



Research Article

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# East Within the East: Representation of Syrian Identity on Twitter as a Form of Self-Orientalism

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## ABSTRACT

Turkey has faced a major refugee crisis after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and currently hosting 3.6 million Syrian refugees. The growing number of Syrian refugees in Turkey has raised a problem of social integration and representation. Hate speech towards Syrians has proliferated on platforms such as Twitter. At the heart of this digital discourse, there's an influence of neo-orientalist and self-orientalist refugee representation that dominates the Western media. The West has closed its doors to refugees from the Islamic geography. Refugees are left out as "unidentified others" of the new world. The orientalist perspective internalized in Turkey, especially after the westernization process, adopts this Western discourse. This discourse is reflected most intensely on social media. In the study, the self-orientalist discourse of the middle class, educated and young prosumers towards Syrian identity on Twitter were examined through tweets. Through the Knime software, the tweets containing the phrase "Syrian" were analyzed with content analysis method. The study aims to reveal how the self-orientalist discourse towards refugees is represented through digital media. In the tweets, Syrians were first represented as a social and economic threat (47,8%). The largest part of the tweets (36%) contains the "claims about Syrians". These tweets are full of unsupported and manipulative claims. Overall, the percentage of tweets (16,3%) that reflect Syrians only as humans is low. In other tweets, Syrians have been represented as illegal aliens (15,2%), dehumanized (5%) and backward (2,3%) groups. These results revealed the prevalence of othering language and stereotypes towards Syrian identity on Twitter.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Self-orientalism, other, Syrian identity, Twitter, content analysis.

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# Doğu İçinde Doğu: Bir Self- Oryantalizm Biçimi Olarak Suriyeli Kimliğinin Twitter’da Temsili

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## ÖZ

*Türkiye, Suriye İç Savaşı'nın patlak vermesinden sonra mülteci kriziyle karşılaştı. Türkiye'deki Suriyeli mülteci sayısının artması, sosyal entegrasyon ve temsil sorununu gündeme getirmiştir. Suriyelilere yönelik nefret söylemi Twitter'da çoğalmaktadır. Bu dijital söylemin merkezinde, Batı medyasına hâkim olan neo-oryantalist mülteci temsili etkisi bulunmaktadır. Batı, neo-oryantalizmin ve self-oryantalizmin "tehlikeli ve öteki" olarak tanımladığı İslam coğrafyasından mültecilere kapılarını kapattı. Türkiye'de özellikle Batılılaşma sürecinden sonra içselleştirilen oryantalist bakış açısı, bu Batı söylemini benimsemektedir. Bu söylem en yoğun şekilde sosyal medyada yansımalarını bulmaktadır. Araştırmada orta sınıf, eğitilmiş ve genç Twitter kullanıcılarının Suriye kimliğine yönelik self-oryantalist söylemleri Twitter üzerinden incelenmiştir. Çalışma, mültecilere yönelik self-oryantalist söylemin dijital medya aracılığıyla nasıl temsil edildiğini ortaya çıkarmayı ve mültecilerin sosyal entegrasyonunu olumsuz etkileyen stereotipleri tanımlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla Knime programı aracılığıyla "Suriyeli" ifadesinin geçtiği tweetlerin içerik analizi yapılmış ve öne çıkan self-oryantalist etiketlemeler ortaya konulmuştur. İncelenen tweetlerde Suriyeliler öncelikle sosyal ve ekonomik tehdit olarak temsil edilmektedir (%47,8). Tweetlerin büyük kısmı (%36) "Suriyelilerle ilgili iddiaları" içermektedir. Bu tweetler kanıtlanmamış, manipülatif iddialarla doludur. Genel olarak, Suriyelileri sadece insan olarak yansıtan tweetlerin oranı (%16,3) düşüktür. Diğer tweetlerde Suriyeliler yasadışı yabancılar (%15,2), insanlık dışı (%5) ve geri kalmış (%2,3) gruplar olarak temsil edilmiştir. Bu sonuçlar, Twitter'da Suriyeli kimliğine yönelik ötekileştirici dilin ve stereotiplerin yaygınlığını ortaya koymaktadır.*

**Keywords:** Self-oryantalizm, öteki, Suriyeli kimliği, Twitter, içerik analizi.

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## INTRODUCTION

Edward Said examined the thought models and discourses that the West systematically developed about Eastern societies in his book "Orientalism" (2012). This model of thought to which Eastern or Western individuals are subject today emerged with the image of the "mysterious and dangerous East" of the colonial states. This creation process initially consisted of the dreams and fantasies of all those writers, painters, journalists who visited the East on behalf of the West but over time these fantasies turned into generally accepted stereotypes. The continuation of the orientalist paradigm means the continuation of the hegemony of the Western discourse.

The issue of orientalism which doesn't allow Eastern societies to evaluate themselves, made the West speak on behalf of the East. Thus, an East-West distinction has emerged. The world has internalized it and this distinction has determined the criteria of being "mainstream" or "other" not only at the global level but also at the national level.

The hegemonic discourse gained by the West through orientalism has caused the Middle East to be perceived as identical with violence, both in the context of words and images. Terrorist organizations such as "Isis" which stands out as the most brutal example of this perception, are like the embodiment of the stereotypes about Islamic culture.

The Syrian civil war that emerged in this chaotic, stagnant and violent region fed the West's fears about the East. Refugees fleeing this geography are the most unidentified and the newest "others" of the West. Representatives of the nothingness, these groups are creatures whose deaths are considered very likely and normal and they aren't featured as individuals in the Western media. For this reason, Europe's policy against the refugees which are the new fear elements is to close the doors and exclude these groups.

Turkey is a country that opened its borders to refugees. As of now, 3.6 million (UNHCR, 2020) refugees are living in Turkey. As a result of this situation, the issue of refugees in Turkey is more visible than the other countries. Turkish society initially approached the issue at a more humane level but with the increase in the number of Syrians and the lengthening of their stay, discourse turned against Syrians especially in digital media, and reached the level of hate.

