure 5: Welcome to the first traditional gas festival*

**Value priority:** "Gas festival" is a visual allegorical metonymy used in place of the police violence and the uprising for **democracy**. The protestors are **traditional** in the sense that they are still recipients of established rituals such as celebrations and festivals. The word *first* means that this protest for democracy will be celebrated every year. "The first traditional gas festival" alludes allegorically to the protestors' persistent **hopes for democratic Turkey**, which is taken as typical or normal in their **figured world**.

**Humor:** This graffiti depicts the mental frame of the youth and conveys their efforts to set up a kind of pseudo **superiority** and a **relief** mechanism over their oppressors.



*Figure 5. Welcome to the first traditional gas festival.*

Figure 6: *We have not had a bath for three days, send us TOMA<sup>1</sup> [water cannon]*

**Value priority:** TOMA (Toplumsal Olaylara Müdahale Aracı) used to suppress the protestors created severe injuries during the protests. The irony of having a bath with water cannon refers to the protestors' **resistance, durability, endurance, and unvarnished youthful heroism** against all the hardships.

**Humor:** The protestors challenge water cannon by gently teasing their oppressors. The metonymy of TOMA used in place of bath alludes to an ironical weapon the protestors use for **defense, relief,** and **pseudo superiority** over their oppressors.

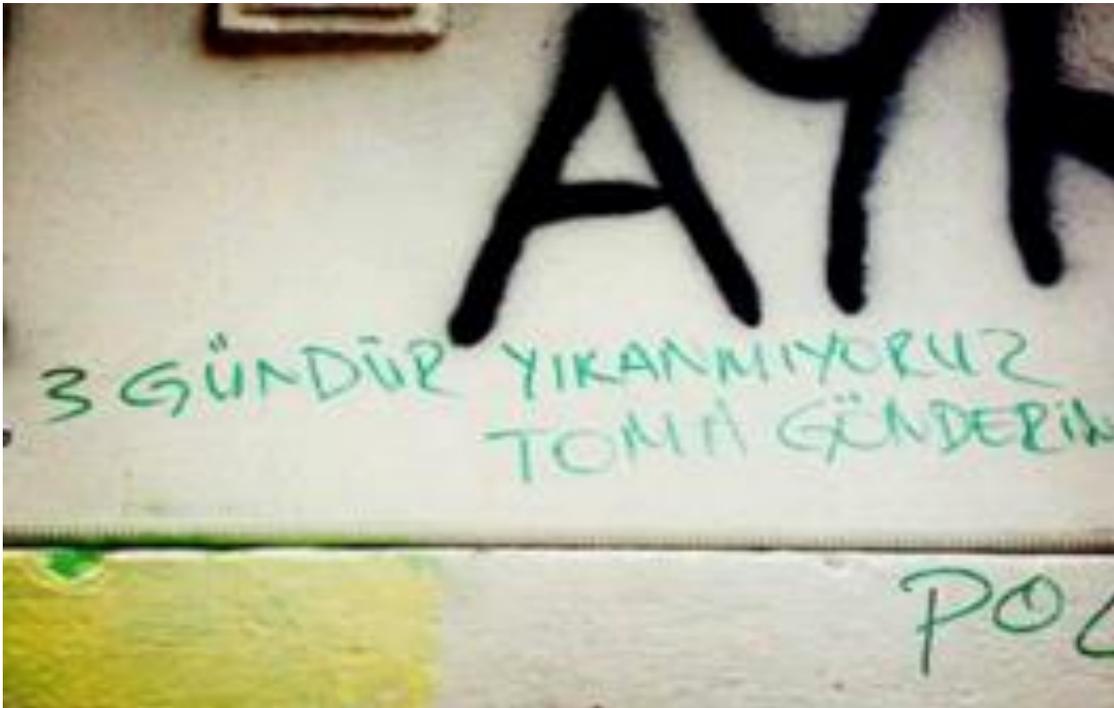


Figure 6. *We have not had a bath for three days, send us TOMA.*

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<sup>1</sup> TOMA means "Intervention Tool for Social Events" in Turkish.

