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A Discourse Analysis of Stray Dogs Posts in an Online Community
Sanal Bir Öğrenci Topluluğundaki Sahipsiz Köpek Gönderilerinin Söylem Çözümlemesi

Abstract

This study examines the discursive construction and contestation of stray dogs as a security threat within a closed Facebook community comprising Middle East Technical University (METU) students, alumni, and personnel. Utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), it explores how stray dogs are represented, how security measures against them are justified, and how pro-stray individuals are discursively constructed. The findings reveal the centrality of anthropomorphism, appeals to nature, and narratives in securitizing stray dogs and delegitimizing their defenders. Additionally, anti-stray discourse often invokes anthropocentric empathy hierarchies and developmentalist rhetoric, portraying stray dogs as existential threats to urban safety. The study also highlights the use of irony, memes, and parodic resonance as "semiotic weapons" to ridicule pro-stray advocates. By addressing the grassroots dimensions of stray dog securitization in Turkey, this paper contributes to critical animal studies, urban sociology, and discourse analysis, bridging gaps in the existing literature.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi (ODTÜ) öğrencileri, mezunları ve personelinden oluşan kapalı bir Facebook topluluğunda, sahipsiz köpeklerin güvenlik tehdidi olarak söylemsel inşasını ve buna yönelik itirazları incelemektedir. Eleştirel Söylem Çözümlemesi ve Bilgisayar Destekli Söylem Çözümlemesi yöntemlerini kullanarak, bölgedeki sahipsiz köpeklerin nasıl temsil edildiğini, onlara karşı alınan güvenlik önlemlerinin nasıl gerekçelendirildiğini ve köpeklerin haklarını savunan bireylerin söylemsel olarak nasıl inşa edildiğini araştırmaktadır. Bulgular, köpeklerin güvenlikleştirilmesi ve savunucularının itibarsızlaştırılmasında antropomorfizm, doğaya atıflar ve kişisel anlatıların merkezi bir rol oynadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, köpek karşıtı söylemler, sıklıkla insanmerkezci empati hiyerarşileri ve kalkınmacı retoriği kullanarak sokak köpeklerini kentsel güvenlik için varoluşsal tehditler olarak göstermektedir. Çalışma, köpek yanlılarını alaya almak için ironi, memler ve parodik yankılanmanın "anlamsal silahlar" olarak kullanımına da dikkat çekmektedir. Türkiye'de sokak köpeklerinin güvenlikleştirilmesinin tabandan gelen boyutlarını ele alarak, bu makale eleştirel hayvan çalışmaları, kentsel sosyoloji ve söylem çözümlemesine katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Keywords
Stray dogs, street dogs, securitization, discourse analysis, online community

Anahtar kelimeler
Başıboş köpek, sokak köpeği, güvenlikleştirme, söylem çözümlemesi, sanal topluluk

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Introduction

In recent years, the Turkish public sphere saw increasing debates about what is commonly called the "stray dog problem"[1] (*başıboş köpek problemi*). While neither the existence of large, free-roaming animal populations in Turkey nor their problematization is certainly not new, negative portrayals of stray animals have arguably gained incommensurable traction among the public through social media's effect on opinion-making processes, culminating in the amendment of the country's Law #5199 on the Protection of Animals. This study analyzes competing discourses on the representation of the stray dog population in the Middle East Technical University (METU) campus and the surrounding 100. Yıl/İşçi Blokları neighborhood in Ankara, as seen in a Facebook group populated by METU students residing in the area during May 2023. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis approach supported by Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis, this study will aim to shed light on a) how stray dogs are represented and discursively established as a security threat, b) how any hypothetical security measure that would be taken against the contamination of stray dogs is justified, and c) how the individuals who disagree with the securitization of stray dogs are represented. Doing so, I hope to contribute on the grassroots origins of the increasing securitization of stray dogs in Turkey and also to contribute to the lacking literature on ownerless domestic animals in Critical Animal Studies.

Theoretical Background

Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA) is a multimethodological and multidisciplinary approach that primarily seeks to investigate the discursive manifestations of power dynamics, discrimination, and inequality. While CDA emerged as a field of inquiry in the '70s, its intellectual roots can be traced back to the Frankfurt School, which is where CDA borrows its critical approach from (Wodak, 2001). CDA is thus critical in the sense that Critical Theory (CT) is, meaning that its criticality aims to render the socially constructed aspect of reality, often reduced invisible and viewed as natural by relationships of power, visible. While CDA can and is applied as a self-standing method of discourse analysis, it often accommodates a host of different approaches. One such discourse-analytic approach is Computation-Mediated Discourse Analysis (hereafter CMDA).