In Turkey, the economic and social concerns of the Turkish society have justifiable reasons but it's obvious that the lack of a humanitarian approach to these people and the adoption of Western stereotypes will cause a big problem for social integration and representation. Fears towards refugees in Turkey have transformed into hate speech and cause a social abyss.

The main purpose of choosing the word "Syrian" is that in Turkey, sometimes this word is used





for defining an inferior social status. Just as the word "Middle East" is equated with negative concepts such as violence, chaos, laziness, the word "Syrian" has started to be referred expressions like "disorder, confusion, crime, misery, backwardness".

Bauman's (2019) concept of stranger in his analysis of liquid modernity is a useful term to define the current situation of refugees in the modern world. The frightening stranger expressed here is identical to the members of the Eastern-Islamic societies, which are objects of orientalism. The position of Syrians defined within the framework of Western orientalist discourse fits Bauman's (2019) definition of excluded foreigners. This concept extends to hate speech as a key concept, especially on Twitter.

In this study, after the theoretical assessments on the issues like "orientalist image of the East", "otherness of the "refugees", digital representations of the Syrians on the Twitter are questioned. In particular, the projections of orientalist refugee representations that dominate the Western media in the tweets of young Twitter users have been sought.

The author aims to reach the representation types of the self-orientalist paradigm in digital media and to reveal the "Syrian" stereotypes that negatively affect the social integration of refugees. 460 tweets were pulled for the research to make this analysis. Tweets were pulled using an open-source software "Knime" and they were categorized with the content analysis program Atlas.ti and statistical results were obtained.

### **The East and West Distinction in Orientalism**

According to Edward Said (2012), the Western image that's the center of the civilization and the problematic Eastern image created by the West are two sides of a conflict that has survived today. As a result, even societies that are nowhere in this conflict define themselves through this conflict.

Western, Eastern or other spaces aren't just real geographic spaces, but historical and discursive fictions (Keyman et al., 1996). The issue of Orientalism based on this distinction isn't the story of the East but the West (Mutman, 2002).

Orientalism is a way of thinking based on the ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident (Said, 2012). The term "distinction" which describes the difference in status, doesn't describe an unbiased and innocent geographical distinction. This discourse of distinction is an othering process that marks the East and makes the West center (Mutman, 2002, p.191). The West has produced this distinction mostly based on the discourse. Although the centrality of the superior Western civilization remained unchanged, the East- as an opposite side of the West- isn't just a certain place. The geographical





boundaries of the East have changed throughout history but the East as an "other" has always existed. The superiority of Western civilization is a constant criterion for the foundation of Eastern classifications, whether geographical or cultural.

In the study, we find it useful to proceed through the discourse of distinction between East and West, which Said emphasizes in his definition of orientalism. This definition is based on the discourse that the East is only an "other" represented and defined by the West.

According to Dirlik (2005), Said's argument for orientalism can be criticized from certain points but the main argument in the book is clear. In a world reorganized as European centrist, non-European societies were characterized not by what they had, but by what they lacked.

The knowledge processed by orientalism is the knowledge that the oriental is incapable of producing any knowledge about himself. So according to Said, orientalism isn't only a colonial, material, and hegemonic approach. Orientalism is also a truth production (Mutman, 2002, p.191).

Orientalism is the representation of the East through the European eyes. To this framework, it doesn't seem possible that Eastern societies can rationally represent themselves. While the West is building the foundations of civilization, democracy and freedom, the East has been imprisoned in a static and violent history. The East described in the Western discourse is actually without an identity.

The "other" is without identity. The identity of the other can only be defined with its connection to the mainstream culture. The West needs the East to emphasize the superiority of itself. The orientalist discourse of East-West distinction has turned not only to an element of global hegemony but also patterns of thought affecting the attitudes of modern people and the relations of social classes. Today, the distinctions like "us" and "others", majority and minority, native and alien gained a discursive dominance.

Internalized orientalism, also called self-orientalism, means that Eastern societies read themselves with the labels of the West. They become a part of this circulation by producing their distinctions like "us and others" Thus, new Easts are constantly constructed within the East.

The discourse of distinction not only shaped societies but also turned to a seed of thought that was planted in the minds of Western or Eastern individuals. No place in the world can avoid being the object of orientalization process now.





## New Easts Created by Self-Orientalism

The marginalized East isn't a single area. The "Easts" are constantly multiplying. For example, Balkans is more Eastern than Western Europe. Turkey is more eastern than Europe and the Middle East is more eastern than Turkey. Hayden explains this classification process as follows:

*The grading of the East, that's what I call "constantly nesting orientalisms", is a reproduction model of the original duality on which orientalism is based. In this model, Asia is more "eastern" or more "other" than Eastern Europe (Hayden, 2007, p.356).*

The reproduction model of the East has created a new tendency towards constructing new Easts within the Eastern societies. Because of this dual conflict system which's imposed on the whole world through global information technologies, the Eastern societies cannot think freely without this framework and they systematically create their "others".

Western global powers have presented the East as an element of fear, an enemy, or an underdeveloped region in need of help when necessary to keep their societies in this hegemonic network and protect their global interests.

The concept of self-orientalism was used for the first time in 1927 by "Antonio Chuffat Latour" in his work "Apunte historico de las chinas en Cuba" for the representation of the Chinese community (Durna, as cited in Bezci & Çiftçi, 2012, p.143). The concept of self-orientalism has gone beyond Said's conceptualization. Though it's based on Said, the new orientalism reveals a more introverted, intellectual and hegemonic phenomenon (Fukuzimi, as cited in Bezci & Çiftçi, 2012). While sowing the seeds of the global East-West conflict within Eastern societies, the distinction of modern vs other was built within the society.

Said asked many questions that he didn't answer in his book Orientalism (2012). What's the contribution of the Eastern societies in the process of orientalism? Said's orientalism is based on Euro-American thought. Although orientalism is a creation of European intellectuals, Eastern intellectuals also participated in this creation process (Dirlik, 2005, p.168).

