

Rap Music as Resistance and Its Limits, Two Diverging Cases: Sulukule and Bağcılar Rap

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Abstract

In the city of Istanbul, where problems such as poverty, discrimination and exclusion are widespread, young people who live in poorer communities use rap music as an instrument of resistance and as a tool for expressing frustration towards their socio-economic exclusion. In two neighborhoods, Sulukule and Bağcılar, young people who socialize around rap music reflect both the reality of these neighborhoods and their struggle against social stigmatization. Rappers from these communities do not only sing about the local issues, but they also touch upon social inequality, justice, and freedom beyond their locality. Yet some rappers also try to disseminate their arts through social media, earn money, and become famous. As a result, their lyrics become more moderate. Indeed, the discourse of Bağcılar rappers who prefer to “amateurishly” publish their works on social media – unlike Sulukule rappers who release professionally produced albums – becomes more moderate in terms of critique and resistance, as the competitive market logic dominates their logic when writing new songs.

Introduction

In the last few years, rap music in Turkey has come to the fore in a politically significant form. The fact that famous rappers such as Ezhel, Khontkar, and Young Bego, among many others, were imprisoned for their provocative music increased the political significance of rap music in Turkey. A recent song called “Susamam,” by 14 different rappers and groups, has gained much attention, as it was purely oppositional and politically straightforward. However, this is not the whole story. In the city of Istanbul, where problems such as poverty, discrimination, and exclusion are widespread – all the result of neoliberal urbanization – young people who live in poorer communities have used rap music as an instrument of resistance and as a tool for expressing frustration towards their socio-economic exclusion. In two neighborhoods, Sulukule and Bağcılar, young people who socialize around rap music reflect both the reality of these neighborhoods and their struggle against

social stigmatization. Rappers from these communities do not only sing about local issues, but they also touch upon social inequality, justice and freedom beyond their locality. Yet some rappers also try to disseminate their arts through social media, earn money, and become famous. As a result, their lyrics become more moderate. Indeed, the discourse of Bağcılar rappers who prefer to “amateurishly” publish their works on social media – unlike Sulukule rappers who release professionally produced albums – becomes more moderate in terms of critique and resistance as the competitive market logic dominates their logic when writing new songs. So, what are the limits of opposition through rap music? Why do some rappers become more moderate over time while some others preserve their critical language? These are the questions that this article addresses.

After a brief examination of rap music in Istanbul and how it is used to express dissent and resistance to social and economic inequality, discrimination and exclusion, this article shows the different trajectories of rappers in Istanbul in terms of oppositional culture as their art and music become more mainstream over time. Specifically, it compares the cases of two neighborhoods, Sulukule and Bağcılar, to explore the experiences and realities rappers experience these communities. In order to do so, I use semi-structured interviews, which provide a better understanding of the problems that rappers face firsthand, establish a connection between their song lyrics and their experiences, and help with understanding the complex relations within both neighborhoods and among rappers, CD producers, and other members of their community. I conducted twelve interviews over six months of fieldwork. Furthermore, I draw from other interviews that rappers had with other media outlets. In addition, the interpretive method is used to analyze the lyrics of songs by rappers. More than 40 songs by rappers from both Sulukule and Bağcılar are examined. By critically examining the discourse, concepts, and words in the songs, this article aims to capture how politically meaningful concepts such as exclusion, poverty, injustice, discrimination, and stigmatization are treated.

Rap as a Form of Resistance

Rap music emerged in the mid-1960s in the United States and gained popularity as a genre of music that allowed young African Americans to voice their experiences with racism, poverty, and violence (Sullivan, 2003). It is a genre that is associated with socially stigmatized groups and is now seen as a tool for minority groups to express their frustration in the face of discrimination. With all its aspects of identity construction, expression of grievances, production of subculture and resistance, rap music is consequently depicted as a distinct form of art in its relations to politics and society.

Scholars who study rap music in relation to politics and society highlight how rappers observe, interpret and reflect upon the issues surrounding them and explore how rap music is used to express dissent and show resistance (Scott, 1990; Rose, 2004; Stuckey, 2013). For Librado, rap music can be used as a means of making the voice of disadvantaged groups heard and also creates a space for young people to critically evaluate their own political, social and economic reality (Librado, 2010). While Smitherman (2000) and Kaya (2002) view rappers as storytellers and historians who lead the discussion of the complexities of African-American life. More specifically, Kaya sees rap music as a mirror and rappers as contemporary minstrels. As Kaya also observes, Rose (2004) claims that rap music may be used as a counter-hegemonic power because it gives voice to the powerless.

Despite the fact that rap is a genre that came to existence in the U.S of the 60s, it would not be wrong to argue that the interaction of politics and rap music is not bound to this particular context. There are many studies which nicely show that in many different contexts, rap music served as an instrument of resistance and critique to the social and political order. For example, Osumare (2007) and Charry (2012) claim that rappers in Africa, especially in Senegal try to mobilize people by their songs and participate in the street protests to criticize political leaders. Librado (2010) is another scholar who recognizes rap music as an instrument of resistance outside of the U.S. He argues that the city of El Alto, Bolivia, which is characterized by poverty, exclusion, and racism, witnesses an appropriation of rap in such way that music reflects political, social and economic problems and provides a way of resistance for youth (Librado, 2010). As he suggests, the exhaustion brought by neoliberalism in Bolivia are shown through rap music. Rappers try to protest against the state policies which deepen economic inequalities and demand an equal right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996; Harvey, 2008). In a similar vein, as Chang states Young rappers from Palestine try to give voice to the youth's political sufferings (Chang, 2007). All in all, rap, as a universal genre, is used for expressing local identities and frustrations in many different contexts. He says;

“Rap music has long been considered a form of resistance against authority. Boosted by the commercialization of the music industry, that message has proven its appeal to youth all around the world. Now, from Shanghai to Nairobi to São Paulo, hip-hop is evolving into a truly global art of communication” (Chang, 2007:1).