CMDA is a relatively recently emerged field in Discourse Analysis (DA). Having originated as an extension of the applications of Conversation Analysis (CA) to digital discourse in the '90s, the key dynamics the latter analyzes, such as turn-taking, repair, and synchroneity, can also be found in the center of CMDA scholarship. The joint ground CA and CMDA share has led some scholars to not adapt their studies of online communication as CMDA, preferring to categorize their scholarship under CA on the basis that such discourse is essentially sequence-based and context-dependent - thus posing no substantial deviation from

CA's conventional applications (Paulus, Warren, & Lester, 2016). Data gathered from text-based online interaction also satisfies CA's requirement for the captured interactions not to have been produced with any possible inference from the researcher (Meredith, 2019). However, the dynamics of computer-mediated online discourse takes significantly different forms from conventional, speech-based conversation CA specializes in - even differing according to the digital medium that is being used (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I will prefer the label CMDA over CA, although I make references to studies of similar mediums that label themselves primarily as CA studies.

Stommel's (2008) and Vayreda and Antaki's (2009) studies of online support groups pioneered community-of-practice (CofP) based discourse analyses provide insights into how repair, turn-taking, stance, and membership function in digital interaction. More recent scholarship in this vein includes Myrendal's (2019) study of contested meanings in an online forum and Ehret and Taboada's (2020) corpus-based study of complexity and subjectivity in what they call "opinionated discourse."

Also relevant to the study at hand are the still-emerging fields of ecolinguistics, Critical Animal Studies (CAS), and securitization theory scholarship. As laid out by Balzacq et al. (2016) and demonstrated by Gaufman (2022), securitization theory analyzes how certain phenomena are constructed as threats ("securitized") in a given community, with discourse analysis constituting one of the framework's main pillars and social theory, the other. Ecolinguistics, and CAS (Taylor & Twine, 2014) to an extent; use Critical Discourse Analysis to understand and reveal humans' attitudes and perceptions toward their environment and the non-human living beings that exist in them, as well as how they participate in the construction of the presumed notion of "the nature" (Steffensen & Fill, 2014).

As instructive as the insights these fields provide may be, the case of the debates around stray dogs in Turkey reveals several undertheorized points in the said literature. This is especially true for CAS and securitization theory studies. While CAS scholars have stressed the precarity of companion animals and the affective labor associated with them, no attention has been given to free-ranging populations of homeless domestic animals. Moreover, discussions of speciesism in CAS have mostly focused on what is conventionally called "industry animals", taking the relative welfare of dogs for granted as putative companion animals (e.g., Taylor and Nick, 2014; Cook, 2015; Cole and Morgan, 2011). Securitization theory scholars, on the other hand, have mostly adopted a top-down approach to the construction of security threats, that is, how institutions and authorities create or reinforce certain perceptions of security threats for various ends (e.g., Sjöstedt, 2008; also see Balzacq et al. 2016). This paper aims to diverge from these approaches by carving a space for the discussion about homeless domesticated animals in the literature and pointing out the construction and contestation of security threats in a community of urban residents and university students.

Research Setting

Middle East Technical University (METU) is a public university located in Ankara, Turkey. As of 2022, the university has around 27,000 enrolled students. Aside from being one of the most prestigious universities in the country, METU is known for its vast campus and the adjacent METU Forest, which was cultivated under the supervision of the university itself and stretches out to Lake Eymir (METU, 2022a). The university's main campus area is 4500 hectares, with the METU Forest encompassing 3043 hectares of land (METU, 2022b). The university offers on-campus accommodation to nearly 7000 students (METU, 2022b), with a sizeable portion

Figure 1
Map showing the METU campus (1), METU Forest (2), and the surrounding residential areas including 100. Yıl/İşçi Blokları (3)
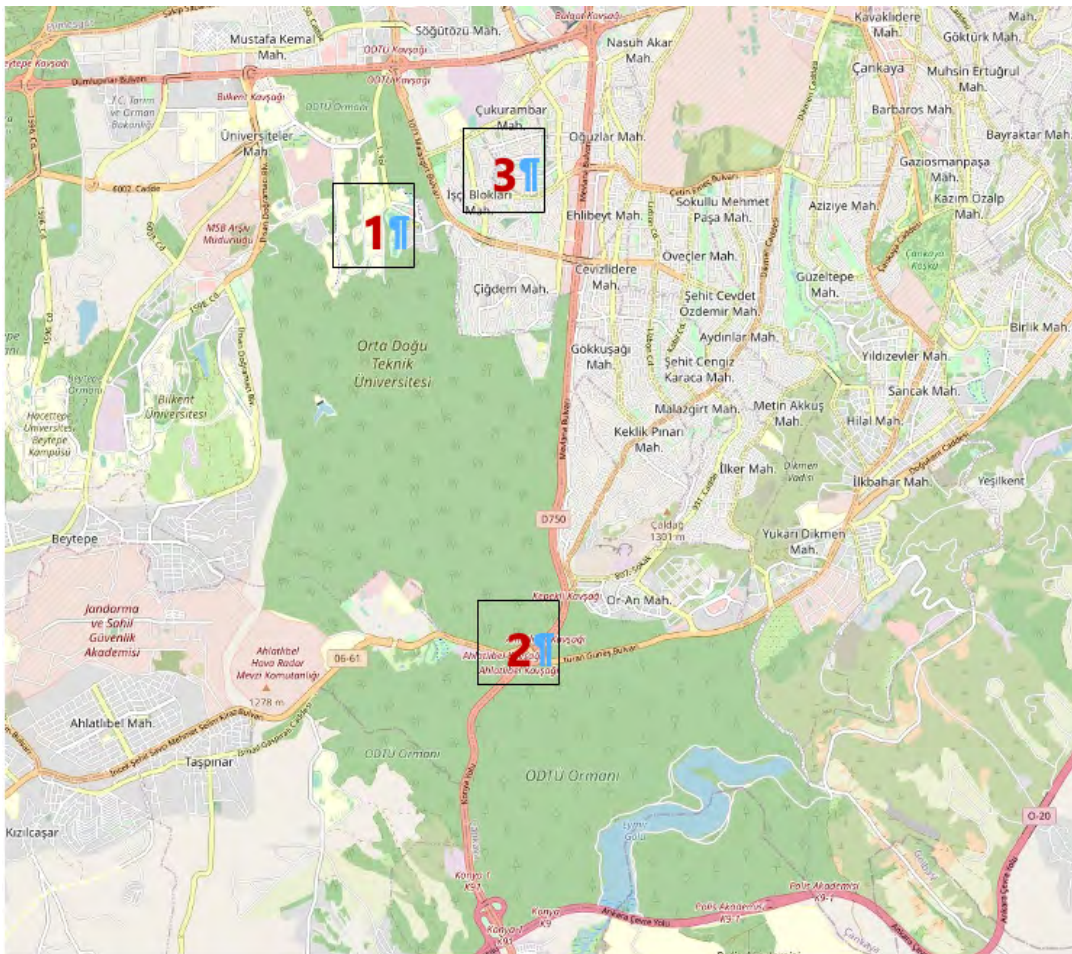
Source: OpenStreetMap