Self-orientalism stands out as a political strategy applied voluntarily by leaders who aimed to modernize society in the process of the formation of modern nation-states. In the post-colonial period, it's systematically implemented by intellectuals who are in contact with modern colonialists after colonialism (Bezci & Çiftçi, 2012).

Hamid Dabashi identifies self-orientalists as "comprador intellectuals" who serve the purposes of the great powers. Self-orientalists/comprador intellectuals play an important role in the



establishment, construction and definition of orientalist understandings and generalizations (Obendorf, as cited in Aka & Nişancı, 2015).

The problem of the intellectuals' participation in hegemonic practices requires a certain seriousness since these intellectuals appear with an identity that Gramsci describes as organic intellectuals and they're soldiers of the alienated social power (Dirlik, 2005, p.63).

Through the discursive powers of intellectuals, self-orientalism alienates society from itself, and part of society becomes the other of society. Whether it's in Turkey, in the Far East, or the Arab world, the distinction of "modern" and "other" has become so normal for every society. As a result of this view, as Bauman (2019) emphasized, others who are seen as strangers are pushed out of social boundaries.

According to Hilmi Yavuz, with the Enlightenment project, the East began to be surrounded by a systematic othering. Montesquieu and even Marx saw the East as the other. Asiatic mode of production (AMP) was a theoretical concept that aims to show that the East is an "other" which is different from the West. Nevertheless, we (Eastern societies) continued to use this concept which allows us to construct our realities through the Western discourse of the other. This is exactly the process of self-orientalism. It's a process of understanding ourselves like the West understands us and even marginalizing ourselves (as cited in Uluç, 2009, p.204).

After the September 11 attacks, the target of neo-orientalism is a more concrete and defined region: Islam and Arab Region. Of course, these new forms of otherness have also found their reflections in self-orientalist and intra-national othering.

September 11 has brought Islam to the front of the stage as never before, with a very heretical result. Since then, Islam has been in the dynamics of globalization. It's consistently become both the product and the actor of globalization. Islam and the Western world have never been closer to each other. The distant and mystical image of Islam in the colonial period was replaced by an Islamic culture that moved to the center of Europe and America (Göle, 2009).

The difference between neo-orientalism and classical orientalism stems from the description of the East. While classical orientalism mostly defines the East through geography (East of Europe), neo-orientalism describes the East in the context of a certain identity (Islam, and the Middle East) (Aka & Nişancı, 2015).

After orientalism started to target the Islamic region and culture as its focal point, the Middle East region was highlighted as a feared area with violence, chaos and human rights violations. As a result, Islam was presented as the sole cause of backwardness and violence against Western civilization.



Well-known neo-orientalists such as Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, Robert Kaplan explained the backwardness of the Islamic geography with the cultural characteristics of its members and with the violence-inclined mental structures of Muslims (as cited in Aka & Nişancı, 2015, p.15).

When Huntington proposed the theory of clash of civilizations in 1993, he predicted that the new conflict that would affect the whole world would be between Western and Islamic Civilization. According to Huntington, when the ideological divide in Europe disappeared, the cultural divide between Western Christianity and Islam reappeared in Europe (2000).

Said (2012) gives concrete examples of this conflict in his book. He reveals the Western representation types of Islam in America. The rising Muslim Arab figure in American popular culture is the most dominant one of these examples. In the cinema and on the television, the Muslim Arab type is mostly a bloodthirsty rascal and a lecherous. Arabs are always shown in crowds in news videos and photographs. There’s no individuality, no personal traits or experience of them. The majority of the photographs show mass anger, misery, or irrational gestures.

These forms of representation overlap with the representation of refugees in the media. For the same reason, a good result or a benefit cannot be expected from the human flow from Syria to Turkey and Europe.

Similar depictions of Said which he made years ago continue today in the Western news media with the same methods towards refugees. Refugees running from the Syrian civil war are unidentified and crowded. This approach towards refugees has become an unquestionable discourse for other countries in the Middle East. Even countries of Islamic culture or those who recognize this culture are affected by the distinction between center and periphery.

### **Refugees As “Others”**

The Eastern-Islamic Geography, which was represented as a threat to Western civilization, was discursively positioned as the center of violence, terrorism, and chaos. The atmosphere of violence in the region, shaped by regional conflicts and global interests, reached its peak with the Syrian Civil War.

Refugees fleeing the civil war continue to be seen as problems that need to be solved not only for border regions but also for other global powers. At this point, the status of Turkey is different compared to other countries. A distinction should be made between Turkey which hosts 3.6 million refugees (UNHCR, 2020) and Western countries whose only policy is to protect their borders and societies from this refugee threat.







The striking thing is the reproduction of orientalist refugee representations of Western media in Turkey depending on the number of the refugees and the duration of their stay. The state of Turkey has adopted more humanitarian approaches to the refugees. Yet, over time, the dominant digital discourse on social media caused the representations of refugees to transfer to an "othering" and self-orientalist framework.

In the context of the problem that creates the othering process, each social group acquires a representation of other groups and nurtures stereotypes. Because essentialist thought is embedded in society. Refugees thrown out of mainstream categories have also become the object of the othering process (Uluç, 2009, p.41).

It's necessary to analyze the approaches of the Western Media towards refugees to understand the representation forms of Syrian Identity.

*Rane, Ewart and Martinkus (2014) argued that Western media perpetuate Orientalist discourses by framing Middle Eastern culture and Islam as a religion that's "a different, strange, inferior and threatening 'Other'. Kamali (2001) found that news reports heighten public perception of differences by focusing on negative stories involving immigrants, honour killings, and legality of religious dress (as cited in Aarssen, 2017, p.3).*

As explained above, the representation types of the Western media towards Syrian refugees proceed in parallel with the culture of Islam. Individual stories of refugees are ignored. These people whose deaths are more predictable than Western individuals are portrayed as faceless and unidentified crowds.

According to the mainstream Western media, "refugees" are a burden for global states, and these masses without identity and place are doomed to wait at the Western borders forever. Refugees are homeless strangers of the new world. This orientalist discourse of Western states that alienates refugees overlaps with Bauman's (as cited in Öztürk, 2017) definition of "stranger".