*Figure 7: At first everything was a gas cloud, then life began*

**Value priority:** A gas cloud will be the beginning of a **democratic society**. The protesters are **optimistic** and give the message that they will be **successful in achieving their democratic rights**. The allegory of a gas cloud and the beginning of life in the context of the big bang theory (**intertextuality tool**) makes reference to the hopes and prospects of the youth for a better society.

**Humor:** Ridiculing the police for violent gas use can be alluded to the protesters' untainted youthful courage and heroism to establish **pseudo superiority** and thus **relief** over disaster.



*Figure 7. At first everything was a gas cloud, then life began.*

Figure 8: Revolution Party! All our citizens are invited (with pilav)

**Value priority:** "Revolution party" is another allegorical metonymy used in place of the uprising for **democracy and salvation**. The protesters refer to the countrywide protests as a revolution to be celebrated traditionally, as their elders do, with *pilav* (cooked rice). Revolution party with pilav comprises a type of masked **intertextuality tool** that is used to show the protesters' affiliation to traditions. However, this tradition alludes to their demand for **revolution of democracy**. This graffiti shows us how a specific contextual use of a phrase (revolution party) ironically ties the cognitive psychology of the protesters to their **figured world** and culture.

**Humor:** The protesters reformulate the **superiority hypothesis** as the winner and loser hypothesis by deploying metaphorical cognition for democratic revolution versus submission. By so doing, they constitute once again their **relief** mechanism. They use humor as a specific mode of perceiving the world and constructing it (**phenomenological approach**).