of the remaining 20,000 students residing in the neighboring districts of 100. Yıl and İşçi Blokları. I will refer to the METU campus, METU forest, and the 100. Yıl and İşçi Blokları districts collectively as the METU area.

A perpetual topic of controversy among METU students is the dog population in and around the campus. Besides the dogs living in the campus area and the strays inhabiting the neighboring residential areas, a sizeable stray dog population lives in the METU Forest. The vastly polarized debate around stray dogs revolves around an anti-stray camp, which sees the stray population often not only as a nuisance but an outright threat to the METU area residents' safety, as well as a pro-stray camp which is primarily concerned with the welfare of the strays and argues for co-habitation although they do not necessarily put down the other camp's grievances.

The online community that is in the focus of this study is a closed Facebook group called *100. Yıl Evleri* (Houses of 100. Yıl). Founded in 2011, the community boosts a membership of 29.590 as of May 2023. The group is open to METU students, personnel, and alumni only, and new members are asked to provide a valid METU mail address issued in their name to be allowed in. A variety of topics are covered in the group, including but not limited to lost & found posts, asking for product advice, questions and comments about developments in the METU area, roommate ads, academic questions, and as it is the focus of the study, posts about stray dogs.

Data and Methodology

The data used in this study comes from the Facebook group *100. Yıl Evleri,* which was sketched above, accessed in early June 2023. As noted by Vayreda & Antaki (2009), text-based online discourse consists of discursive actions that are simultaneously context-dependent and context-shaping like spoken language, albeit the former lacks the synchronous structure of the latter. In this specific case, one post prepares the context for the next one, and starting a thread by posting carves allows for the context to be built and reshaped by future contributions from other potential interlocutors.

I treat the group members as constitutive of a Community of Practice (CoP). As Stommel (2008) points out, the CA paradigm benefits from understanding the community rules, its common schemas, and practices. Having a CoP framework offers the researcher an understanding of "how reified rules and statements co-occur" with communal participation (Stommel, 2008). A basic definition of a CoP for the purposes of this study could have a CoP as an institutionally, historically, or culturally developed community whose members pursue shared enterprises over time (Wenger, 1998). Using CoP as an analytical concept when analyzing online communities such as *100. Yıl Evleri* allows the researcher to have a practice-based and well-situated understanding of group dynamics. Essential for a CoP framework are the complementary concepts of participation and reification. Participation in a CoP, either

linguistically as it is the focus of this study or through extralinguistic acts, simultaneously reifies and negotiates the repertoire of shared meaning-making processes and behavior templates in the group. As Stommel (2008) points out, the reifying aspect of interaction is stronger in online Communities of Practice in relation to the ephemeral face-to-face conversation since online conversations remain accessible over time unless participants or community administrators choose to delete it for any reason. Here it should be noted that the members of *100. Yıl Evleri* represent a bigger CoP of METU students and alumni, which is undoubtedly a mainly extra-digital community. The most significant marker of the METU identity in discourse is the addressive term *hocam* (*hocamlar* in plural). While the *hocam* literally means "my master" or "my mentor", it is typically used in Turkish contexts by pupils addressing their teachers or professors. METU members are known for their universal employment of the term towards their peers, seniors, and professors alike.