*"Stranger is simply not an unknown person, not someone we don't know well. The notable feature of strangers is that they're largely familiar; To consider a person as a stranger, I first need to know at least a few things about him. First of all, they must come into my field of vision over and over again, uninvitedly. If they were not like this, they wouldn't be strangers, they would be 'nobody' (as cited in Öztürk, 2017, p.5).*

Today, Syrian refugees have entered the field of vision of the world states uninvitedly and





started to push their comfort zones. Refugees aren’t only a threat with their cultural and religious differences but also elements that make the uneasy and conformist worlds of the EU countries void with nihilist migration movements.

According to Baumann, the most annoying feature of refugees /strangers is that they’re neither neighbors nor creatures. Neighbor-like creatures. Creature neighbors. In other words, strangers. So socially distant, but physically close. Strangers are residents of nobody's country or an area where there are very few norms and rules. Therefore, whatever is normal and natural for us and what’s suitable for our lifestyle, is strange and sometimes surprising for them. Even if they don’t act aggressively, people consciously or unconsciously get angry with strangers because they’re unfamiliar and therefore unpredictable and suspicious. Refugees are the most well-known strangers of the fluid modern age (as cited in Öztürk, 2017, p.6).

Refugees are seen as unregulated groups that leave the dust of their destroyed countries behind. For this reason, most of the news on them is about death, destruction, and misery. Taking advantage of the dominance of visual culture, the media constructs this orientalist discourse especially, through photographs.

*Behdad and Gartland argue that photography has played a unique role in maintaining orientalism historically. Photography is crucial for the creation and maintenance of Europe’s distinctly Orientalist Middle East vision. Titles and labels are used to control a viewer’s interpretation of the subject being represented, to speak for them, and to balance the fear of uncertainty, to balance the possibility of any interference by the Eastern other on the life of the European audience (Behdad, 2013, p.26) (as cited in Aarssen, 2017, p.4).*

Even if the images about refugees don’t only say lies, they can be deceptive because they tell the truth one-sided. As Sartori (2004) emphasizes, the image is a reality that leaves no room for words and is perceived as it appears. Visual elements, whether on social media or television, are deceptive because they reflect the visual side of the event, not the facts behind it.

*Haynes, Deveraux and Breen (2014) identified several key negative frames in mainstream news media in the context of discourse about refugees: economic threats, social deviants, illegal aliens, and a threat to national integrity. These frames are utilized to represent refugees as “other” and to delegitimize the system of asylum (as cited in Aarssen, 2017, p.4).*

These negative frames encountered in the Western media are also frequently encountered among professional journalists and Turkish social media users.





*There was a tendency to show refugees in large groups and lacking recognizable facial features, leading to “visual dehumanization” (Bleiker et al., 2013, p.406). Batziou (2011) noted that press photographs use particular techniques, such as spatial distance and expressionless faces, to frame immigrants as Other (p.41) (as cited in Aarssen, 2017, p.4).*

*The Ethical Journalism Network (Suffee 2016) noted that migration stories in the British press are rarely told from the perspective of the refugees. Additionally, a cross-European press content analysis of migration stories (LSE report), found that refugees were seldom given names in press coverage, nor were details given about their profession, gender, or age – features which humanise subjects enabling readers to relate to them. On the other hand, their nationalities were very often provided with the effect of emphasising their dissimilarity and thus their separation from European readers (Arif, 2018, p.36).*

According to Agier, immigration policy aims to strengthen the separation between the two increasingly strict world categories. On the one hand, the clean, healthy and visible world, on the other hand, the dark, sick, and invisible world of "residues" (as cited in Bauman, 2019).

The refugee camps aren't the new mysterious East of orientalism. They're at a much lower position than the mentioned form of representation. People here refer to a population that lives nowhere in the world and they're counted as "residuals". Refugees, who are representatives of nothingness in the face of existing sterile European Union ideas, attract the attention of Europeans as they move between the two worlds, but this attention isn't in a humane dimension but in the form of a "burden".

The existence of residues is a worldwide phenomenon that's not limited to Europe. This term refers to those who are far from our eyes, hearts and conscience. We only notice these people at the point where they want to transition into our world. Each camp is surrounded by barbed wire and electric fences, or simply under siege by the deterrent presence of the emptiness. If they manage to visit this world, their entrances and exits pass through guns and virus detectors, and their thoughts and memories take place in captivity (Flammarion, as cited in Bauman, 2017, p.75).

Refugees, the human waste of the global border, are the incarnation of the "stranger" or the new "other" of orientalism. In the planet where fluidity prevails, these people, who have no roof over their heads and no rights, suffer not because of inequality before the law, but because there is no law and protection can be applied to them when they complain about the ill-treatment towards them. Today the statesmen of the European Union are using much of their time and mental capacity to think of increasingly sophisticated ways to close and





consolidate the borders (Bauman, as cited in Öztürk, 2017).

Göle (2009) emphasizes the conflictual interpenetration of Islam and Europe after September 11. Refugees waiting at the borders of Europe are the new actors of the Islam-Europe encounter.

While European countries follow such persistent policies to keep refugees out, Western media represent refugees as completely excluded, unidentified and dangerous groups of people. This discourse effect even the countries like Turkey -which is an another object of orientalism- whose their refugee policies is more humanitarian.

Especially the approach of middle-upper class, educated, young “pro-sumers” who use social media platforms such as Twitter, where the global digital discourse is more prominent, is in line with these neo-orientalist and self-orientalist policies. In the background of this trend, the internalized orientalist perspective which has been extant in Turkey is hidden.

In Turkey, especially since after 1839 and after the declaration of the Republic, the adventure of Westernization has been sharply demonstrated. After this point, Turkey's approach to the Middle East has mostly progressed in parallel with Western states. The West has been evaluated as the geography of development and the Middle East has been identified as the geography of inertia and chaos. After the establishment of the Republic, with Turkey's positioning next to Europe, this perception has strengthened. Turkey has brought an internalized and implicit interpretation of self-orientalism to the Middle East where it connects with the connections of Ottoman History and Islam. Although the importance of Islam was still central for Turkey, the Middle East has been accepted as geography where the religion of Islam is misinterpreted (Kahraman, 2002).