The moderation of rap lyrics with regards to their social critique has also been investigated in the literature. For instance, Lusane (1993) successfully points out that rap music was also a way of

making money for poor black Americans. As it does not require significant monetary investment and in some cases results in large profits, many young African Americans saw it as a way to earn money and alleviate their poverty. In addition, some rappers took their art not only as a tool for making money, but also as an instrument of integration by gaining a popular status. Yet, she also suggests that by integrating into the market economy and becoming more mainstream, rap music also decreased its level of critique and became more moderate.

Representations of blacks and ghetto have also been commodified. As Hart (2009) claims, hip-hop music became related more to exploitation than representation of realities. The representation of blackness replaced the artistic elements in the music. In other words, in order black rappers to be successful in the market, they had to agree with and meet the demands of record firms wherein the representations that the culture industry draws from the negative Black imaginations bolsters the pejorative history of blackness and racism (Rose, 2003). Furthermore, in her analysis Blair (1993) claims that rap music has passed into the stage of mass production and hence producers try to transform rap music into a form which can attract more focus in the market. While many black young people see rap music as a way to get rid of their problems or at least as a tool to have a voice, most of the producers do not know about the subculture wherein the hip-hop culture is originated nor do they pay attention to it but only put emphasis on the profitability of the product. Hence the political meaning of rap culture is replaced by the elements of entertainment.

Although it has been noted that the integration into market economy and mass consumption has a pejorative impact on political aspect of cultural products, the role of social media has not been deeply highlighted. Social media is mostly regarded as a relatively autonomous space in which people can freely interact and transfer thought and information. Yet, its influence on the political aspect of music is questionable. It is widely recognized that social media is effective in mobilizing struggles, building networks, facilitating production via tutorials and production technologies available online (i.e. Titifanue et al., 2016; Webb-Gannon & Webb, 2019). However, in some cases, along with several advantages that the medium of internet offers to artists, it poses particular challenges to the creativity and freedom. For example, as Moore (2013) shows, although internet provides access to a wider audience and artists in an affordable and easy way, internet regulations, surveillance and censorship in the particular context of Indonesia hinder artistic production and freedom. In a similar manner, this article also shows that it may counterintuitively have a negative impact on the criticism of cultural products.

Discrimination in Sulukule and Bağcılar

As a result of globalization, neoliberal policies, and increased social mobility, Istanbul has experienced significant structural economic change that has caused social and economic exclusion for some communities – these issues are echoed in rap music. While some ethnically and culturally distinct groups that have migrated to Istanbul with the hope of social and economic mobility or have remained in the inner city for a long time face economic hardship, they are also the subject of discursive and social exclusion. Thus, poverty and discrimination against different groups of people is common in several districts of the city (Yilmaz, 2009). In places like Sulukule and Bağcılar, both class and ethnicity constitute different sources of exclusion and/or subordination. While people in Sulukule are excluded as a consequence of their Romani identity, they face economic hardship as well. Historical discrimination against Roma in Turkey and the world mirrors the social stigmatization they encounter and underline the state's economic meddling in the district. Notably in the 1990s, one of the most important economic sources of Romani citizens in Sulukule, the entertainment houses where they performed art and music, were labeled as brothels and shut down by the state (Yilmaz, 2009).

Another important factor in Sulukule that increased the depredation of the Romani community is the urban renewal project. Poor people who had settled in Sulukule – located in the center of Istanbul – were evicted from their homes. As a consequence, they were sent to the outskirts of the city. The neighborhood was rebuilt with luxurious and expensive houses that none of Sulukule's original inhabitants could afford to buy. This event triggered urban, Romani activism in the area. Therefore, young people in the area who experienced such exclusion and poverty and were exposed to seeing the deconstruction of their homes began to socialize around their common interest in hip-hop culture, and they used it to voice their frustration towards these developments.

In Bağcılar, too, young people experience discrimination and poverty. They are also excluded on the basis of ethnicity and class, and even viewed by some with contempt. People in this neighborhood are often poor, generally lack education, and work in the lower branches of the service sector (Yaman, 2013). In addition, entangled with Kurdish identity, the subcultural values in Bağcılar are regarded as the sources of stigmatization. Furthermore, drug addiction in this community is a major problem. It is not only a direct problem from which youth in Bağcılar suffer but also a component through which they are labeled as defective or immoral. All in all, it is in this context that young people who feel trapped in their neighborhoods and experience stigmatization, poverty and discrimination identified rap music as an instrument to voice dissent and resistance.

Resistance via Rap in Sulukule and Bağcılar

The emergence of Turkish rap dates back to 1995 when the first Turkish rap group called "Cartel" came into existence in Germany (Diessel, 2001). More rappers especially in Germany followed Cartel after the huge success they showed in the music industry. For the analysis of rappers from this generation, Kaya (2002) uses the framework "glocalism". He states that Turkish rappers conduct an identity politics by emphasizing their authenticity in the age of glocalism, that is to say they use hip-hop culture which is a universal tool of resistance to express discrimination, criminalization and German supremacy from which they suffer in their local context. Both Kaya and Diessel claim that rap music in Germany was against German nationalism, yet they also contend that Turkish rappers' songs had nationalistic features at a time when the nationalism in Turkey was on the rise. Hence, groups such as Cartel were quite welcome in Turkey. Even, the right-wing nationalist party-MHP- wanted to incorporate them into their own political propaganda. As Kaya states, Cartel quickly turned into one of the major pillars of Turkish nationalism. In that way, Turkish rap nationalism was directly carried into Turkish context from Germany by the hands of right-wing forces in Turkey. Çınar contends that Turkish rap which was born in Germany against nationalism was turned into a tool for Turkish nationalism against the Kurdish minority in Turkey (Çınar, 1999).