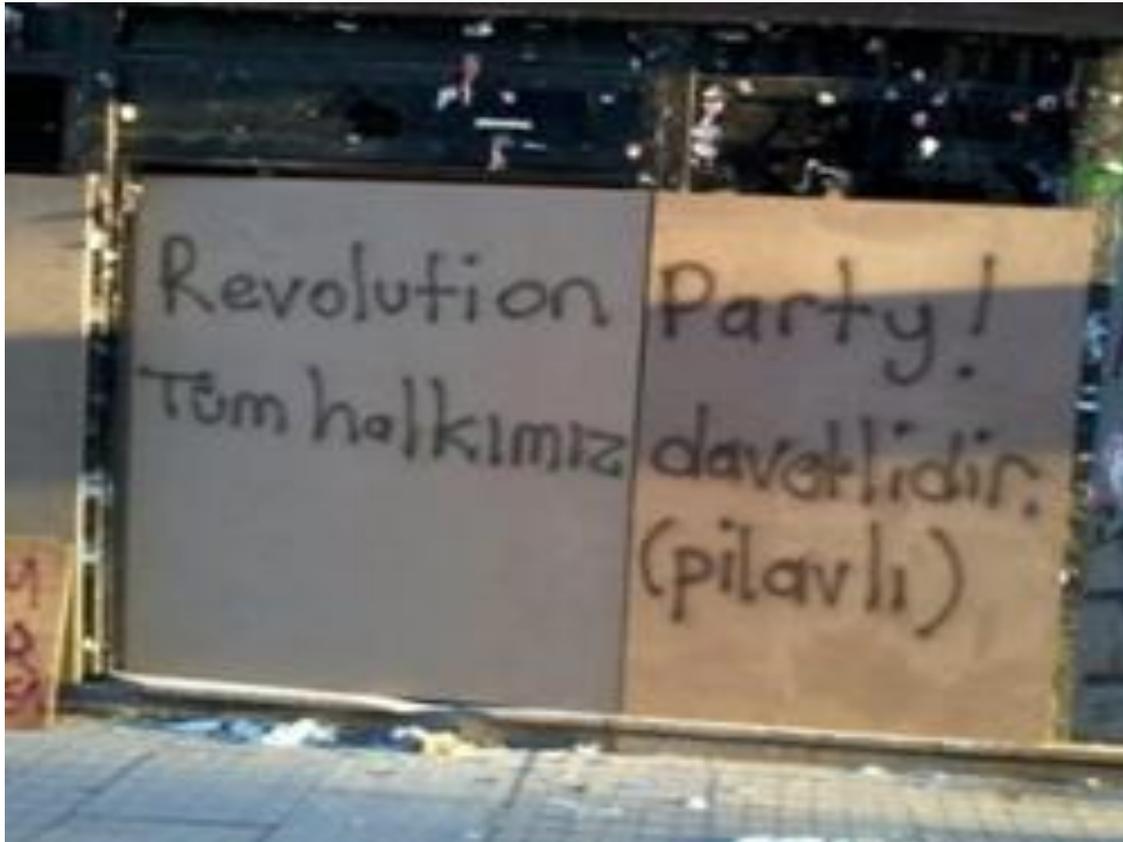


Figure 8. Revolution Party! All our citizens are invited (with pilav).

*Figure 9: We are continuously smooching Tayyip*

**Value priority:** On various occasions, the prime minister criticized girls and boys living together in the same house or kissing in public. This graffiti gently accentuates the negative attitude of the prime minister related to the protesters' **lifestyle freedom**. This graffiti clearly reflects their **figured world** and mental cognitions about **freedom of lifestyle and self-actualization**.

**Humor:** The protesters are gently mocking the prime minister's conservative and restrictive views about male-female relationships. There is a witty disguise of **superiority** over the restrictive authority and a youthful challenge and defiance against restrictions (**relief and superiority**).



**Figure 9. We are continuously smooching Tayyip.**

*Figure 10: Tell us more Tayyip, it is exciting*

**Value priority:** Erdoğan's totalizing, stereotyping, and polarizing rhetoric helped to establish solidarity and unity among the protesters. They are fulfilling social control as a social corrective (**functionalist approach**). They prefer to convey their identity and displeasure with the authority with gentle derision implying their **triumph and liberation** rather than using hostile and disparaging vocabulary. They are creative, functional, ironical, and intelligent in conveying their displeasure (**social languages tool**).

**Humor:** This is an ironical **defense and relief rhetoric**, aiming to establish **superiority** over the authoritarian speeches of Erdoğan. The protesters are reflecting the ironical glory and **relief** arising from the pride of their challenge.



**Figure 10. Tell us more Tayyip, it is exciting.**

*Figure 11: Look! What these 3-5 trees are doing to you*

**Value priority:** Erdoğan continuously accused the protestors and the international interest lobby of attempting to overthrow his government under the pretext of their uprooting of three to five trees for the reconstruction at Taksim. The "3-5 trees" is a specific type of metonymy (synecdoche) ascribing priority to values such as environmental protection (**postmodernist sand**). The protestors situate their worldview about the environment with witty irony (**situated meaning tool**) via a **functionalist approach**.

**Humor:** Gently mocking the prime minister for disregarding the cutting of trees is a witty and creative example of establishing **superiority** and **relief** through verbal irony.



*Figure 11. Look! What these 3-5 trees are doing to you.*

*Figure 12: You banned alcohol all the nation has sobered up*

**Value priority:** "All the nation has sobered up" has various **situated meanings:** **awareness** of what is done, **resistance**, **counteraction**, **deprecation**.

**Humor:** The alcohol ban and the sobering up of the nation is a polysemy, which means that there is an association or contiguity between the two concepts. The **incongruous aspect** of humor here is the mingling of two concepts that is utterly unexpected. It is a specific type of metonymy (synecdoche)—a disguised challenge to establish **superiority and triumph** over the authority for the protesters' individual rights.



**Figure 12. You banned alcohol all the nation has sobered up.**

*Figure 13: Even Edison regrets*

**Value priority:** Reference to Edison's regret for having invented the electric light bulb, which is the AKP's (the prime minister's party) logo, is a situational irony, because the protesters think that the exact opposite of what is meant to happen occurred (**the intertextuality tool**). This graffiti reveals two identities: the identity of an esteemed Western inventor and that of a political party restrictive of human rights. The protesters express their **commitment to Western values** in the context of Edison's regret (**figured world tool**).