With this new positioning, it's normal for Turkey to separate itself from the geography of the Middle East and to be close to the Western civilization but on the other hand, the Eastern stereotypes of orientalism have been internalized. As a result, the distinction of "moderns and others" which has been created by self-orientalism has become the main conflict of Turkey today. In particular, it's observed that the y and z generation whose focus is on secularity and modernity, shaped by the development of global information technologies, tend to adopt this discourse. The discourse used by these generations on social media focuses on the acceptance that the West is equal to civilization and the East has the gene of violence. East's backwardness is inevitable. Undoubtedly, there is a huge impact of the global media in the creation of this digital discourse.

Because the refugee policy of Turkey is different from the Western States, Turkish society has faced the reality of the refugees more sharply and longer than the Western societies. Initially,





attitudes towards refugees were mostly humanitarian. These humanitarian approaches have started to change with the increase in the number of refugees and the lengthening of their stay. The refugee issue has begun to be considered as a problem with its economic dimensions as well as its cultural dimensions.

Syrians coming from Syria or refugee camps often live under difficult conditions and without the opportunity for representation but on the other hand, it would be wrong to say that all of them are excluded and othered by society. In this aspect, Turkey is separated from Western countries. Refugees can establish a business in Turkey and receive significant assistance through non-governmental organizations. Despite all this, the majority of refugees still live an unidentified life in great difficulties.

Turkey is affected deeply by the global refugee crisis, due to its geographical location. It has a very unique experience on the global refugee map. Firstly, Turkey which is the neighbor of countries like Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria that have faced the problems like war, civil conflict, social and political pressures is located at the center of geography which produces refugees or immigrants. Second, Turkey is the transit point not only for refugees from the countries mentioned but also from African countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, albeit in limited numbers. For these reasons, Turkey stands out as the country that experiences refugee migration most intensively, both as a transit and a destination country (Kahraman & Nizam, 2016, p.809).

After the Syrian Civil War, these migration movements have reached an uncontrollable level. Since 2011, there has been a significant migration movement to Turkey. Turkey's socio-economic structure has been affected significantly by this migration that took place in the last nine years. Basically, this obligatory migration from Syria to Turkey also led to other movements of migration to Turkey. Between 2011-2017, a total of refugees who have immigrated to Turkey has exceeded 4 million (Erdoğan et al., 2017).

According to recent UN Refugee Agency-UNHCR (2020) statistics; the number of Syrian refugees reached nearly 3.6 million in Turkey. According to "Refugees Association's" figures of registered Syrians which is under temporary protection in Turkey has been announced on 21 October 2020 as 3.624.514 by showing an increase of 2.549 people according to last month. 1.694.242 of those people (%46,7) are children between 0-18 age. A total number of 0-18 aged children and women is 2.558.139(%70,5). The most important information about Syrian refugees is that over 98% of Syrian refugees live across Turkey in 81 cities.

### **Representation of Syrian Refugees on Twitter**

Syrians sometimes represent themselves in public spheres in the center of Istanbul and other





big cities. This situation causes the emergence of different perceptions towards refugees. Urban refugees in Turkey, like around the world, can face all kinds of risks in urban spaces although they have more opportunities than the refugee camps. In addition to not having citizenship rights, they live in worse conditions than the poor natives of the city. Regardless of their status in Turkey, Syrian urban refugees try to live in crowded houses, in negative housing conditions, and face the most severe exploitation mechanisms, including the informal labor market (Buz, et al., as cited in Kahraman and Nizam, 2016).

Syrian refugees in Turkey tend to live invisible because of difficult living conditions. This invisibility, which is the expected behavior of refugees, doesn’t cause social discomfort but Syrians who display behaviors that don’t match the oppressed and suffering refugee image presented by the media (such as celebrating the new year, dancing, establishing a business, etc.) are getting much more reaction. These reactions can be seen on Twitter under certain terms and hashtags.

Discrimination and hate speech towards refugees in countries receiving migration can cause conflicts between natives and refugees in the long term. Traditional and new media have a significant impact on the spreading of negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviors towards refugees.

The “high but fragile level of social acceptance” that exists in Turkey cannot be evaluated without the attitude of the media. According to a study conducted previously on the representation of refugees in the conventional Turkish media (Erdoğan et al., 2017), the following findings were reached;

- 1) Generally, the subject of Syrian refugees in Turkey is drawing no attention in Turkish media.
- 2) The Turkish media reported on the Assad regime rather than the difficult conditions of the Syrian refugees.
- 3) The refugee issue is often dealt with on an emotional basis. The economic, social, and political impacts are dealt with very limitedly. Such news can be seen within the context of popular culture and drama as an element of the culture industry.
- 4) The issue of refugees is considered as a field of sacrifice, solidarity, generosity, and goodness in pro-government media, while it’s treated as a ball of political shortsightedness and inaccuracies in anti-government media.
- 5) Refugees fleeing Turkey and their accidents in this way of migration are the most important part of the issues regarding Syrians in Turkish media.

It can be generally said that the stories of Syrian Refugees was substantially ignored by the Turkish media. In the language used in the news, some definitions and stereotypes stand out





about Syrian Refugees such as, “illegal refugees”, “illegally passing fugitives”.

As seen in the study above, the conventional media approached the Syrian refugees in the context of “crime”, “drama”, “foreign policy” and “hospitality”. This result has led to an alienating perception towards Syrians in the eyes of society. As a response to these misperceptions, most Syrian refugees don’t have the opportunity to express themselves. These stereotypes support the self-orientalist representation style, which is dominated by the theme of violence and backwardness. There is a lot of false information about refugees on Twitter. For example, it’s claimed that Syrians receive salaries from the state, can enter universities without exams, and don’t pay taxes. Such false information reinforces the perception of Syrians as an economic threat. Hate speech towards Syrians on Twitter is growing with lies.

