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Telling as Resistance:

Making Sexual Abuse Public in Istanbul

By

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Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

Melis told in Facebook that she was sexually abused as a child. And a lot of people liked her post. If she can tell, and if people like it, it shouldn't be something to be ashamed of. Maybe one day, I also won't feel ashamed anymore[1].

(Diary entry by Idil, 2012, Date Unknown)

As I wrote these sentences to my diary, I was a high school student struggling with my own memories of being sexually abused as a child. I was used to seeing people talking about sexual violence in the mainstream media, but it was never the survivors who talked about their own experience: survivors were always talked about. The concept "survivors" felt like an anonymous group of people, who neither had a voice nor a face. Seeing Melis' post was a ground-breaking moment for me. Suddenly, there was a person I could relate to talking about their own experience. It made me question the shame I was feeling and showed me that telling was an option.

After their initial post, Melis kept on posting about their personal experiences about being a survivor of sexual violence on different social media platforms. In 2020, they created an Instagram account called @iyileşmeçizimleri[2] (drawings of healing). There, Melis started posting their own drawings accompanied by a sentence. The topics of the posts include healing from sexual violence, how to talk to survivors, misconceptions about sexual violence as well as being queer and vegan. They also touch upon important political incidents in Turkey like protests in Boğaziçi University, withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and the disappearance of the university student Gülistan Doku. Initially, the posts were only in Turkish, and over time they started to also post in English and Kurdish. Right now, the page has 12.4K followers and Melis regularly posts new drawings.

Figure 2 Screenshot Post from 08.03.2022, Turkish

Figure 3 Screenshot Post from 08.03.2022, Kurdish

Figure 1 Screenshot Post from 08.03.2022, English

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[1] *Melis Facebook`ta çocukken cinsel tacize uğradığını anlatmış, birsürü kişi de bunu beğenmiş. Eğer anlatabiliyorsa ve insanlar da beğeniyorsa utanılacak bir şey olmamalı. Belki ben de bir gün utanmam.*

[2] Following Melis' informed consent and preference, I use their name and Instagram account without anonymizing in my thesis.

In my thesis, I ask how a young activist in Istanbul position themselves in the slippery slope between political oppression, taboos in the hegemonial public discourse and affordances of social media algorithms. Is making sexual violence public an act of resistance for them? And if yes, how do they understand the concept of resistance in their own work? What strategies do they use to create visibility and what are the possibilities and limitations of depending on a social media platform to make it into the public sphere?

Since hashtag movements like #MeToo started to spread virally, there has been a big academic interest in sexual abuse disclosures on social media. Some argued that the hashtag was just a media spectacle, incapable of creating social change. Others criticized the movement for not going far enough and excluding already disadvantaged populations (O'Callaghan & Douglas, 2021).

Most of the research focused on the social media posts (Mendes et al., 2018; O'Neill, 2018; Schneider & Carpenter, 2019), the reactions to them (Andalibi et al., 2018; Bogen et al., 2019), as well as the online publics that form around disclosing sexual violence (Andalibi et al., 2016; Clark-Parsons, 2021; Page & Arcy, 2019). Nearly all of the mentioned papers used content analysis of social media posts as their main research method. O'Calaghan and Douglas (2019) argue, that there is a critical gap in the online sexual violence disclosures research, as analysing social media posts is not enough to grasp the perspectives of survivors who create the posts:

> We may have ample research on #MeToo disclosures, but we know very little about what happens to survivors after they post, or how to support survivors who disclose online. Until we know more about both, researchers will continue to be the largest benefactor of social media sexual assault disclosure research rather than survivors. (O'Callaghan & Douglas, 2021, p. 519)

While discussing the public-making of the sexual violence in Istanbul in this paper, I aim to shift the research focus from the social media posts to the survivors who create the posts. On that basis, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with Melis were the primary source of my empirical data. I used social media content for my analysis only when it was addressed by my interview partner. Following the approach of ethnographies of the particular (Abu-Lughod, 1991, pp. 473-476), I included only one case in my thesis which I analysed and described in detail to emphasize the uniqueness of survivor experiences and to avoid generalizations.

The thesis consists of five different sections. The first section reflects on my own positionality, how I used my own emotions in the research process, how I conducted my interviews and the survivor informed approach that played an important role in the research

process. The second section is dedicated to building the theoretical background of my work. First, I will discuss the concept of feminist counterpublics and how it can be applied to the context of Turkey. Then, I will introduce the concept of platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015) to gain a better understanding of how the digital narratives of the activists are shaped. After that, I will elaborate on the concept of *resistance* and how it can be understood in its relation to vulnerability (Butler, 2016). The fourth section will focus on the discourse in Turkey about sexual violence and present an overview of already existing movements. The fifth section presents my case study focusing on three different modes of resistance Melis and I discovered in their work. Finally, I will be discussing my findings and presenting questions for further research.