The data excerpted in this paper will only include the total of three threads published in the community during May 2023. In line with most other single-case DA studies of online communities (e.g, Antaki et al., 2005; Vayreda & Antaki, 2009; Stommel & Koole, 2010; Myrendal, 2019; Gaufman 2022), I will provide excerpts from threads opened in the group, in this case, specifically about stray dogs in the METU area. I refer to the demonstration of data as excerpts since I will not accommodate the threads in full – for example, I will be skipping repetitive comments simply offering their sympathies to the original poster (OP) or the "up" comments that are not discursively informative. I also do not include any visuals that are attached to the posts analyzed depicting injured people or animals. Besides providing the total number of comments a post has received, I also give the reaction count for every post and comment, since the reaction system of the platform provides the audience of the posts to engage with them and endorse them without directly getting involved in the conversation.

Analysis

Representation and Securitization of Stray Dogs

Anthropomorphism

Dogs are widely anthropomorphized in the threads about stray dogs to different effects. Verbs describing human action are imposed on stray dogs' behavior to infantilize them, humanize them for humorous ends, or to ascribe malevolence to them. The former two strategies can also be used in combination. For example, a sympathetic post about a stray dog who is assumed to have injured itself after trying to aggressively chase a car describes the dog's aggressiveness towards the vehicle as "enter[ing] into an argument with a car" ("*köpeklerden birisi bir*

arabayla münakaşaya girdi", Excerpt #1) and the dog's squawking over its broken foot as "crying" (*"Viyak viyak agliyodu"*). Here, the euphemistic description of the dog "arguing" with a car creates a humorous effect, while the dog's "crying" in reaction to its injury is reminiscent of infantile behavior, portraying the dog on favorable terms as an innocent and defenseless being. Similarly, a replier to the post repeats the humorous anthropomorphizing of the OP by implying that the dog is reaping what it sows and referring to the dog as *köpek kardeş* ("doggy bro") (*"Etme bulma dünyası bu köpek kardeş"*) . The anthropomorphic effect is created by Replier #2's ascription of human-like agency and the consequent responsibility that arises to the dog and addressing the dog in camaraderie.

As mentioned above, anthropomorphic depictions of stray dogs can also serve to discursively establish them as malevolent and dangerous beings. A striking demonstration of this can be found in the remarks of Replier #4 of Excerpt #1. Replier #4 uses the verb "massacred" (*katletmişti*) when describing their encounter with barn animals that were killed by dogs. When taken in combination with their previous remarks distinguishing the preying habits of dogs from those of cats and birds, portraying the former's hunting behavior as an act of unnatural, sadistic pleasure *("Kediler kuşları yakalıyor yiyor bu doğanın kanunu veya kuş böceği vs..ama köpeklerin yemeden zevk için kedileri boğmaları paramparça etmeleri doğa kanunu değil"*), Replier #4's use of the verb *katletmişti* instead of *öldürmüştü* ("killed") portrays the dogs attacking the smaller animals as deliberate murderers who have a human-like cognizance of their behavior and thus carry responsibility of their acts.

Appeals to Nature

The comment Replier #4 has made on the post from Excerpt #1 is also demonstrative of a certain type of appeal to nature in the portrayal of stray dogs in the community. Asserting that dogs prey on cats not as an ascription of the "laws of nature" but for pleasure (*"köpeklerin yemeden zevk için kedileri boğmaları paramparça etmeleri doğa kanunu değil"*), Replier #4 appears to have excommunicated dogs from the realm of nature. A more moderate stance involves naturalizing the aggressive behavior of stray dogs by associating it with hunger and weather conditions *("kışın -10 derecede sıcacık evlerinden çıkmak istemeyince bu hayvanlar aç kalıyor ve epeyce agresifleşiyorlar"*, E#2 R#1) which contributes to the argument that "dogs do not belong to the streets" (*"Köpekler güzel hayvanlardır ama yerleri sokak değildir"*, E#2 R#2, in endorsement of R#1).

Appeals to nature are also made by invoking the predatory instincts putatively ascribed to stray dogs (*"maalesef bahsettiğimiz ve şikayetçi olduğumuz tür söz ettiğiniz üzere bir anda içgüdüleri tarafından tetiklenip beklenmeyen zamanlarda da saldırabiliyor"*, E#3 R#1). Such portrayals of stray dogs contribute to their construction as unpredictable beasts.

Use of Narratives and Visuals

The use of narratives and visuals plays an important role in reproducing and reifying the (mostly negative) attitudes toward METU's stray population and stray dogs in general. Posts about stray dogs that mainly consist of narratives of personal experience and visuals with affective load aim to mobilize their audiences towards the pro- or anti-stray camp of the university community's stray debate. Narratives about stray dog attacks and memetic visuals portraying stray dogs (and their defenders) in negative terms are more widespread, while visuals aimed at generating positive affect toward stray dogs are met with parodic resonance and disapproval.

The thread in Excerpt #3 revolves around a personal narrative of the OP's recent experience of a dog attack, which is demonstrative of the sketch given above. One could have expected that this narrative may come across as a purposeless reporting of a chain of events: the OP explicitly states that they do not have faith that the so-called stray dog problem can be resolved in the foreseeable future and that they are only writing this to share their experience and warn the others (*"Sonuç olarak bu problemin yakın zamanda çözüleceğine dair inancım yok sadece kendi deneyimimi paylaşmak ve uyarmak amacıyla yazıyorum."*).