The tragic death of Aylan Kurdi, 3, who lost his life due to the sinking of the boat carrying refugees off the Bodrum, was an important breaking point for explaining the tragic conditions of Syrians. This dramatic image highlighted the humanitarian level of the refugee issue by revealing the image of an innocent and oppressed refugee. As refugees are often rated at a level far inferior to the normal human level, standard human behavior cannot be expected from them. Death, drowning, and misery await them. Images or news stories suitable for the low-profile refugee image bring the attitudes towards refugees to a humanitarian level. However, behaviors that are the opposite of this image are met with big reaction.

One of the biggest examples that contradict this refugee image was the annual celebration of Syrians in Turkey. A reactionary discourse has emerged on Twitter, after a group of Syrians’ New Year Celebration and the opening of the flag of the Free Syrian Army in Taksim. The events of the New Year have transformed the image of the “Syrian Refugee” to the “alien occupying the urban sphere” by taking it out of the context of pain, drama, and backwardness. After the Syrians celebrated New Year's Eve at Taksim Square which is a social meeting and entertainment point of different cultures, a significant part of the people reacted to the celebration of the Syrians. This reaction was reflected on Twitter as an anti-refugee discourse. As a concrete result of this anti-refugee discourse on Twitter, the hashtag “#ÜlkemdeSuriyeliİstemiyorum” (*#IdontWantSyriansinMyCountry*) was quickly circulated.

From a self-orientalist perspective, Syrians are defined as others who don’t belong to these lands. Their way of living, their Eastern characteristics like having a lot of children, and some of their cultural incompatibilities in public spheres are regarded as the features that justify this marginalization. Syrians continue to be perceived as fugitives and criminals who left their country. They’re also considered as “parasites” that don’t contribute to the production and an economic burden for the country.

The rise of othering language and hate speech on refugees in traditional and social media has







also come to the fore as an academic field of study. The earlier studies in the first years of the refugee crisis in Turkey mostly focused on the confusion and problems regarding the use of political terms such as "immigrant", "asylum", "refugee" in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis (Kolukırık et al., as cited in Pandır, 2018). Later, it's seen that studies focusing on Syrian representation were carried out, especially in the print media. In these studies, it's concluded that the representations of Syrians in the print media had a dual structure. Accordingly, Syrians are represented in two contexts. They were either represented as oppressed victims or portrayed as a threat to society, especially in the anti-government media outlets (Erdoğan, 2015; Gölcü & Dağlı, 2017; Sunata & Yıldız, 2018). In recent studies, the discursive power of social media has been taken into account. There's been a significant increase in studies on Twitter and hate speech in particular. These studies mostly support the argument of our study. In these studies, it's been concluded that a language based on the distinction of "us and others" has risen on social media and Twitter. Due to its ease of use and its structure that allows anonymity, Twitter has become an environment where different perspectives and hate speech towards Syrians can easily spread (Bozdag & Smets, 2017; Bulbul et al., 2018; Özdemir & Özkan, 2016; Yıldız, 2018).

The aforementioned studies support our study as they highlight the growing anti-refugee language on Twitter. However, our study is based on the tweets of ordinary social media users who we can call prosumers, not the written, visual or digital content of media professionals. Through these tweets, the projections of the self-orientalist language that's been included in the Turkish social structure have been sought. For this reason, Twitter has been an important source of data for our study.

According to WeAreSocial Stats of 2020, Twitter is the fourth most-used social media platform in Turkey. Almost 12 million people are using Twitter. Twitter is a text-based micro-blogging platform, and therefore it's a medium for the purest and concrete forms of hate speech. As an alternative public sphere, Twitter offers a wide range of material to social scientists. Twitter is the social media platform where different discourses and approaches towards Syrian refugees can be followed in detail in Turkey. For this reason, in the research section of the study, Twitter was chosen to reveal self-orientalist approaches and stereotypes towards Syrians in Turkish society.

### **The Twitter Research of "Syrian Identity"**

The purpose of this study is to reveal which stereotypes correspond to the "Syrian" image among Turkish users on Twitter and to question the self-orientalistic effect in the process of othering.

The main reason for the selection of Twitter, which has turned to a micro-journalism and







micro-blogging site as a field of study, is that it stands out as a text-based social media platform and quickly spreads the concentrated ideas of the users and becomes a public sphere where people from different views express their opinions.

## METHODOLOGY

The main limitation of researching on Twitter is that the information flow is infinite. It's very difficult to limit, filter, and categorize the tweets among this tweet bombardment. There are certain computer programs for this but for individual usage these are also quite expensive.

Within the scope of the study, 460 up-to-date tweets containing the word "Syrians" (Suriyeliler) were pulled and analyzed through the open-source software Knime and they were categorized with the content analysis program Atlas.ti. Certain categories are determined for classification and each tweet is tagged with these categories. As a result, these measurements, prominent terms, most used words, category titles, tweets shown as examples translated into English, and statistics presented in this way.

The reason for choosing the term "Syrian" is that it's turned into an umbrella term. Because even refugees of different nationalities, who tend to be seen as the "other", maybe called "Syrian" by looking at some social, economic and physical factors. In this context, the word "Syrians" has turned into a name of an inferior social stratum.

Among young people using social media, it's observed that there's a sensitivity towards the term "Syrian". One of the most important ways to measure this reaction is to examine digital content. Tweets pulled from Twitter through the Knime were posted between November 16 and 20 of 2020.