**Humor:** There is **relief** in referring ironically to the regret of Edison, which also connotes a kind **superiority** over the authoritarian leader through the personality of Edison as an esteemed scientist.



*Figure 13. Even Edison regrets.*

*Figure 14: Installing democracy. Cannot install democracy: Please remove "System"*

**Value priority: Intertextuality** occurs in a written text not only by direct quotations from another text but when a text written in one social language is associated with a different identity. This banner provides an allegorical illustration of the antidemocratic climate in the country with digital language codes. The protesters are openly **criticizing the "system"** not because it is Marxist, leftist, rightist, capitalist, or liberalist, as it is clearly stated in Gezi surveys, but because it is not democratic (**social languages and figured world tools**).



**Figure 14. Installing democracy. Cannot install democracy: Please remove "System."**

**Humor:** There is a **functionalist approach** in the **irony** of the present system. The protesters are making fun of the present system for not being democratic and thus fulfilling social control as a social corrective.

Figure 15: Tayyip, I thought much. Do not come! Mevlana

**Value priority:** This image is an example of an **intertextuality tool** referring to the protesters' respect of Islam philosopher Mevlana Celaddiin-i Rumi and all faiths. This is an understated type of irony that undermines Erdoğan's character. If we juxtapose the message with the photograph of a protestor (see Figure 16), a *çapulcu* (a looter: Erdoğan's label for protestors) whirling dervish attired in Sufi Mevlevi (a mystic Muslim follower of Mevlana) clothing with a gas mask on his face doing *sema* (a mystical journey through mind and love to the "perfect" by whirling in remembrance of God), we can better understand the identity of the protestors. The famous verses of Mevlana Celaddiin-i Rumi, a 13th-century Muslim saint and Anatolian mystic known for his exquisite words of wisdom, is a good fit to the multicultural, humanitarian mood of the event and to the Gezi Park protestors' quest for democracy and respect for every ethnicity, faith, and thought. These well-known verses of Mevlana represent the social, psychological, and political spirit and morale of the protest:

Come, come again, whoever you are, come!  
 Heathen, fire worshipper or idolatrous, come!  
 Come even if you broke your penitence a hundred times,  
 Ours is the portal of hope, come as you are.

The protestors are multicultural, humanitarian, tolerant and democratic and have respect for every ethnicity, faith, and thought (**intertextuality, situated meaning, and figured world tool**).

**Humor:** The protestors establish **superiority and relief** on Erdoğan through the personality of Mevlana (**intertextual tool**). We can explain the humor used in this graffiti by the **phenomenological approach**. The protestors conceptualize a comparison (Mevlana and Erdoğan) in the context of "a specific outlook or world view or mode of perceiving the world and constructing the social world" (Kuipers, 2008, p. 376).



Figure 15. Tayyip, I thought much. Do not come! Mevlana.



**Figure 16.** *A çapulcu whirling dervish.*

### **Discussion**

Literacy among new generations is changing due to not only the medium but also to the needs of the users. Phrases are short, ironical, and contain a lot of local slang. However, this research area is full of problems. As Cohen (1999) claims, jokes are conditional, which means that only suitably qualified audiences can understand the joke. In this context, we have to be cautious in inferring a connection and transferring meaning to readers outside the scope of a given culture. And translating a humorous phrase written in Turkish into English and condensing the background of the social and political background of the humorous texts in a brief summary is a crucial aspect of the research. As Attardo (2002) claims, translating a humorous text from the original language into a different language is one of "the biggest constraints in critical discourse analyses and/or even impossible" (p. 191). Low (2011) explores two kinds of problems for translators of humor: the problem of the translators' incompetence and the problem of not making a serious effort to find equally humorous substitutes or using a narrow notion of translation combined with an unrealistic standard of success. Chiaro (2008) approaches the main issues of humor translation as equivalence, translatability, untranslatability, and sociocultural. In a critical discourse analysis context, translating ironic or sarcastic messages from a native cultural apprehension into a different cultural context that would be understandable for international readers was the primary difficulty of this research.