2. Methodology

This chapter starts with a reflection of my positionality and how I engaged my emotions to the research process. After that, I will elaborate on how I conducted my interviews. The last section of this chapter illustrates how I tried to apply a *survivor-informed approach* both in data collection and the writing process of my thesis.

2.1 Positionality and Emotions in the Research

I position myself in my field as a cis-woman from Istanbul with a history of childhood sexual abuse. Therefore, while addressing survivors of sexual violence during my research, I used the term "us" while acknowledging that the experience of every survivor is unique and not everyone who has endured sexual violence identifies as a survivor. Following Anderson's (2021, p. 213) argument that "dichotomy of insider and outsider does not reflect the realities of a nuanced field" (p. 213), I locate myself in between. As a Istanbullite who has been living in Germany for four years, I am familiar with the discourses on sexual violence and the struggle of being a survivor in Istanbul. Nevertheless, my experiences over the last four years in Germany have shaped my perception and created a distance between me and my field.

Two months into the process of writing my thesis, I realized that working in the field of sexual violence as a survivor evoked strong emotional responses for me. Engaging with the concept of *epistemological affects* (Stodulka et al., 2018), which suggests that using the field researchers' emotions in the analysis is useful for the knowledge-making process, I decided to document my emotions during the research. As a tool for the systematic reflection, I used the *emotion diaries* (Lubrich & Stodulka, 2019, pp. 37-41) that consist of

seven different questions. The following illustrates what my notes looked like and how I used them to inform my research:

> We are talking about resisting, empowerment and solidarity all the time. At first, it made me very excited and hopeful. But now, I feel stuck, I just want to mourn. Nothing can give us a first sexual experience that we choose for ourselves, nothing can take back the times where we had to be silent and carry everything alone, nothing can make the pain we had to endure go away. No kind of solidarity and no resistance can give us back what is stolen. Thinking about it, it just hurts.

(Emotion Diary Idil, 05.05.2022)

As I brought up what I wrote in my interview with Melis, we got to talk about the process of grieving, the possibility of grieving collectively and how important it is to create spaces for grief. Then, the question came up: "Can we interpret the act of grieving the oppression and opening up spaces for survivors to grieve as an act of resistance?" This question broadened my sense of resistance and opened up a very fruitful space for my analysis of Melis' work. In the section "Grieving as resistance", I will go deeper into the findings this discussion opened up for us.

2.2 Interviews

As already mentioned in the introduction, my focus of interest while analysing the public-making of sexual violence in Istanbul is the perspective of survivors who create the posts rather than the posts themselves. Therefore, I used *person-centered interviewing* (Levy & Hollan, 2014) as my main method. Levy and Hollan argue that this method enables one to analyse and understand the "complex interrelationships between individuals and their social, material, and symbolic contexts" (ibid., p. 296). I conducted two unstructured pinterviews and one semi-structured interview with Melis. Following the recommendations of Levy and Hollan (2014, p. 301), I mostly asked open-ended questions that are purposely ambiguous to leave my respondent a wide range of responses. The first two unstructured interviews served the purpose of exploring which topics are relevant for my informant and what the possible fields of analysis are. After that, I formulated my research questions and conducted one last interview, which was a semi-structured interview focusing on the concept of "resistance" in Melis' work. All of our interviews were in Turkish, and I conducted them online via Zoom.

2.3 Survivor Informed Approach

Campbell and her colleagues (2009a, 2009b; 2019) have proposed recommendations for *trauma-informed* research on sexual violence that are primarily informed by interviews with survivors on participating in research. Although not all of the recommendations are applicable within the framework of a bachelor thesis, I used them to inform the structure of

my interviews as well as my writing process. Unlike Campbell and colleagues, I decided to use the term *survivor-informed* instead of *trauma-informed* as the term emphasizes that survivors cannot be reduced to their traumatic experiences and "survivors should be the central concern in how we choose to conduct research with them" (O'Callaghan & Douglas, 2021, p. 506). The recommendations of Campbell and her colleagues are as follows:

1. Being aware that the experience of interpersonal violence might have ongoing negative impacts and being prepared to hear about traumatic experiences, coping strategies and ongoing impacts.
2. Identifying recovery from trauma as a primary goal.
3. Giving the participants the possibility of making a fully informed decision on whether to participate in the research by using transparent requirement language.
4. Providing the participants options on how their data will be shared and how their confidentiality will be protected.
5. Reducing the power imbalances between researcher and participant by creating a relational collaboration.
6. Creating an atmosphere that respects survivors' needs.
7. Using active listening and emphasizing survivors' strengths.
8. Minimizing the risk of re-traumatization by avoiding intrusive research practices.
9. Creating an understanding for how survivors backgrounds and identities intersect with trauma.
10. Involving the participants in various stages of the research.