Interestingly enough, in 1996, Cartel's first album was banned by the then Turkish government, because they found the manner that their music talks to poor people "threatening to the state ideology of socialism." (Mallett, 2012). After that, there became a retreat in Turkish rap until the 2000s when Nefret (Hatred) started rapping in Istanbul. Yet, as Mallett suggests nationalistic lyrics and themes were absent in their songs and instead subjects such as drug abuse and smoking, which are closer to gangsta rap as well as hatred for Islam, culture, and Istanbul were present in their music. After rap music's remarkable success in the early 2000s in Turkey, especially under the leadership of rappers such as Sagopa Kajmer and Ceza, it remained relatively quiet in the following years.

With ups and downs in its popularity over the decades, rap music in Turkey recently has come to the fore again, yet this time with a very politicized agenda different than nationalism. Famous rappers touched upon social and political matters in their songs. In fact, 14 of these well known rap artists made a 15 minute-long song in 2019 in which they reflected their criticisms in a wide range of issues such as education, patriarchy, corruption and justice. This song reached almost 50 millions views in one year on YouTube.ⁱ Although this has been the most obvious manifestation of rappers' involvement in social and political matters, it was already a widespread phenomenon. Many rap artists including those in Sulukule and Bağcılar have already been using music "as a social

critique” (Dyson, 2010). For instance, in her article in which she examines a song called “Wonderland” by Tahribad-I Isyan (Revolt’s Destruction) -a rap group from Sulukule, Schoon argues that rappers use rap music for urban and identity politics. She suggests that rappers do not only expose their anger and frustration to the urban renewal project that destroyed their neighborhood, but also try to expose the exclusion, poverty and discrimination that Romas face in Istanbul (Schoon, 2014). Besides, rappers who use music as a social critique including artists in Sulukule and Bağcılar have been able to reach a vast audience thanks to social media. Some of the songs made by rappers in Bağcılar have more than 200 millions of views on YouTube.ⁱⁱ Besides, some rappers also participated in many city events and concerts sharing stage with crucial figures in music world such as Şebnem Ferah, Kenan Doğulu and Kardeş Türküler.ⁱⁱⁱ Even, rappers from Sulukule took the stage in a TEDx organization after presentation of a documentary about them.^{iv} All in all, it was not a tiny phenomenon that local artists rap about their problems in their neighborhoods, but a widely recognized and appreciated phenomenon which has echoes in social and political spheres.

Having provided a brief history of Turkish rap music, now I would like to shed light on how rappers use rap music as a tool of resistance. It is widely stated in the literature (i.e. Smitherman 2000, Kaya 2002, Librado 2010) that rappers aim to reflect the actual problems in a society, give a voice to suppressed or excluded groups and to make an impact on people’s lives. Accordingly, one of the most common themes in rappers’ views on hip-hop is that it creates a space for those who cannot participate in politics or society to express their grievances. This philosophy of rap, so to speak, is particularly applicable in the Sulukule and Bağcılar cases as well. For example, Dinçer from Bağcılar says “Everyone listens to this. There are so many ‘small’ people in the society. There are people forgotten on one side. I opened this studio to let people know that they are not forgotten.” Although for some rap music was initially just for fun, as they get more engaged in the philosophy of hip-hop, they start to critically express the economic, social and political problems which surround them. Tahribad-I Isyan members state that as they understood the hip-hop culture better, they began to write more provocative and meaningful lyrics.^v In the following song verse, one can see how urban renewal is among the biggest concerns that occupies the thought of people in Sulukule and how it is treated in rap music. In *Wonderland* Asil Slang says:

“Yo! My house will also be destroyed
Sulukule is now a bourgeois place
Time has changed, who sees Romas badly

is not called Racist, but Mustafa
You name it as the urban transformation
This is actually the collapse of this city”^{vivii}

In these words, Asil explains both the gentrification of Sulukule and discrimination towards Romani identity in Istanbul. These lyrics underscore how rap music can not only provide an opportunity for rappers to express themselves, as Asil does in this song, but also how it allows these artists to critically examine their own realities. In other words, Sulukule and Bağcılar rappers reflect the contextual situation and conditions of their communities. They explain everyday life in their neighborhoods and try to show the difficult aspects of life in the city. For example, Dinçer says; “We are the only rappers who make jokes about drugs in the world. I sat with hash heads and glue-sniffers. I even gave them roles in my clips. These are not bad people. They just need some support.” They also claim that the stigmatization that they experience is actually due to unequal distribution of wealth in Istanbul. In his song called *Farklı Semtin Çocukları*, Heijan stresses the exclusion and stigmatization that they face in such a cosmopolitan and competitive megacity:

“This city is a land of gold
For everyone except us
Why are we always in the role of guilty?
Why are the handcuffs always on our arms?
Istanbul has been paradise for you
You do not know this place, for me
You do not hear the sounds of the night
You do not see us in secluded corners”^{viii}