However, as Labov (2001, 2011) notes, most narratives posit an evaluative point through different linguistic devices, such as the use of irrealis clauses to compare what happened with what could have happened and assigning responsibility through the use of certain verbs that posit agency to certain subjects. In the OP's narration, the evaluation to be gathered is that "stray dogs could've seriously hurt me", and "stray dogs can come out of nowhere and hurt you even in the settings that are deemed to be safe". The strongest clue establishing the former point is the OP's assertion that they ought to consider themselves lucky because there were not many cars when they panicked and tried to outrun the dogs, falling on the road *("O esnada yoldan araba geçmediği için şanslıyım sanırım.")*. The latter is established through the OP's positing of being on guard against the appearance of aggressive stray dogs as their default stance which they had ceased to do so on what proved to be a mistaken sense of safety (*"Gayet işlek bi sokak ve saat de daha erken olduğu için hiç tetikte değildim"*) and her reiteration in the evaluation section of the narrative of the necessity of being on guard against stray dogs even in crowded places and during hours that are deemed safe (*"etrafta insanlar olmasına ya da saatin erken olmasına güvenmeyin mutlaka tetikte olun")*. In other words, the "so what?" (Labov, 2011) of the narrative is "you're never really safe from the strays."

Replier #1 to this post builds their response to the OP's narration on the irrealis reference point of there being more vehicle presence on the street in which the events took place and the OP subsequently getting involved in an accident when they were panicking – they even support the worse-case scenario with claiming that they know of such accidents happening in similar situations *("neyseki o korku ile yola atlamamışsınız. benzer durumlarda araba altında kalıp*

vefat eden insanlar var bu başıboş vahşi köpekler yüzünden."). Replier #1 thus validates and further reifies the evaluative points of the OP's narrative. Their marked portrayal of stray dogs as wild, perhaps even beastly, creatures should also be noted.

A thread revolving around a pro-stray, affectively laden visual that involves two short videos of several METU area stray dogs having themselves be pet, with the caption "The 100. Yıl dogs you want dead are in the attachment. Thank you." (*"Ölmelerini dilediğiniz 100. yıl köpekleri ektedir. Teşekkürler."*). This is responded by Replier #1 saying "don't accuse anyone who does not bury their head on the sand with wanting the dogs dead, enough with this" (*"kafasını kuma gommeyen herkesi köpekler ölsün istemekle suclamayin artık yeter ya"*) and going on to draw an analogy between stereotypical middle-aged, AKP-supporting men and pro-stray people accusing others of wishing for stray dogs' death (*"malum partili dayilardan bi farkınız kalmıyor kendinize gelin"*).[2]

The OP, in turn, reveals in response that it was his observation that there are many people who wish death upon dogs (*"Köpekler ölsün isteyen epey insan da var benim gördüğüm kadarıyla"*) and that he felt like sharing these videos since negative posts about stray dogs are often posted in the community (*"Bu konuda olumsuz gönderiler çok sayıda atılıyor. Keyfim geldi ve güzel bir şey paylaşmak istedim ben de."*). These imply that the OP wanted to challenge the dominant common assumptions and unfavorable attitudes about stray dogs in the METU community, reified again and again in the community by the negative posts about stray dogs. The replies to the post also include several anti-stray memes. Repliers #4, #5, and #6 use visual memetic references in their contributions to the thread. Replier #4 comments that "Alright *hocam*, these kinds of dogs can stay" (*"Böyleleri kalsın tamam hocam"*) with a visual of what appears to be a stray dog attacking an AKP banner on the street. Replier #4 thus humorously implies that he is not pro-stray (since the only dogs to be exceptionally allowed on the streets would be those that are anti-AKP) and simultaneously portrays themselves as a witty, humorous opposition supporter in line with the shared attitudes of the METU student community (Sierra, 2023).

Replier #5's memetic comment involves an animated visual of the mythological Cerberus, a three-headed giant dog with the caption "Abisi o oyun/oyun oynamak istiyor abisi" (Abisi *he just/ he just wants to play* abisi). The proposition offered by the caption creates a contradiction with the three-headed mythological creature displayed in the background, leading to a case of prototypical irony, conveying a negative counter-evaluation of stray dogs the OP aims to portray in a positive light (Alba-Juez & Attardo, 2014). The said caption also constitutes a case of parodical resonance, in which a voice is ironically emulated in order to categorically mock those portray who argue that dogs are essentially harmless and friendly (Zappavigna, 2022). Note that the use of *abisi* (lit. "his/her bigger brother") also implies an anthropomorphic evaluation of dogs from the standpoint of the emulated voice, rendering the infantilization of dogs a subject of mockery.

Replier #6 similarly uses a memetic visual, whose caption reads, "What have you eaten today? / [For my part] I have eaten one child, one stray cat, and half a kilo of pet food" over the background of three unclean dogs walking as a pack on the street. This constitutes a straightforward portrayal of street dogs as insatiable beasts, countering the OP's presentation of 100. Yıl's stray dogs as loving and calm creatures.