These recommendations show the need to give the participants agency during the research process, creating a safe space for their experiences and using informed consent on how their information will be used and shared.

In the beginning of my research process, I organized a meeting with Melis to explain in detail what I want to do with my research, which methods I will be using and with whom it will be shared. After that, we reflected on our boundaries and which topics could and could not be addressed during the interviews. I did not put a time limit to any of our interviews to make space for stories that might come up and we started every interview with a reflection of our emotional status.

The writing of my thesis was also a collaborative process with Melis. I regularly shared my writing process and thoughts with Melis and we discussed the theories and ideas that went into my thesis. At the end of the writing process, Melis did my last proofreading.

3. Making the Personal Visible as a Feminist Struggle

This chapter builds the theoretical framework of my thesis by locating the process of telling sexual violence online within the concept of public spheres and questioning how resistance occurs within this act. I will first engage with the theory of *public spheres* and the concept of *feminist counterpublics* (Fraser, 1990). Then, I will discuss how feminist narratives on social media are shaped by the affordances and *vernaculars* (Gibbs et al., 2015) of the platforms. The last section explores, building on Butler's (2016) arguments, how the aspects of *resistance* and *vulnerability* relate to each other.

3.1 Feminist Counterpublics

Habermas defines in his influential text "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopaedia Article" *public sphere* as "[…] a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas et al., 1974, p. 49). Private individuals form a public body when they assemble and engage in discursive interaction about common affairs. Important hereby is the accessibility of information to the public, the freedom to express publics opinions and the freedom of assembly (ibid., pp. 49-52). Habermas idealized the bourgeois public sphere as an era where the critical functions of the public reached its highest point (ibid., p. 60). Fraser (1990, p. 58) argues that Habermas never explicitly problematized the exclusion practices the "bourgeois public sphere" rested on despite the rhetoric of general accessibility (ibid., p. 59). Exclusionary operations were essential to the formation of the "bourgeois public sphere":

> Women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded from official political participation precisely on the basis of ascribed gender status, while plebeian men were excluded by property qualifications. Moreover, in many cases, women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded on racial grounds. (ibid., p. 63)

According to the given historical facts, Fraser (ibid., p. 62) suggests that "the bourgeois public sphere was a masculinist ideological notion with the function of legitimizing the rule of a specific class". The "bourgeois public sphere" was actually never "the public" as Habermas suggested. Instead, it was only one of the publics in a multiplicity of public spheres. People who did not have the possibility to access the "bourgeois public sphere" contested its exclusionary norms by forming counterpublics. Fraser (ibid., p. 67) proposes to call these counterpublics, which were created by members of subordinated social groups, subaltern counterpublics. These groups expand the discursive space by describing their social realities, needs, ideas and inventing new counter-discourses (ibid.).

> […] in stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds

for agitational activities directed towards wider publics. It is precisely between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies. (ibid., p. 68)

As patriarchy persists as the dominant social structure worldwide, I argue that women who share their experiences of sexual violence form *subaltern counterpublics* by producing alternative discourses and regrouping individual accounts under the shared experiences. By the act of telling sexual violence, women in Turkey cross the boundary of what is considered to be *mahrem*[3] by the hegemonial public and make the individual a shared/sharable experience.

When using the term *public spheres* in my thesis, I follow Loubna Skalli, who defines the term specifically for the context of the MENA region, acknowledging how gendered spaces are still particularly affecting political and social life: "My use of the public sphere in the context of the MENA region refers to open discursive spaces that include subaltern counterpublics, where subordinated groups such as women challenge the patriarchal public/private division" (Skalli, 2006, p. 37).

3.2 Creating Feminist Digital Narratives in Social Media

"The personal is political" is probably one of the best known slogans dating back to the 1960s' U.S. feminist movements. According to Hanisch (1969), making the personal political meant calling out, denaturalizing and challenging the norms that excuse and silence oppressive experiences such as sexual violence. Although the relevance of the slogan for feminist movements did not change to this day, social media gave it a new turn (Antonakis, 2015, p. 104).