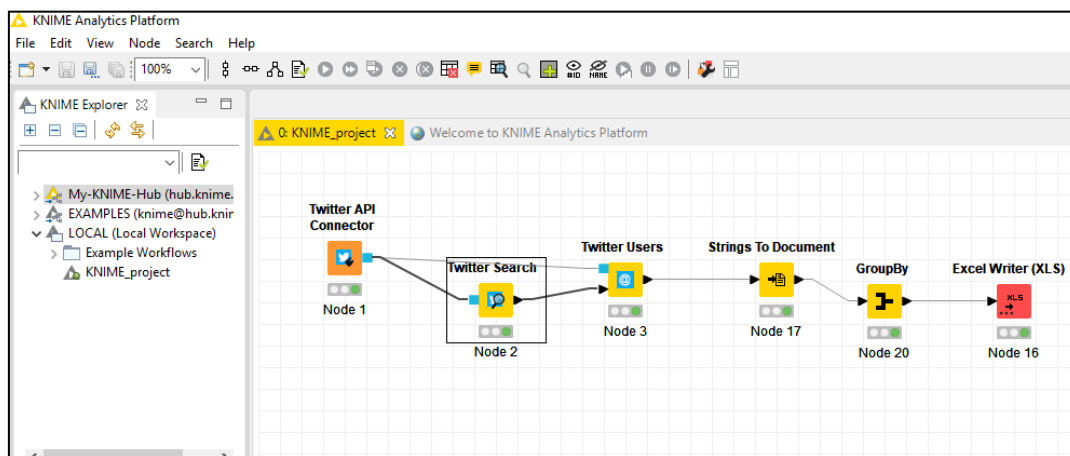


Image 1. Knime Interface and Algorithm Used for Pulling Tweets





After reaching 460 tweets randomly, tweets were divided into categories (code groups) with the qualitative data analysis & research software "Atlas.ti". Categories can be considered as a higher level of code to which text will be tagged. The categories and the codes can be listed as follows:

### 1) Retweet (Rt) Situation

- a. Non-Rt
- b. Rt

### 2) Content

- a. Claims about Syrians (The tweets consisting of fake or unsupported information about refugees)
- b. Hate Speech (The tweets consisting of direct hatred towards refugees)
- c. News (The news from professional media)
- d. Political Criticism (The tweets mostly based on the political criticism)
- e. Real Informations (The tweets consisting of real informations about refugees)
- f. Support (The tweets that support the refugees)
- g. Other Content (The Tweets that cannot be included in other codes of contents)

### 3) Representation Types (Stereotypes)

- a. Backward
- b. Dehumanized Groups
- c. Economic and Social Threats
- d. Human
- e. Illegal Aliens
- f. Traitor
- g. Victim
- h. Other Types

While examining the contents, it’s been revealed that certain categories, themes are evident and constantly repeat themselves. These emerging categories helped to identify the codes to which the contents would be classified. The tweets examined also include retweets. Because retweets shared by another person also mean that a different user shares similar stereotype. While performing frequency analysis at the level of single codes, relations between different codes were also examined.



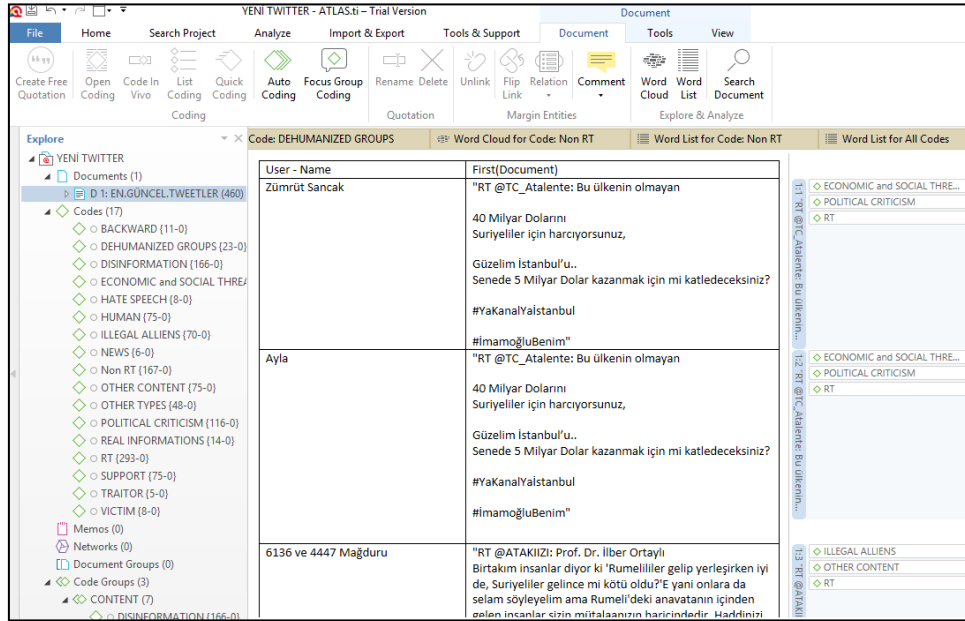


Image 2. The Interface of Atlas.ti

## Findings

As a result of the frequency analysis of the examined 460 tweets, the following findings were reached. In this study, the most important and prominent parts of the findings were shared. The obtained findings support the thesis that self-orientalist discourse and othering language are dominant on Twitter. First, the following conclusions were reached about the status of retweets:

167 (36%) of 460 tweets don't contain retweets. 263 (63,7%) of them contain retweets. These findings show that certain concepts and discourses regarding Syrian refugees revolve between different users and similar stereotypes are shared among users. Among the 460 tweets studied, one of the most retweeted (5,3k) tweets belongs to İlber Ortaylı, one of Turkey's leading historians;

İlber Ortaylı @ILBERORTAYLIGSU Jan 19, 2019

**(Tr)** "Birtakım insanlar diyor ki 'Rumelililer gelip yerleşirken iyi de Suriyeliler gelince mi kötü oldu? E yani onlara da selam söyleyelim ama Rumeli'deki anavatanın içinden gelen insanlar sizin mütalaanızın haricindedir. Haddinizi bilin."

**(En)** "Some people say: "It's ok when the Rumelians come and settle but why it's bad when the Syrians come?" Let's salute them too but the people from the motherland in Rumeli are outside of your consideration. Know your place."

In that tweet, it's indirectly emphasized that Syrians are people from outside of the Ottoman



Empire homeland. Although İlber Ortaylı, as an important intellectual, didn’t directly say that people from Rumelia are more valuable than Syrians but Turkish users shared this tweet intensely for emphasizing that Syrians are culturally at an inferior level compared to Rumelians. Syrians are considered outside of the Turkish historical homeland.