Justification of Action against Stray Dogs

Anthropocentric Empathy Hierarchy

The group members who are anti-stray, that is, against the free roaming of stray dogs with varying degrees of hostility towards them, often found their arguments on a presumably unconscious invocation of an anthropocentric empathy hierarchy, in which non-human animals are seen as deserving to live mainly according to the potential uses and harms they possess for the humans (Langacker 1991; Sealey, 2013; Paulhus, 2022). Moreover, the empathy hierarchy of the group members invoke to justify any securitarian action against stray dogs can distinguish among not only humans and other animals but also dogs and other street animals. Replier #4 from Excerpt #1 provides a noteworthy example for this. Replier #4 rationalizes the preying habits of cats and birds as a part of the natural order but singles out dogs as sadistic animal killers (*"Kediler kuşları yakalıyor yiyor bu doğanın kanunu veya kuş böceği vs..ama köpeklerin yemeden zevk için kedileri boğmaları paramparça etmeleri doğa kanunu değil")*. The smaller animals that fell prey to the dogs, on the other hand, are presented as innocent victims of savage attackers. Having already implied that their own cat has been subjected to aggression by dogs (*"kedimin başına gelen durumdan bahsettim"*), Replier #4's comment reveals a clear empathy hierarchy (Sealey, 2013) in their line of thought in which humans are superior to non-human animals, and dogs are singled-out as beasts undeserving of empathy at the lowest level.

Another demonstration of the anthropocentric empathy hierarchy can be found in the responses to the original post in Excerpt #2, which involves short videos of 100. Yıl stray dogs having themselves be petted. Here, Replier #2 criticizes the OP's justification of their post on the basis of "feeling like sharing it," saying that the OP has to study at the same school as those who have phobias towards stray dogs (*"fobisi olan insanlarla aynı okulda okumak zorundasınız"*), and that every human being has the right to demand stray-free streets (*"sokakta başıboş köpekler olmasın demek de her insanın hakkıdır"*). Replier #2 thus not only puts humans at the top of the empathy hierarchy but also constructs being pro-stray as a marked, nonstandard stance that can only be tolerated as long as it complies with the anthropocentric empathy hierarchy at hand.

Human-Centric Developmentalism

A developmentalist rhetoric associating the lack of free-roaming stray dogs with high levels of development is also invoked to support anti-stray arguments. This rhetoric also serves to legitimize the community's grievances about stray dogs by rendering them an extension of what is deemed as the general backwardness of the country.

In Excerpt #3, the OP juxtaposes their experience with aggressive stray dogs with the political atmosphere of the country, referring to the notorious event of the opposition candidates being thrown stones at them during a campaign rally (*"başka zaman olsa daha çok sinirlenebilirdim ama bugün 2023 yılında insanların taşlandığı bir ülkeden çok da bir beklentim yoktu açıkçası"*). Moreover, they assert that they think "such a scandalous situation can only happen in banana republics" *("bu derece rezalet bir durum sadece muz cumhuriyetlerinde olabilir diye düşünüyorum").* Replier #1 and the OP then collaboratively engage in a discursive presentation of the existence of aggressive stray dogs in residential areas as a developmental problem, while the lack of credible animal shelters and neutering campaigns is notably absent in their construction of stray dog populations as a sign of low development. Replier #1 endorses the OP's deplorations, associating the events such as the OP's encounter with stray dogs as "the unimportance of human life" that can be seen in "bad countries." *("muz cumhuriyetinden bahsetmişsiniz. ben bu konuyu defalarca dile getirdim. bu vb. olaylar gelişmiş ülkelerde yaşanmaz , insan hayatının öneminin kalmadığı kötü ülkelerde yaşanır diye"*). Replier #1's last reply to OP further contributes to the construction of human and animal welfare as incompatible notions through their lamenting that the law protects stray animals *("maalesef yasalarımız bu "sevimli" dostlarımızı korumaya yönelik (!)"*). The quotation marks around "cute" (sevimli) and the use of (!) in the end set a sarcastic tone for Replier #1's concluding comment, making it clear that they neither think stray dogs are our "cute friends" nor that it is a good thing that they are under the protection of the law (Zappavigna, 2022).

Representation of Pro-Stray Individuals

The so-called pro-stray camp, if it indeed exists, is fairly unrepresented in the community's debates about the stray dog population. Positive posts about stray dogs, such as that in Excerpt #2, are exceptional. Openly pro-stray comments are also rare in the remainder of the threads started by anti-stray posts. Thus, pro-stray individuals are often represented through the discourse of anti-stray individuals. These putative representations of pro-stray people often portray them as feminine, and gullible. An us-versus-them dichotomy (van Dijk, 2006; Chilton and Schaffler, 1997) is established through anti-stray individuals' discursive portrayal of pro-stray people, with the former also accusing the latter of actively harming the human community

of METU. For example, in the thread in Excerpt #3 that revolves around the OP's experience with aggressive stray dogs, Replier #1 goes on to attack the OP from Excerpt #2, who had shared two videos around 30 seconds each, containing several stray dogs having themselves be petted. Aggressively, and arguably reminiscent of militaristic discourse, Replier #1 blames the previous OP and their mentality on account of causing "the blood that is shedding", and without redress, challenges them to face the pictures of the OP's injury ("*nerede şu bi önceki köpek postunda " hocam bunları mı öldürmek istiyosunuz ya :s " diyip en sakin köpeğin videosunu çeken arkadaş? iyi bak bu fotoğraflara. şu akan kan senin zihniyetinin eseri. iyi bak belki aklın başına gelir.*"). Moreover, in the way they ridicule the former OP's framing of the anti-stray discourse as wishing to kill them, Replier #1 implies that "these wild stray dogs" (*bu başıboş vahşi köpekler*) are not undeserving of being killed.