Most of the rappers state that through rap music they want to bring significant change to their neighborhood, in particular, or to the country and world in general. Rap is not only made for the sake of music, but also for achieving transformation on issues such as discrimination, poverty and exclusion which many inhabitants of Istanbul face. Tahribad-I Isyan members say “Rap music serves to break the limits of the perception in people's minds, and we love to show the reality to those who will not like that the truth will be revealed.” Rappers do not confine themselves to addressing issues only related to Sulukule, Roma, or their own lives. They also touch upon the matters from which people in Turkey suffer or broader political issues. For example, Tahribad-I Isyan criticizes state

officials through contemporary events in another song called *Ölene Kadar*. In 2014, 301 mine workers were killed in an accident in Soma (Çelik, 2015), and they touch upon this in their song:

“Ministers will not go down the ground like a miner
Instead of helping them, they look at dead bodies
Money became the common interest of all people
Children wait for the worker fathers at home
While ministers only care about their political positions”^{ix}

By rapping, young people who do not have an equal opportunity to participate in socio-political debate find the chance to express themselves. That is to say they increase society's awareness of their plight, as they sing about the difficulties they face. These young people who get engaged in hip-hop culture also start to reflect critically upon their own society and reality, and they echo these concerns in their song lyrics. All in all, for rappers in Sulukule and Bağcılar, rap music is a means of having a voice and creating a change and thus, becomes a tool of resistance.

Integration of Rap Music to the Market and Softening in Critique

As mentioned before, it has commonly argued that as rap music gets integrated into the market and becomes more mainstream, the intensity of critical reflection and dissent declines. Briefly, the main reason why rap music becomes more moderate in its lyrics is that rappers start to see rap music as a way to make money, instead of a platform to express their political frustrations. In other words, as they become more aware of market logic, their art turns into a commodity which they regard as a way of increasing status by meeting the expectations of rational consumer society. It can also be argued that consumers are less inclined to enjoy, and thus purchase music that is too politically provocative. Consequently, rappers modify their realities and experiences in their song lyrics in order to create what they consider to be more culturally representative products. As a result, the philosophy and consciousness of hip-hop and rappers are eliminated by the mainstream industry.

Thus, I also argue that unlike Sulukule hip-hop, Bağcılar rap music, as it became much more market oriented, lost its characteristics of critique and resistance. Yet, that is not to say that in these cases professionalism necessarily led to decline in social critique. Neither did the so-called free social media help rappers to remain critical.

In 2017, Tahribad-1 Isyan released their first and only album. They started to work with professional production companies and sought help from professional music organizations. They

earned the opportunity to participate in many concerts and TV programs. Some rappers from Bağcılar, especially Heijan, also became very famous in contemporary Turkish music. Their songs reached a record number of views on YouTube and became some of the most popular songs in clubs. Yet, one must ask: how is it possible that while these two Bağcılar artists, who produce less politically charged lyrics, became much more famous in Turkey with a wider public appeal, than the Sulukule rappers who maintained their critical perspective?

There are two important reasons that explain this difference. The first and foremost difference between these two hip-hop cultures is that the rappers in Sulukule are more engaged in social activism. While rap culture in Sulukule is influenced and empowered by external social activism, this is not the case in Bağcılar. Secondly, the integration of these two rap cultures into the mainstream market is very different. Though rappers from Sulukule try to use more professional mediums to perform rap music, Bağcılar rappers mostly use social media to spread and popularize their music. Although one might expect Sulukule rappers to be more in step with the imperatives of market as a result of the professionalism with which they produce their songs, Bağcılar rappers have adapted to the competitive market logic with greater success.

Urban and Roma Activism and Rap Music as Solidarity in Sulukule

In her article, Schoon (2016) suggests that in Sulukule, the formation of resistance towards urban renewal emerges both from global “right to the city” movements and local Roma activism and consciousness. For her, this is a case where various actors, specifically global and local forces, have influenced the community’s activism. Somersan and Schoroeder (2007) also claim that international Roma activist groups, NGOs, and local activists engaged in a hegemonic struggle against state.

Indeed, around the world there has been support for activists in Sulukule. For example, the famous singer Manu Chao gave one of his concerts in France with a t-shirt that read “Sulukule will not keep quiet” (Manu Chao'dan Sulukule'ye destek, 2008). Similarly, Sezen Aksu, a very popular Turkish singer, showed her support by visiting the district (Sezen Aksu'dan Sulukule'ye 'göbekli' destek, 2008). Kardeş Türküler, a famous Turkish band, performed a duet with Tahribad-I Isyan and helped them to raise their popular platform (Kardeş Türküler'in 'Barış' Çılgılığı, 2014). In addition, a well-known German-Turkish rapper, Sultan Tunç, who is also a sociologist by training, held workshops in Sulukule for children to teach them rap music. He even gave some of them the opportunity to be on the stage with him or to release their songs. Such events are not only important to maintain resistance and social critique by supporters, but it is also important in the establishment of an understanding of art that always bears the characteristics of civil resistance. By being both

supported by and socializing with important artists, rappers from Sulukule feature critique and rebellion in their songs lyrics. However, it is not only support from artists but also from activists that nurtured resistance in Sulukule. As Yılmaz (2009) states, there have been over 15 actors, including international and local non-governmental organizations, that work in Sulukule. The reason why there is such intense activism is the grievances born out of urban renewal projects and the overlapping politics of ethnicity, poverty, and social exclusion. Indeed, that there were such developments that underline the pervasiveness of discrimination and exclusion in Sulukule was central to keeping this worldview alive in the minds of local residents, and it influenced the local activism of both NGOs and rappers. Activism by external actors in Sulukule was especially important for the establishment of a culture of resistance in the district. As Cem Avcı says;

“The urban transformation in 2006 was initiated by a decree. Against this situation, there was not much resistance from the Romani people. This occurred because they don’t have any collective organizational culture. It also happened because throughout history, they had to hide their identity. Resistance to the police and the state started with the establishment of the Sulukule Platform.”