On movements like #MeToo, #WhyIdidntReport, #NiUnaMenos (#NotOneLess) and #EverydaySexism, activists made their struggles visible, bridging the individual with the collective and emphasizing the systematic nature of injustice. Organizing through the hashtags, the activists created new discourses within the feminist counterpublics, which in many cases also *spilled-over* (Antonakis, 2015) to the mainstream media. The new organization forms and possibilities of networked activism also created a big interest within academia. Some scholars like Manuel Castells (2012) argued that social media can revolutionize the public sphere by lowering the cost of participation and democratizing the access to information. Others however framed networked activism as "slacktivism", a risk-

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[3] The word *mahrem* is derived from the Arabic root h-r-m, which means forbidden. Sehlikoglu (2015) defines it as a "voiced, yet non descriptive reference to the *intimate*".

free performance without the capability of building sustainable movements (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2016). Clark-Parsons (2021) suggests moving beyond the instrumentalist approach of "activism vs. slacktivism" and working from an understanding of social media as *practices* by looking into the "processes through which activists develop their tactics while working within particular sociotechnical constraints" (ibid., p. 363).

To understand how activists act and the tell their stories within social media platforms, I argue that engaging with the concept of *platform vernacular* (Gibbs et al., 2015) is crucial. According to Gibbs and his colleagues, every social media platform has its own unique "combination of styles, grammars and logics" (ibid., p. 300), that together with the communicative habits of its users constitutes a *platform vernacular*:

> While platform vernaculars are particular to social media platforms, it is also important to acknowledge that they can share many elements, and the vocabulary and grammars of vernaculars migrate between social media platforms as new practices and features from one platform are appropriated for use on others. (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 300)

The architecture of the social media platforms and its vernaculars curate *digitalized narratives.* Looking into how this digitalized narratives are curated within the context of sexual violence is especially important as, according to Young and McGuire (2003), the act of discussing experiences of sexual violence also shapes how survivors make sense of the assault. Creating a digital narrative on sexual violence on a social media platform involves careful decisions like whom to tell, which experiences to share, where to post, how to shape the narratives, which stylistic elements to use (depending on the platform images, tags, hashtags, stories) and which interactions to allow (for example by restricting the comments section).

In the chapter "Possibilities and Limitations", I will look into how platform vernaculars and the affordances of Instagram shape Melis' digital narratives and which constraints/possibilities the platform offers in their case.

3.3 Vulnerability and Resistance in Making Sexual Violence Public

As the title of my thesis frames the act of telling sexual as *resistance,* it is necessary to clarify what I mean when I use the term. To develop a nuanced understanding of the term *resistance* within the framework of my thesis, I follow Judith Butler (2016), who understands *resistance* in relation to the concept of *vulnerability*. She argues that *vulnerability* and *resistance* are not opposing terms, but they coexist:

> I wish to point out that even as public resistance leads to vulnerability and vulnerability (the sense of "exposure" implied by precarity) leads to resistance, vulnerability is not exactly overcome by resistance, but becomes a potentially effective mobilizing force in political mobilizations. (Butler, 2016, p. 14)

In that sense, to analyse an act of resistance, it is necessary to look at which vulnerabilities were mobilized to create that resistance and which ones occur when people start to resist. Judith Butler distinguishes between two different types of vulnerability. The first one is *bodily vulnerability*. She suggests that the body is "defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible" (ibid., p. 16). This dependency to infrastructure and social relations is what creates the *bodily vulnerability*. The second type of vulnerability is the *linguistic vulnerability*.

> We do not only act through the speech act; speech also acts on us. There is a distinct performative effect of having been named as this gender or another gender, as part of one nationality or a minority, or to find out that how you are regarded in any of these respects is summed up by a name that you yourself did not know and never chose. (ibid.)

The names we are called and categorized by create a vulnerability as we cannot choose them before they act on us.

Building on the ideas of Judith Butler, I define *resistance* in my thesis as making the vulnerabilities created by oppressive systems visible and mobilizing them to create change. Here, it is important to note that when mobilized, the vulnerability might change forms but will stay persistent.

4. Sexualized Violence in Turkey's Public Sphere

This chapter aims to illuminate in which framework Melis is doing their activist work by addressing recent discourses on sexualized violence against women in Turkey's social media as well as the mainstream media.