Another example can be found in the exchange between Excerpt #1's Repliers #3 and #4. Delegitimizing the claims of loving animals of those who oppose sending strays to animal shelters or their outright termination, Replier #3 argues that the people in question condemn stray animals to live "destitute and perilous" (*sersefil ve tehlike altında*) lives and challenges them to show themselves and face the situation. Replier #4 is a self-claiming animal lover ("*ben hayvanseverim karıncasından kuşuna kadar*") and takes to Replier #3's challenge for the animal lovers to confront the difficulties stray animals experience. Replier #4 appears to have registered Replier #3's confrontation as a face-threatening act against all those who call themselves animal lovers in the community and, by extension, Replier #4 themselves. After establishing their identity as an animal lover, Replier #4 then seeks to disarm Replier #3 to prevent any future conflict by distancing themselves from those who oppose any action that should be taken about stray dogs ("*hayvansever olmak demek kayıtsız şartsız hoşgörülü olmak demek değil ki yanlış giden bir şeylerin olduğunu ne yazık ki kabul etmiyorlar bu semttekiler*"). They go on to delegitimize people's claim of loving animals ("*sözüm ona hayvan severler*"). By distancing "true" love of animals from defending the free roam of stray dogs, as well as taking care of them and attributing individual personalities to dogs ("*her bir köpeğe isim verip beslemek çözüm değil*"), Replier #4 is undertaking a face-saving discursive act through which not only theirs but all "true" animal lovers' credibility is saved as a group by distancing themselves from the pro-stray people (Brown & Lewinson, 1988). By doing so, Replier #4 also establishes loving animals and being against the free roam of stray dogs as compatible notions.

Following Replier #4's reconciliatory act and airing shared grievances against Replier #3's confrontation, the latter joins the reconciliatory process in their reply to Replier #4's intervention. Addressing them as *hocam*, Replier #3 grants legitimacy to #4's concerns and grievances ("*inanın bu kadar sinirlenmekte haklısınız.*") and then goes on to shift the focus of evaluation from "animal lovers", as it was in their initial comment, to "those who provoke people, saying that 'you want all the dogs to die'" ("*Ve bu şekilde söylediğimizde üstüne siz bütün köpekler ölsün istiyorsunuz diye insanları kışkırtan bir güruh var.*"). Stating that they

too believe that every animal has a right to live (*"Ben de sizin gibi bütün hayvanların yaşama hakkı olduğuna inanıyorum"*), Replier #3 poses an us-versus-them dichotomy (van Dijk, 2006; Chilton & Schäffler, 1997) in which the "so-called" pro-stray animal lovers Replier #4 refers to do nothing but to cause division among animal-loving people (*"Ve hayvansever insanlar arasında bölücülükten başka bir işe yaramıyor yaptıkları"*). More interestingly, this us-versus-them dichotomy takes a more conventionally political turn as Replier #3 associates "people with this kind of mentality" with AKP voters ("voters of the you-know-which party"), since they are both viewed as deprived of logical reasoning and blindly attached to their beliefs (*"bu kafa yapısındaki insanlar da malum parti seçmeni gibi, ne bilim ne mantık hicbir sey kalmamis bunlarda, ezberlemisler birkaç cümleyi, tekrarlayip duruyorlar"*). This is telling because it reveals that Replier #4 was indexed as an opposition-party voter by the virtue of their METU membership, enabling Replier #3 to mock the pro-stray camp over presumed common attitudes and affiliations brought by being a part of the METU community. Associating the thought system of a stereotypical AKP voter with those of the pro-stray people can also be found in the remarks of Replier #3 from Excerpt #2, who purports that the OP's argument, that of the strays of 100. Yıl being unharmful on the basis that some of them are captured on video allowing themselves to be petted, is a weaker argument than the exclamations about not letting the Turkish flag come down made by the ruling AKP and its supporters. Such trite interjections by AKP politicians and supporters are infamous for acting as a red herring, fallaciously drawing attention from the arguments against AKP policies. Replier #3's invocation of this inference rich AKP catchphrase also functions as a popular culture reference, allowing Replier #3 to be a part of the discussion in the thread without having to elaborate on why the argument deduced by the OP's post is not a sound one.