Rappers also suggest that activism in Sulukule was important in the formation of their social and political consciousness. They say that thanks to their “brothers” and “sisters” who tried to socialize them through art, they developed an awareness of their social and economic circumstances. In addition, activists also tried to find spaces for them to perform their music.^x These developments are supported by V.Z. from Tahribad-I Isyan when he says the following about one of the activists in Sulukule and the founders of Sulukule Children Art Workshop, Funda Oral;

“She made us conscious when writing our words. We were children and we did not know what we were doing. She taught us what we did was, what rap is. We learned later that rap is a rebellion. The ones in trouble the neighborhood started running to us. "They are firing their assistants in ITU", we were helping them. There was an earthquake in Van, we went there. We went to Suruc. We started to tell you everything on we could touch and see. Rap became our weapon.” (Cinmen, 2017).

As they are socialized in these spaces, they also attempted to create opportunities for younger generations. Tahribat-I Isyan conducts workshops for children and visits children prisons and detention houses. They explain why they do this as follows;

“Broadly, we give education to 'children at risk'. For children who are stuck where they are, who think that the world is only their own neighborhood and those for whom there is no risk of being dragged into evil. We started these things first with the children in our neighborhood. Now we continue with refugees, Roma, Kurds and children with difficulties.”

Rappers from Teşkilat-I Isyan also state the same understanding. Ismail, another member of Teşkilat-I Isyan says; “Those who see us are enthusiastic, and they say “we will be like you”. We are helping them. Something like being transmitted from generation to generation. We have already learned rap music from Asil brothers.”

Hence, art, for rappers in Sulukule, is a way of creating awareness in youth and they believe that they can encourage positive change through rap music. That is why they do not confine themselves to performing rap music, but also teach the components of hip-hop culture to young people, thus creating a group political and social consciousness in Sulukule and other communities. Indeed, for them, rap music is not merely a way to make money. In fact, they state that, in the cause of their ideals, they refuse – and are denied – potentially lucrative opportunities. Notably, they admit that censorship is a major concern for them. The manager of Tahribat-I Isyan says that because of some of their lyrics, no TV channel will broadcast it, even though their music garners millions of views on the internet. Even on live TV programs, some verses in their songs are censored. Yet, although Sulukule rappers refuse to moderate their lyrics and tone, they can still find spaces to express themselves. For them it is important to perform rap in any place because it is a way to create group consciousness. They say;

“Censorship has been applied. We made every effort to say, without hesitation, what we wrote. Despite their censorship, we think that we convey what we want to say correctly. We should show our rebellion on such

platforms, because we are trying to raise awareness in ‘zombies’ (I assume they mean this metaphorically – if so, quotations should be used in English) that are bound to these platforms.”

They also state that despite having the opportunity to earn much more money, they prefer to perform in their own way (What do you mean to say here? Do they perform in front of smaller crowds? Do they not charge money for their concerts? Please explain) which creates some difficulties as well. For example, Asil says; “Sometimes we are hungry to keep our standing. But we have had a lot of spiritual gains.” (Cinmen, 2017). Similarly, V.Z. says;

“It is not easy. While our parents are working such as repairmen and waiting for us to support them, we turn our minds to the other side and focus on music. It's a bit disturbing to our conscience because we do not have such a luxury” (Cinmen, 2017).

Zen-G also states that this dilemma is not only problematic in material terms, but also for one’s mental well-being. He says;

“We've been having spiritual exhaustion lately. We started to take place in the environments on which we had not dreamed before. We had a chance to see the luxury lives. Şebnem Ferah congratulates us suddenly! Şeyma Subaşı is dancing in front of us. I feel good, but once you get out of there and go back to Sulukule. You're entering the neighborhood at 2:00. In the corner, Osman Abi asks, "Do you have 1 lira?" An hour ago, where were you, an hour later where? ... The spirit is disturbed.”

Overall, Sulukule rappers do not behave in accordance with the rationale of the competitive market or mainstream music culture. Instead, they try to act morally, if not idealistically. In contrast, I argue that Bağcılar rappers, unlike those in Sulukule, adapt a more competitive logic. As a consequence, their song lyrics are far less critical or provocative.

Rap Music on Social Media and Rap as Competition in Bağcılar

Rappers in Bağcılar almost always distribute their songs on social media, especially on YouTube. It is mainly because it is very fast and cheap, and it does not require any procedures or technical knowledge. For those who do not have the chance to work in studios or work with record companies, it is a significant advantage. In addition, their material is not censored on YouTube. Most importantly, YouTube pays anyone who posts a video a certain amount of money according to the number of views the video gets.

Thus, for rappers in Bağcılar, YouTube is perfect because they can say almost whatever they want and easily gain popular exposure online. In this case, rappers tend to make and arrange their own songs and clips on their own. Since they need to reach as high a number of views as possible in order to earn more money, a competition among rappers for online popularity has emerged. So, in a sense, the competitive logic of the market has begun to dominate this space. This circumstance is explained by rappers in Bağcılar as follows; “For example, I teach you a computer program, and you teach it to someone else. I teach him a rap, but he does not teach it to someone else. He wants to keep it to himself. He does not want you to improve.”

Dinçer states that producing a rap song requires certain technical knowledge, especially in music production software. Hence, as a matter of intellectual capital, rappers in Bağcılar do not wish to share their knowledge so that only they can produce songs of higher quality and earn profit. This issue of technology and programming experience is also explained by Yakup. He says;

“But we do not know how to do this, the program, we do not know anything. Nobody says anything. The man does not want to give us his secret. He's downloading his program; he does not show it to us. There is competition. I would not want to show it to other, too. There's a secret to this.”