As Van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht (2004) argue, "social movements cannot be understood without considering the ideological beliefs of the protesters" (p. 11). The socioeconomic climate of Turkey during the Gezi Park protests, the demographic profile of the protestors, and the messages conveyed through graffiti and banners support my claim about the change in value priority in young generations. Surveys by the International Monetary Fund (2012), Bilgiç and Kafkaslı (2013), and KONDA (2014) and the results of this analysis of the individual and ideological perspectives of the protestors provide clues about the socioeconomic environment of Turkey and the identity of a newly emerging postmaterialist generation. The picture that emerges from all these data is that the majority of the young protesters are not conservative, but rather secular, multicultural, tolerant, and better educated. As a protestor and a web activist described the feelings of the protesters and the use of humor, they use "disproportional intelligence in the face of disproportional force. . . . It's relatable and it shows the protestors' confidence in what they are doing" (Milasius, 2013, para. 19).

Digital youth were not happy with the new cultural climate and were seeking more democratic and individual freedom security rather than economic security. Humor was the only medium or weapon for the protestors to demonstrate their indignation over their oppressors. The humor in the messages was not aggressive, but gently sarcastic, cleverly ridiculing, and deriding; it put the oppressors down by witty wordplay to foster an innocently romantic triumph over them. The protesters use verbal irony in the messages, which requires creativity, intelligence, talent, and a broad perspective in evaluating the world and understanding the circumstances properly. They play with words and ideas and find unexpected connections between ideas (incongruity) to reassure (relief) themselves and to gain some control (superiority) under hard conditions. The analysis also reveals that expectations of the protestors about their future and about the country are optimistic, but they are pessimistic about the current situation of Turkish democracy.

However, when the Gezi Park case is judged from the other side of the coin, we can see the severe polarization in evaluating the Gezi Park protests. According to Hart (2008), "In highly variegated audiences, humor does not necessarily unite, it can also divide and exclude" (p. 2). Although it is another focus of research, the dividing and excluding perspective of humor and the protest deserves some comment. According to KONDA (2014), 54% of the general public supported the opinion that the Gezi protests were a plot against Turkey and that the protesters fell victim to provocation. From this perspective, the Gezi protests can also be explained with reference to the existing social tension and polarization in society. The supportive group believed that the Gezi protest was democratic and a spotlight on the democratic sensitivity of Turkey, while opponents believed that it was a conspiracy against AKP and Turkey. From this perspective, the Gezi Park protest highlights the severity of the polarization in Turkey.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigates a unique protest in the context of the protestors' value priority preferences and the humor they used as a defense to cultural schism. The analysis of the protestor's humorous graffiti and banners supports the following assertions: (1) There are no ideological, discriminative, or impertinent messages, but humorous complaints and criticisms for more democracy and tolerant governance, which may function as social correctives, as (Billig, 2005) claims, to relieve tension

and build cohesion in groups against injustice. (2) The messages are romantic, pluralistic, apolitical, and innocuous in the face of the police violence. (3) The social language the protesters use is gently sarcastic, tolerantly ironical, playful, and witty even in the most chaotic situations. (4) The protesters are creative in finding unexpected connections in irreconcilable ideas (incongruity) to compose an ironic defense (relief) rhetoric, aiming to establish a playful and gentle control (superiority) over the police and Erdoğan. (5) The protesters are optimistic for the future and affiliated to existing humanistic national values.

The Istanbul Gezi Park protest reflects not only the shift from physical to more conceptual demands such as democracy, freedom of speech and lifestyles, and self-actualization but a change in how such demands are expressed and the sociopolitical climate of Turkey. Further studies on positive and negative practices during the protests and the positive and negative effects of the protest on the government and general public might provide important data about the future of democracy in Turkey.

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