Finally, the average pro-stray person is represented as a young female figure, as exampled in the meme Replier #1 from Excerpt #1 attaches to their comment. In the meme, a stereotypical, *çomar*-looking stray dog is carrying what seems to be an African person in its mouth or maybe even devouring them in what appears to be a desert setting. The young female with glasses and apparent blush on her cheeks reacts, "S/he wants to play – *can onlar can.*" This meme ridicules the putative, stereotypical stray dog defender by satirically speaking from their point of view. The meme uses negative irony (Alba-Juez & Attardo, 2014) that emerges through the contrast between the man-devouring dog and the young female's (in this case) absurdly naïve, positive take of the dog "just wanting to play" to convey a negative judgment of stray dog defenders. As noted by Zappavigna (2022), the use of irony can also shift the target of evaluation in each context to the mockingly quoted voice itself. Replier #1's meme not only carries an ideational function of conveying stray dogs as dangerously violent beings and their defenders as oblivious people (a quality that somehow seems to be indexed with femininity), but it also calls for the negative evaluation of a third party (namely, the pro-stray people) that has not been a part of the conversation so far. Moreover, and again, as

Zappavigna (2022) points out, ironic quotations of third parties need to allude to the "shared attitudinal alignments" in a community to come across as a meaningful parody. In other words, parodic quotation needs to be found on the common assumptions and stances of a community. As it is the case with this instance, ironic quotation works as a "semiotic weapon" of mass ridicule or shaming.

Conclusion & Discussion

This paper has attempted to critically analyze how stray dogs and pro-stray individuals are discursively represented in a digital community of Turkish university members. A notable finding of the study is that despite that anti-stray (and generally speaking, anti-animal) rhetoric has been almost exclusively used by far-right politicians up until the point of the amendment of Law #5199 to allow municipalities to kill ownerless domestic animals (e.g; T24, 2023; BBC Turkish Service, 2021; Yolcu, forthcoming), the securitization of stray dogs is not endemic to right-wing ideology: in fact, this study has demonstrated that people accuse those who oppose the securitization of stray dogs with acting like a typical AKP voter (one must, of course, also keep in mind here that METU has a strong tradition of left-wing student politics).

In July 2024, 13 months after this study was conducted, a controversial amendment in line with the Turkish anti-street dog movement's agenda to Law #5199 On the Protection of Animals was accepted in the Turkish Parliament with the votes of the governing AKP and its allies (BirGün, 2024). Through the amendment, the Turkish state officially ceased to recognize the right to live of unowned animals and stipulated that domestic animals cannot exist without the guardianship of a specific individual or individuals (Yolcu, forthcoming). Despite its passage, public support for the amendment was limited. According to a KONDA poll conducted in early July 2024, only 15% of respondents supported the changes, with the lowest levels of support coming from conservative voters who typically form the AKP's electoral base (KONDA Araştırma & Danışmanlık, 2024).

The negative presentation of stray dog defenders and the securitization of stray dogs are achieved through a variety of discursive strategies. Narratives about encounters with stray dogs reproduce and reify the community opinion, while parodical resonance and irony conveyed through memes and political references further act as a "semiotic weapon" (Zappavigna, 2022) targeting the stray dogs and their defenders. Stray dogs are portrayed as violent predators, and their violence is, on some occasions, attributed to a presumed sadistic urge. Their construction as beast-like violent predators enables their portrayal as an existential threat to human welfare. This, in turn, justifies cleaning the streets of their presence, so to say, or even their annihilation by appealing to an anthropocentric empathy hierarchy.

It should be emphasized that the aim of this paper is not to delineate what "proper discourse" about stray dogs should be nor to evaluate the validity of the grievances of people who are disturbed by the presence of stray dogs. As Balzacq et al. (2016) highlight, securitization (that is, the socially shared construction of a given notion as a security threat) cannot be achieved solely through discourse. The audience of the securitizing act needs to contextualize and resemiotize the signs that the securitizing discourse makes claims about within their extra-discursive experience. Further studies supported by anthropological and sociological methods should be conducted to illuminate the societal and animal-behavioral mechanisms behind the contestation of the co-existence of humans and street animals.

Acknowledgments

1 This study mainly uses the term "stray animal" through its body, whose literal translation in Turkish is "başıboş hayvan" – an innovation in the Turkish language spearheaded by the anti-street dog movement (Yolcu, forthcoming). The conventional, value-neutral term for free-ranging dog populations is "street animal" (*sokak hayvanı*). As Srinivasan (2012) points out, the nuance between the often-interchanged English terms is that the former treats the existence of the ownerless dog as an anomaly or an outlier, while the latter use acknowledges the continuous inhabitance of urban settings of the free-ranging animal. I decided to keep the "stray animal" appropriation for this study as the dog population pertinent to the study mostly inhabits a forest region rather than urban areas. However, the nuance between the two terms are still germane to this study and kept in mind for future research.

2 Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, *Justice and Development Party*) has been the ruling party in Turkey since 2002. Under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the party is widely associated with religious conservatism, nationalist-populist rhetoric, and neoliberal developmentalism (see Baykan, 2018). The stereotypical profile of the AKP voter—often invoked in public discourse—tends to be positioned in contrast to secular, urban, and middle-class identities, such as that of the average METU student. This symbolic opposition plays a significant role in the political polarization shaping the discourse analyzed in this study.

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