Another important aspect of rap music scene in Bağcılar is to earn money by having high hit rates on YouTube. As YouTube pays certain amount of money to people who upload their videos on the website, young people in Bağcılar see this as a lucrative opportunity. For example, Yakup says;

“For example, Dinçer says he earns a lot. He's making \$ 1,000 a month. But we do not do it that much. So, for example, would you earn a lot if you have a shop that you open every 6 months? We get 100 liras a month or something. We had a song that hit 6-7 million and we got 2000 liras for it.”

Drawing on the idea of earning money from YouTube, rappers in Bağcılar speak of music that becomes popular online and refer to a “Çağatay Akman type of song”. Çağatay Akman is an 18-year-old rapper from Zeytinburnu who enjoyed a great success on YouTube with his song called *Gece Gölgenin Rahatına Bak*. His song garnered over more than 200 million of views on YouTube and, thus earned him a lot of money. Rappers in Bağcılar, too, want to make a song that becomes popular quickly. For them, this is one of the easiest ways of getting rich. Accordingly, Yakup explains his objectives in rap as follows;

“That's our goal now. Sezer has a project. It is a song similar to ‘Gece Gölgenin Rahatına Bak’. We will do it in an original studio, with the original camera. A catchy song, good sounding, attracting people. Like, when you are walking in the store the song catches you. We have that kind of a project.”

Dinçer also explains “Gece Gölgenin Rahatına Bak” style as follows;

“Now there's something like this. The club style is more popular. Because we have something like this; we dance like hustle and bustle. We also have ‘indigestion’. Three months later we forget. For example, ‘Gece Gölgenin Rahatına Bak’. Nobody remembers it three months later.”

Therefore, for many rappers in Bağcılar, as they see the opportunity of making money from songs posted to YouTube, the central reason to produce rap music changes from expressing grievances to improving their economic wellbeing. Indeed, Yaman observes that becoming wealthy is a primary objective for young people in Bağcılar. In his study, he finds out that for many young adults in Bağcılar, material wellbeing is among the most desired goals they possess. He states that the most common answer to the question of “What would you want to have in your life” references

material goods, such as cars and houses. Similarly, they see money as a precondition for happiness. Thus, for them, making easy money and getting rich immediately is very important (Yaman, 2013).

In addition to wealth generation, the lack of an environment in which a political culture that encourages social and political critique in hip-hop thrives has also played a role in the moderation of Bağcılar rap music. Unlike Sulukule, there is relatively little social and political activism in Bağcılar. As a consequence, young people in Bağcılar do not use their rap music as a tool of political expression or socialization, unlike their counterparts in Sulukule. As I demonstrated above, the music production in Bağcılar is monopolized, as it requires a certain level of technological know-how; thus, newcomers are seen as challengers. Furthermore, since there are few activists operating out of the district, again in contrast to Sulukule, young people in Bağcılar do not socialize within a critical discourse and political culture other than their own.

As the central reason of rap changes, the styles and the content of rap music in Bağcılar do so as well. Rappers try to produce songs that can attract more listeners. Instead of treating issues that reflect their personal lives or struggles, they prefer to produce songs for entertainment. For example, when I asked Furkan and Burak, young rappers from Bağcılar, whether there is a change in their songs after earning money, they say;

“Brother, it changed. They were talking about Bağcılar before. They now talk about everything. The words that they use also change. New Year's Eve or something... I mean, it's not anymore “This is Bağcılar, welcome to hell”. It is Ortakoy or Beşiktaş. He is trying to promote himself. I think he is trying to get popular and he became famous.”

They did not only start to write about issues outside of Bağcılar, but they also started to focus more on entertaining subjects. One way of doing this is to use popular topics, generally posted and spread on the internet, or to refer to celebrities. It can be observed that rappers in Bağcılar started to make videos of not only their songs, but parodies of famous topics and people in the hope that they may go “viral” and earn wide popularity online. For example, Heijan and his friends made a video that imitates a popular TV series called “İçerde” (Müge Nazlıcan, 2017). Similarly, when he showed me their videos, Dinçer also stated that they try to make references to famous people, including Nusret, who became well known all around the world as “Saltbae” with the particular manner in which he salts food.^{xi}

Similarly, as Dinçer explains, Bağcılar rappers try to gain popularity by “dissing” other people. A “dis” is a slang term that refers to a form of disrespect, and rappers use it to insult, make fun of or criticize other rappers. Dinçer says they diss Ceza, who is the most famous rapper in Turkey because he took a role in an advertisement. He says;

“Ceza sold himself to Didi (Icetea brand). What did we do to Didi? We made an advertisement. (He opens the song). We gave it to Didi, by saying "You are talking to the Ceza" they did not want it. We have dissed Ceza. Ceza did not leave Çaykur (The company that Ceza advertises). He is not the man of Didi. He is a rapper. Stupidly, he is playing in the commercial. (He shows the ad.) We dissed him for that stupid ad. What we said; “Didi what’s up? I am fine.” Now we will troll it. We will have a place at the grocery store and talk to the Didi. We will put it on YouTube. Didi will ask for it from us, but we will not give it. We’ll troll the ad.”

On the one hand, Dinçer seems to be criticizing Ceza as a rapper because he believes that rappers should not perform under such circumstances. On the other hand, by teasing Ceza for being in the advertisement, Dinçer and other rappers with whom he works find an opportunity to increase their popularity. They believe that by dissing Ceza, they will have more attention on YouTube.