In 2015, Özgecan Aslan, a university student, was killed resisting an attempted rape by the driver of a minibus she took on her way home. The incident sparked nationwide online and offline protests and acted as a catalyst for public discussions on sexual violence against women. The hashtag #sendeanlat (#PleaseTellAsWell) where women started sharing their experiences of sexual violence was born out of this momentum (Dede Özdemir, 2015). However, the hashtag was short-lived and was supressed by another hashtag called #idamistiyoruz (#WeWantDeathSentence). Through the hashtag, people demanded death penalty for abusers and it gained popularity over a very short time period. Voices of survivors gathering in #SenDeAnlat vanished as #IdamIstiyoruz it took over Twitter. #Idam Istiyoruz quickly *spilled over* from social media to mainstream media, and the whole discussion around violence against women got appropriated by different actors (especially the state) following their own political agendas (Habertürk, 2015). After 2015, violence against

women stayed a persistent topic on the mainstream media and in political discourses. Ahıska (2016) criticized the representation of women in those discourses as follows:

> Women are represented in legal, political, and media discourses—including some feminist versions—as victims that should be recognized and protected by society. […] The representations that evoke the victimhood of women cancel the multiple temporalities of vulnerability—that is, how women as subjects have differently lived, desired, and struggled through the experience of violence. When no desire for living, and living differently, is allowed for women in these representations, victimhood is petrified and fixed in time, and hence normalized. (ibid., p. 2013)

In 2019, another hashtag movement called #SusmaBitsin (#DontBeQuietSoThatItEnds) started as women in the film and television industries started posting their experiences and calling out the perpetrators of their abuse. The movement sparked a lot of media attention as most of the people who spoke out, as well as most of the perpetrators, were public figures. However, the movement stayed exclusive to the film and television industries and did not involve other women who shared similar experiences.

One year later, the hashtag #UykularınızKaçsın (#MayYouBeRestlessInYourSleep) emerged. Here, women called out the writer Hasan Ali Toptaş and shared their experiences of being abused by him. For a short time period, the hashtag became a space where other survivors also started to share their experiences and calling out perpetrators. One of the important names that were called out during that time was that of another writer called İbrahim Çolak. On 11.12.2020, following the accusations, İbrahim Çolak committed suicide. This incident created a lot of backlash on the #UykularınızKaçsın. Many hashtags emerged, putting the blame on women participating in the movement and arguing that they went too far.

In one of our interviews, Melis shared how they perceived the hashtag movements against sexual violence:

> #MeToo came to Turkey as *ifşa[4]*. I mean #MeToo is a movement of *ifşa* anyway but it is also more than that. And it didn't come like that. It never became a movement where you can share your story and people listen. It was only important if you called out a name. I find it scary that it is understood and implemented like that. The bigger the name the more worth is given to you and your story. (Interview with Melis 06.05.2022, Zoom, Translated from Turkish)

The movements lacked inclusivity and they only became big if the survivors or the perpetrators were public figures. When the discourses from social media *spilled over* to mainstream media, they were appropriated by political figures and the voices of survivors rarely made it to the hegemonial public sphere.

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[4] The word can be described as making something forbidden public, calling out, exposing. In the context of sexual violence, it is usually used for making the experience public by also calling out the perpetrator.

The next chapter is dedicated to Melis' activist work in their Instagram account @iyileşmeçizimleri (Drawings of Healing). I will tackle the questions of how Melis understand resistance in their own work and what kinds of opportunities and limitations using Instagram as a way of making it to the public brings up for them.

5. @iyileşmeçizimleri

Melis posted on their own experience of sexual violence for the first time when they were fourteen. The first post was on an online blog which was only open for people who identify as women. After the initial post, they moved on to posting on Facebook and Twitter from their personal account.

In 2020, during the pandemic, Melis opened up an Instagram account for their drawings on the healing process as a survivor of sexual violence. Their first post was a drawing with the sentence "Believe the survivor."

Figure 4: Screenshot, Post from 25.08.2020

In the first drawing it says "Believe the survivor.", two women-aligned people are standing and holding hands. I have never experienced something like that. I was crying when I was drawing it. Like, why don't I have this? But then I drew those, started posting and there were suddenly many people. They also don't get the solidarity. They also cannot talk because there is no space to talk. Even if you want to talk you cannot. I never thought that from a place of "I am alone, we are alone and we will stay alone", something that unifying could happen. I couldn't have thought that. That makes me very happy and every message I receive to @iyileşmeçizimleri is very precious to me. I draw so that we can talk. (Interview with Melis, 06.05.2022, Zoom, Translated from Turkish)

Melis frames their work on Instagram as an act of resistance and identifies as an activist. For them, resistance means "refusing and not accepting the given situation". This starts by not accepting the already existing discourses on sexual violence and insisting that survivors should be given voice in those discussions:

> Survivors speaking for themselves can change something because the fact that other people talk so much for the survivors is the reason for as well as the result of survivors not being able to talk. The more you speak as the subject, the more alternative discourses there will be. [...] Of course it is also important what kind of a talking it is. Telling your own story can do a lot. But there is also more you can do than only telling your own experience. For example, standing up and saying "I don't agree with what you are saying as a politician. I don't find what you say as an expert ok. You have to listen to me because I went through it" is also very important. (Interview with Melis, 06.05.2022, Zoom, Translated from Turkish)

During our interviews, we discovered three different modes of resistance in Melis' work on sexual violence: Resisting how survivors are talked about and talked to (these two modes are put together as they are very intertwined), solidarity of survivors as resistance and

grieving as resistance. In the following sections, I will be addressing those aspects one by one:

5.1. The Three Modes of Resistance in Melis´ Work

As mentioned above, the first mode of resistance we identified in Melis' work was "resisting how survivors are talked about and talked to". Starting with their first post, Melis emphasized the importance of believing and supporting survivors, opening up spaces for healing and using considerate language when talking about the abuse someone else went through. In a series of five posts, they highlighted important points to take into consideration when talking about sexual violence:

Figure 5: Screenshot, Post from 16.08.2021

Figure 6: Screenshot from 31.08.2021

Figure 7: Screenshot from 06.09.2021

Figure 8: Screenshot from 13.09.2021

Figure 9:Screenshot from 20.09.2021

A very important issue for Melis that they mentioned in their drawings many times was that childhood sexual abuse counts as sexual abuse even when the perpetrator is also underaged. This topic had caused for many problems and discussions when Melis was seeking support in feminist organisations. Melis also tried to make people aware of their positionality and boundaries when talking about others experiences of sexual violence with posts like: "It's not my place to comment on the severity of that another person went through.", "I know my limits about issues that I am not the subject of", "I don't expose the survivor to the perpetrator and information about them unless the survivor asks for it" and "I don't romanticize trauma."

Melis also opposes the framing of survivors as a very vulnerable population that can get triggered anytime by anything as it potentially takes away agency from the survivors.

Survivors get treated like porcelain dolls. What people understand as not harming the survivors isn't understanding and learning how to be there for survivors, opening up space for them and building solidarity. What they understand as not harming the survivors is "let's not talk about it". Even the women's rights movement does that. (Interview with Melis, 06.05.2022, Zoom, Translated from Turkish)

Instead, Melis encourages an approach that does not presume to fix the vulnerabilities to the survivors. With several drawings, they show that the healing process is very individual and solidarity can only happen when boundaries and needs are negotiated for every specific case.

The second mode of resistance we identified in Melis' work was "solidarity of survivors as resistance". Here, Melis emphasizes the importance of connectivity for the healing process and highlights that survivors do not have to be alone.

Figure 11: Screenshot, Post from 20.03.2022

Figure 10: Screenshot, Post from 15.04.2021

It is resistance when survivors come together because you don't just resist something outside of you. On the contrary, what you do as a survivor is much more resisting what that thing has planted inside of you. You also resist what it has planted in others who went through similar experiences. It means, you resist to the shame inside of you and others resist to the shame inside of them, and then you can resist to the shame inside of each other and maybe to the feelings of guilt, hatred and anger too. This is very precious. It is definitely not less valuable than resisting to an enemy outside. We bear witness to the experiences of violence of each other. (Interview with Melis, 06.05.2022, Zoom, Translated from Turkish)

Melis underlines the meaning and importance of coming together as survivors in several posts and sees great potential in it. They also try to get into interaction with the survivors within their followers by asking them to share their experiences on healing, talking about the abuse and their needs when coping with the effects of sexual violence.

The third mode of resistance we identified was "grieving as resistance". Melis has several drawings on grieving, hurting and crying in their Instagram account. Those drawings show grief as a natural and important part of the healing process.

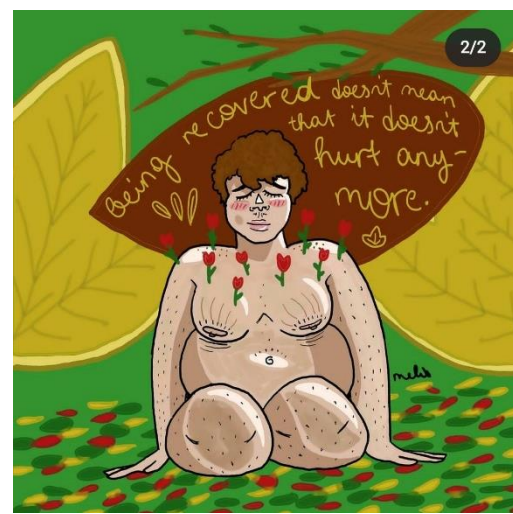Figure 13: Screenshot, Post from 28.12.2021

Figure 12: Screenshot, Post from 27.09.2021

All of the three modes of resistance that we have distinguished need a platform of communication to be visible. Melis uses Instagram to share their message. The platform comes with several possibilities, but it also it limits their work in different ways.

5.2. Possibilities and Limitations

When Melis decided on sharing their drawings, they chose Instagram because of the suitability of its platform architecture for visuals. Within two years, the account gathered more than twelve thousand followers. Melis also regularly posts Instagram stories and interacts with their followers.

However, being on Instagram also means that algorithms decide on how visible Melis' posts are, as the platform uses algorithmic content moderation (Gibbs et al., 2015). How those algorithms work and what kind of posts are prioritized is unknown as the company refuses to share information about that (Joseph 2019). In our interview, Melis stated that the visibility of their posts dropped drastically and even their followers do not see the posts on their feeds as long as they do not go to Melis' account specifically to look at the posts:

> I think I cannot open up enough space because of the platform I use. On Instagram; the algorithms are in a very bad state right now. They are not showing many posts to the users or they show it differently. My posts are seen by way less people than before. That also applies for other pages I follow. That is very limiting. Especially the pages on sexuality of women-aligned people get censured a lot, sometimes even closed. (Interview with Melis, 06.05.2022, Zoom, Translated from Turkish)

What Melis describes in this quote indicates a *shadow ban*. When *shadow banned,* the content does not get removed from Instagram, but it is strategically hidden from users. This strategy removes the content from Instagram's explore page, and even the followers do not see the content on their feed. Joseph (2019) argues that content on sexuality and marginalized peoples' bodies particularly gets *shadow banned* on Instagram. However, it is not possible to be certain that an account is *shadow banned*, as Instagram does not share any information on that strategy.

Here, it is possible to argue that while opening up a space for Melis to share their messages, Instagram also acts as a suppresser with its untransparent content moderation strategies.

6. Discussion of the findings

This chapter discusses how the findings can be interpreted through the lens of the theories I presented in my second chapter.

Following Fraser (1990), I locate Melis' activist work within the realm of *subaltern counterpublics* as they strive to create alternative discourses to those in the *hegemonial public sphere.* By carrying the topics of s*exuality* and *sexual violence* into the public sphere, they also challenge the patriarchal distinction between public and private.

To make it into the public sphere, Melis relies on social media platforms that also shape their narrative through *platform vernaculars* and *platform architectures*. The degree of the visibility Melis can have depends on the automated content moderation system of Instagram. The reliance on Instagram creates a *infrastructural vulnerability,* which Butler (2016) puts in the category of *bodily vulnerabilities.*

The act of going public with the own experiences of sexual violence can be seen as mobilizing vulnerabilities to point out to the oppressive systems that create them and can therefore be framed as an act of resistance following Butler (Ibid.), but the act of going public also creates new vulnerabilities.

7. Conclusion

In my thesis, I asked the question of how a young activist in Istanbul position themselves in the slippery slope between political oppression, taboos in the hegemonial public discourse and affordances of social media algorithms, and if they understand their work as an act of resistance. I came to the conclusion that Melis frames their work as

resistance and focuses on three modes of resistance in their work. Those are: resisting how survivors are talked to and talked about, solidarity as resistance and grieving as an act of resistance. Melis aims to create alternative narratives to those in the *hegemonial public sphere* and uses Instagram to make their counter discourses visible.

Judith Butler's account on *vulnerability* and *resistance* opens up a fruitful ground to understand Melis' activist work as Melis mobilizes vulnerabilities caused by oppressive systems when going into the public sphere. The dependency on social media platforms and their algorithmic content moderation systems create a new type of vulnerability, which can be categorized as an infrastructural vulnerability. Since Instagram does not share transparent information on how algorithmic content moderation works, further research focusing on case studies is needed to discover patterns in activists' experiences on social media.

Melis' case shows that strategies and infrastructures are needed to support survivors when they are going online with their stories. To be able to develop those strategies and infrastructures, more research focused on survivors' needs and experiences is needed.

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Interview Transcripts in Turkish

MeToo Türkiye'ye ifşa olarak geldi. Zaten MeToo bir ifşa hareketi ama sadece ifşa hareketi değil. İfşalamadan hikayeni anlattığın bir hareket de aynı zamanda. Ve bu şekilde gelmedi. Oturup hikayeni anlattığın ve insanların dinlediği bir şey olmadı. Eğer isim veriyorsan önemli bir şey oldu. Bu ürkütücü bir şey bence bunun bu şekilde anlaşılması ve bu şekilde işlemesi. Ve işte verdiğin isim ne kadar önemliyse o kadar değer görüyorsun ve anlattığın şey de o kadar değer görüyor.