In fact, it is also interesting to see that rappers who criticize Ceza because he performs in the commercial would take his place in the advertisements. When I asked Dinçer if he would perform like Ceza he said;

“I would perform, of course. But they did not agree at first. Now, I would not. We were going to diss Ceza. Now, Lipton did it for example. There's one blind guy, playing in the movie (Referring to Hayko Cepkin- a very famous rock singer in Turkey). We will troll him too. In this country, it is psycho, that is to say, trolling people makes one(?) very famous. I'm going to put it on YouTube as Didi's new ad. It will trend immediately.”

Similarly, when I ask him if he would write songs for advertisements, he said;

“Of course. I do it already. I've made a lot of commercials, movies. I have made that of Cem Yilmaz. We also trolled him. We did the same to Fatih Urek, we did it to Lipton. To these disses, answers are also coming. Usually we are trolling. We are music trolls. The goal is totally trolling.”

As making money through internet by rapping becomes central to the Bağcılar rap community, changes in the content and the function of rap music become very obvious. Yakup explains this very well;

“We write what is on the agenda then. We were joking about girls with mustaches, for example. Whatever you write on it, you will be so effective. Trolling a person, catching his weakness... Heijan, for example, is now making long videos. He's having fun or something. Putting ads together, he makes more money. Our previous mindset was not making money. We were doing it as a hobby. Now we want to make money, too. Our present aim is to open a studio and make money by making songs and also do them for other people. Our songs will be long. So we have a lot of plans. Now he is not like he used to be. You cannot write your love now, is there love anymore?”

Another important technique that Bağcılar rappers use is amateurism. They believe that people at large tend to like works that are done in an amateur way as they find them more sincere. Dinçer says;

“We are small producers. For example, I cannot compete with a guy in Unkapanı- the famous market of CD producers. But he cannot compete with me, either. Because, being professional ends amateurship. They want amateurism. For instance, I will give you an example from Koray Avcı- a famous singer in Turkey who became popular through internet. He was widely watched on his first release. Now 2 million to 3 million. Other songs are 20 million to 30 million. Amateurs are also more sincere.

Professionalism remains at the back when you take part in something official. Sometimes people want people like they are.”

He also offers another example and says “For example, "Eypio". There were many who listened to him a lot in universities. He later became a professional. Then, when they go a step back, they fall to the ground. Of course it is better to be semi-professional instead.”

As the entertainment aspect of music becomes more important for Bağcılar rappers, the level of critique and dissent in their song’s lyrics decreases. To elaborate this point further, I will compare two songs. In *Türk Kürt Karderştir*, which is one of the most politically critical songs from the Bağcılar rap community, Heijan and Cash Ömer explain how Kurdish people are discriminated against, using Kurdish words and putting an emphasis on Kurdistan. In the clip, there were pictures of Kurdish people resisting to police forces and Kurdish flags. However, in a later song called *Tek Türkiye*, Cash Ömer and Mavzer say;

“I am son of a Kurd, I do not exclude my friends
Let him be Turk or Laz or Circassian
The color of the flag comes from and only goes with the blood
Of course those who want to divide us is the “United Nations”^{xii}

In this song, they argue that society is artificially divided along ethnic lines and that external forces divide these communities – that is to say, foreign states. In these lyrics, both the discrimination that Kurdish people face in Turkey and the structural factors which promote discrimination and poverty are hidden. Similarly, in another part of the song, one can see that there is a strong emphasis on the unity of society and any social division in metropolitan Turkey is secondary and artificial;

“One body and one wrist, one color in the same vein
Whoever stands against us, one day we will surely pour his blood.
My way is the right way and your way is the way of shit

In this metropolis there are those who make Turks and Kurds kill each other
Do not forget that there is God asking for account^{xiii}

The same observation can also be made in Sezer and Yakup's music. In their song called *Kobane Katliamı*, Sezer and Yakup drew attention to the massacre attempt by ISIS towards Kurdish people and argued that the Turkish state and society did not have any initiative to prevent ISIS on the issue. Yet, a few years later, they wrote another song called *Ölürüm Türkiyem* using elements from the Justice and Development Party's election campaign song, *Dombıra*. In this song, they show their admiration of Turkish culture by referring to Central Asian traditions and myths (KuPsi & Sezer Music, 2017). Yakup explains the change in their songs as follows;

“(For the Kobane song) Yes, we did. There was something in the neighborhood. Sezer said let's do it, I said okay. Sezer's previous habits were so different. In Turkey, we do not divide people. We write anything about our people. We do not have anything like our side, your side or left or right side. We have not been really laying emphasis on these kinds of issues for two and a half years.”

Accordingly, it can be observed that rappers from Bağcılar started to make songs in which Turkish nationalist themes and sentiments take center stage. For example, Heijan and Mustafa Ak made a song for the Turkish National Football team that joined 2016 European Cup (Cem Ezer, 2017). Similarly, Dinçer states that they produce the music for a TV series called “Söz” that is about the Turkish Special Forces and their struggle against terrorists.^{xiv}

Drawing on all the examples that I have outlined above, from interviews or from lyrics, I argue that Bağcılar rap music's integration into the mainstream market resulted in its songs' moderation, with their lyrics expressing less political or social criticism.

For rappers in Bağcılar, rap music is easy to produce and disseminate. They can produce songs by using already-existing beats and writing new lyrics over them. Dinçer explains this as follows;

“Now look at the song “Gece Gölgenin Rahatına Bak”, it is stolen. Stolen from a Greek song. You cannot do it without stealing. There is my song, for example, stolen from Fifty Cent. (He plays the song) I changed the back sound a bit. Look at the melody, it is not exactly the same. Sample is

not going well. The reason I do this is copyright. So that they cannot claim copyright.”