Ilk çizimimde 'Hayatta kalana inan.' Yazıyor, iki kadın okunan insan el ele tutuşmuş ayakta duruyorlar. Ve ben hiç böyle bir şey yaşamadım. Ve böyle ağlaya ağlaya falan yaptığım bir şeydi bu benim için. Çünkü işte böyle bende neden yok falan gibi. Ama sonra bunları çizdim ve insanlarla paylaşmaya başladım ve birsürü insan vardı ve onlarla da kimse dayanışmıyor, onlar da konuşamıyorlar çünkü konuşacak yer yok, konuşmak istesen de konuşamıyorsun. Ve bu kadar tek başımayım, tek başımızayız ve tek başımıza olucazdan bu kadar birleştirici bir şey çıkacağını düşünmemiştim. Bunu düşünemezdim. Ve bu beni çok mutlu eden bir şey. O yüzden iyileşme çizimlerine gelen her mesaj çok benim için inanılmaz önemli. Birbiriyle konuşabilmemiz için çiziyorum.

Hayatta kalanların kendileri için konuşması bir şey değiştirir çünkü o insanların bu kadar konuşuyor olmasının sebebi hayatta kalanların konuşamamasını hem nedeni hem de sonucu. Özne olarak ne kadar konuşursan o konuda üretilen söylemin o kadar alternatifi olur. Bu bence uzmanların konuşmaları için de geçerli. Politikacılardan farklı sebepleri var. Ama bilimsel sebepler politik sebeplerden daha iyi değil bence. Sadece farklı. Tabii ki hayatta kalanlar yaten konuşuyo ama çok az konuşuyo. Bu yüzden konuştuğunda senin duyulma ihtimalin çok daha düşük, ve konuştuğunda duyulma ihtimalin çok daha düşük olduğu için de sen daha az konuşuyorsun. Ne kadar çok hayatta kalan konuşursa o kadar çok hayatta kalan olarak duyulma ihtimalin artar. Nasıl bir konuşmak olduğu da önemli bence. Kendi hikayeni anlatmanın yapabileceği çok fazla şey var. Ama sadece hikayeni anlatmak dışında yapabileceğin de ço fazla şey var. Mesela bir hayatta kalan olarak ayağa kalkıp 'senin bir politikacı olarak söylediğin şeylere katılmıyorum. Senin bir uzman olarak söylrdiğin şeyler de okay değil. Beni dinlemeniz gerekiyor çünkü bunu ben yaşadım.' Demek de önemli.

Hayatta kalanlara porselen bebek muamelesi yapılıyor. İnsanların zarar vermemekten anladığı şey nasıl o kişi için orada olabilirim, nasıl o kişiye alan açarım, nasıl o kişiyle dayanışırımı anlamak öğrenmek olmuyor. İnsanların zarar vermemekten anladığı şey konuşmayalım oluyor. Ve bunu kadın hareketi de yapıyor.

Hayatta kalanların kendi içinde bir araya gelmesi de direniş çünkü sadece dışarıdaki bir şeye direnmiyorsun, sadece dışarıdaki bir düşmana direnmiyorsun ve yani aksine bir hayatta kalan olarak yaptığın şey dışarıdaki bir şeye direnmekten çok o şeyin kendi içine yerleştirdiklerine direnmek oluyor. O şeyin senin yaşadığını yaşamış başka insanların içine yerleştirdiklerine direnmek oluyor. Yani kendi içindeki utanca direniyorsun ve başkaları da kendi içindeki utanca direniyor ve birbirinizin içindeki utanca direnebiliyorsunuz ve suçluluğu ve nefreti ve öfkeyi bir yerde. Ve mesela bu çok kıymetli bir şey. Asla dışarıdaki bir düşmana direnmekten daha değersiz bir şey değil. Biz birbirimizin yaşadığı şiddetin tanığıyız.

Bence kullandığım platformdan dolayı yeterince alan açamıyorum. Instagram algoritmalar şu an bayaa kötü durumdalar. Bir sürü şeyi insanlara göstermiyor, ya da farklı gösteriyor falan. Attığım postları eskisine göre çok daha az insan görüyor ve bu takip ettiğim diğer sayfalar için de geçerli. [...] Bu çok kısıtlayıcı bir şey. Özellikle kadın okunan insan cinselliğine dair sayfalar çok fazla sansüre uğruyor, kapatılıyorlar da.

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