Thus, technology creates a space for those who cannot find an opportunity to express themselves. Even with only basic knowledge of technical skills and minimal capital, it is possible to make rap music. In this way, many people who normally would not express themselves through art can actually do so. In other words, they can produce songs that reflect their political and social realities.

On the other hand, as art becomes increasingly popular, and as people make money from it – thanks to YouTube, in Bağcılar’s case – the rationale of the market is established. This rationality demands profit maximization. For the rappers from Bağcılar, this is achieved by posting as many music videos that garner as many views as possible on YouTube. They prefer to do so either by using apolitical concepts so that they can attract more people – for example, by focusing on entertainment – or by removing politics from songs about their lives in Istanbul.

Conclusion

In Istanbul’s two socially stigmatized and poor neighborhoods, Sulukule and Bağcılar, young artists use rap music as a way of showing dissent and expressing criticism. In a context where neoliberalism, structural economic factors, as well as social dynamics within the city make these communities vulnerable to social and economic discrimination, rap music has become an important tool for expressing frustration and showing dissent. Rappers do not confine themselves to talking about their experiences, but they also critically examine their own realities. While doing so, globalization’s influence over the state of poverty and exclusion in which many of these rappers find themselves also creates the space within which a culture of opposition and resistance arises. In other words, the processes of alienation and stigmatization accelerated by the neoliberal policies can encourage the development of localized identity articulation and new forms of resistance, one of which is rap music. In a similar vein, as a result of the power of social media in an increasingly globalized world, rap music becomes the collective voice of a wider and often socially isolated audience. Rappers in Sulukule and Bağcılar produce their songs easily and cheaply, without need for professional support and disseminate their songs online. Therefore, in a sense, globalism gives those who suffer from its collateral effects a way to express their frustrations.

However, as the rappers in both neighborhoods get integrated into the mainstream market, different trajectories of their music, in terms of opposition and critique, emerged. Despite the fact that Sulukule rappers followed a more professional path as they released their albums and organized concerts in different corners of Turkey, their level of criticism remained high in comparison to rappers from Bağcılar. While rappers in Bağcılar continued to release their songs on social media, which is supposedly a more independent sphere, they produced more moderate and apolitical songs.

The decline in critique in rap music and the replacement of more provocative lyrics by those that are focused on apolitical entertainment have already been underlined in the literature on the relation between markets, popular culture and music. However, the transformative effect of social media, especially Youtube, has also been highlighted in this study. Although the internet seems to be a sphere that promotes freedom of speech, it actually results in the decline in critique, because the desire to make money from Youtube creates a competitive logic in which apolitical motivations are prioritized over provocative calls for resistance or critique in rap music. One of the most important points that underscores this phenomenon is that many songs which can be labeled as critical or political by rappers were removed from Youtube. For example, at the time of this writing, almost all of the older songs of Heijan, one of the artists from Bağcılar, were no longer available on Youtube. Yet, it is important to state that as Heijan was once taken into custody because authorities claimed that his songs were encouraging people to use drugs. Recently, the same also happened to another famous rapper, Ezhel. So, in further studies, the effect of interference should definitely be taken into account, when discussing rap music's limits as a tool of resistance.

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Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5K3IxINr7A>

ⁱⁱ For instance, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgENJPtgyyw>

ⁱⁱⁱ For instance, see a concert of Tahribad-I Isyan with Kardeş Türküler: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8TTMhikGP4>

^{iv} To watch the documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoG9NrD0ouE>

^v We were doing this for fun, at the beginning. But then we realized that we can say what we want via rap. If you rap, they listen to you (Teşkilat-I Isyan).

^{vi} Translations are mine.

^{vii} Yo! Benim de yıkılacak evim
Sulukule artık bir burjuva yeri
Devir deđiřti tabi Romanlara kötü gözle bakana
İrkçı denmez aga Mustafa denir
Adını koydunuz kentsel dönüşüm
Bu aslında bu kentin çöküşü

^{viii} Taşı toprağı altın olan bu şehir
Bi bize mi eksik yaptı hayatta
Neden hep suçlu rolünde biz varız
Neden kelepçe bizim kolumuzda
Size göre cennet olmuş İstanbul
Buraları bana göre bilmiyorsunuz
Duymuyunuz gecenin seslerini
Bizi kuytu köşelerde görmüyorsunuz

^{ix} Bir madenci gibi yeraltına girmeyecek bakanlar
Çıkarılan cesetlere yardım etmek yerine bakarlar
Bütün insanların ortak derdi oldu rakamlar
İşçileri bekler çocuklarını diğerlerini makamlar

^x We have Funda sister. Before, there was a workshop she had opened, with supports. For us, really for us. The children were affected by destruction, their psychology was disrupted and we needed to support them. They gathered us all there (Teşkilat-ı İsyân).

^{xi} Ya bak ben burada Nusret'e bile gönderme yapıyorum. (Tuz dökme hareketini yapıyor.)

^{xii} Ben bi kürdün oğluyum ayırdetmem dostumu
Türk olsun laz çerkez veya zaza farketmez
Bayrağın rengi kanla geldi ancak kanla gider
Bölmek isteyenler tabi ki birleşmiş milletler

^{xiii} Tek vucut ve tek bilek aynı damarda tek bi renk
Karşımız da kim varsa bir gün elbet kanı dökülecek
Benim davam hak yolu ve senin davan bok yolu
Bu metropolde kürdü türke türkü kürdü vurdan
Unutmasın ki yukarıda hesabı soran Allah var

^{xiv} Söz dizisine yaptık mesela, aranje yaptık. Söz dizisi bu, yeni çıktı biliyorsunuzdur. Gerilim müziklerini biz yaptık.