Secondly, the content of the tweets was examined in the study. The following data emerged when the tweets were tagged according to their content:

**Table 1.** Contents of Tweets

Content Type	Number of Tweets	Percentages
Claims about Syrians	166	36,09%
Political Criticism	116	25,22%
Support	75	16,30%
Real Informations	14	3,04%
Hate Speech	8	1,74%
News	6	1,30%
Other Content	75	16,30%
Totals	460	100,00%

According to the data above, the largest part (36%) of the tweets contains the “claims about Syrians”. These tweets are full of interesting and manipulative claims. The tweets shared in the context of the current issues such as the pandemic strengthen the false threat perception towards Syrian refugees. When the co-occurrence tables, in which the code of “claims about Syrians” are compared with the representation styles, are examined, it’s seen that in 78% (129 tweets) of the tweets containing unsupported claims about Syrians, Syrian refugees are represented as an economic and social threat. Syrians are portrayed as dehumanized groups in 7% (11 tweets) of the tweets containing claims about Syrians. There are no tweets where they’re represented only with their individual and humane dimensions.

**Table 2.** Co-occurrence Table of the code of Claims About Syrians and the Representation Type Codes

CODE :	Economic and Social Threat	Dehumanized Groups	Illegal Aliens	Traitor	Other Types	Human	Victim	Backward	Total
Claims About Syrians	129	11	10	2	14	0	0	0	166





For example, many tweets were shared about the claim that Syrian refugees don't get the Corona disease. Even if the claims are true, there's no scientific explanation behind this. Syrian refugees pushed out of society are represented as dehumanized groups by such sensitive issues. According to this form of representation, the pandemic, which is a common problem of Turkish citizens, isn't the problem of Syrian refugees. With such approaches, it's emphasized that Syrians are in a more comfortable situation than it's known and they aren't human enough to even catch the disease.

The tweets below are the examples of this approach;

- 1) **(Tr)** *"bu pandemide hiç zarar görmeyen suriyeliler üçüncü çocuk doğuruyor gayet işleri var hiç sıkıntıları yok"*  
**(En)** *"#Syrians, who have never been harmed in this pandemics, give birth to their third children. Besides they have jobs. They have no problems"*
- 2) **(Tr)** *"RT @History2021: 2) Çin'de parti düzenliyor eğleniyorlar. Ülkede suriyeliler le birlikte toplam 7 milyon göçmen yabancı yaşamakta ve biri bile koronadan ölmemiş Süleyman Soylu da bunu kabul etti. Ölenlerin hepsi Türk. Ülkede 7 milyon mülteci ve yabancı yaşıyor ve bir tane bile yabancı ölmedi ???"*  
**(En)** *"RT @ History2021: 2) They're organizing a party in China and having fun. A total of 7 million immigrant foreigners live in the country together with Syrians and not even one of them died from the corona. Suleyman Soylu also agreed that. All of the dead are Turkish. 7 million refugees and foreigners live in the country and not even one of the strangers died ???"*

In terms of the content of the tweets, "political criticism" (116 tweets) comes second. At this point, the Syrian refugees, in particular are used as means for criticizing and opposing the current government and the president. Also, they're presented as a political trump card to lower the AKP's votes in the elections. This situation ignores or overshadows the individual stories and identities of Syrians. They seem like pro-government political elements without identity.

The most important part of the study is the representation types of refugees. The table below shows which representation types are tagged in tweets. Looking at the table below, the most important result is that an intense othering language has emerged on Twitter towards Syrian refugees. Syrian refugees are firstly perceived as an economic and social threat. Almost half (48%) of the tweets were shared in such a context. This situation shows that how economic concerns affect perceptions towards Syrians. Fake or unsupported information especially about refugees has a great impact on this perception. This perception has been created through the claims that Syrians receive salaries from the state, don't pay taxes and vehicle control fees.





According to Refugees Association's information (2020), people who are under temporary protection or international protection in Turkey and meet certain criteria are paid 120 Turkish liras of support per month, called Social Adaptation Aid (SUY) funded by the European Union. This money isn't given to all Syrians living in Turkey, but only to people with certain criteria.

The Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay) mediates the delivery of this money to the people in need through the Red Crescent Card system (2020). Also, other mentioned claims aren't true about refugees.

The other important information is that in only 16% of the tweets, Syrians were impartially represented as humans.

**Table 3.** Distribution of Tweets According to Different Representation Types

Codes	Number of Tweets	Percentages
Economic and Social Threat	220	47,83%
Human	75	16,30%
Illegal Aliens	70	15,22%
Dehumanized Groups	23	5,00%
Backward	11	2,39%
Victim	8	1,74%
Traitor	5	1,09%
Other Types	48	10,43%
Totals	460	100,00%

The codes in which self-orientalist approaches emerge dominantly are the ones of "Dehumanized Groups" and "Backward". In the tweets tagged with this code, Syrians are represented in line with the neo-orientalist perspective presented in the Western media. In these codes, important stereotypes about Syrians were reached. For example, the most common theme in tweets tagged with the code "dehumanized groups" is the habit of Syrians having many children. In this context, especially the characteristics of Syrians such as traveling in crowds and having many children are evaluated outside of the civilized human stereotype. These people have no identity or uniqueness. The group called "Syrians" is a homogeneous group and people in this social stratum are portrayed as loud and faceless crowds like in the American movies with the same neo-orientalist point of view;





- 1- (Tr) "Suriyeliler eşeysiz üremeye mi ürüyolar? Her yerdeler"  
(En) "Do Syrians breed by asexual reproduction? They are everywhere."
- 2- (Tr) "Suriyeliler neden her yerde ordu gibi geziyorlar"  
(En) "Why do Syrians walking around like an army everywhere?"

The codes that most prominently reveal stereotypes about Syrians are the "dehumanized groups", "backward" and "illegal aliens". The most commonly used words in tweets tagged with these codes and the word cloud consisting of them are shown below:

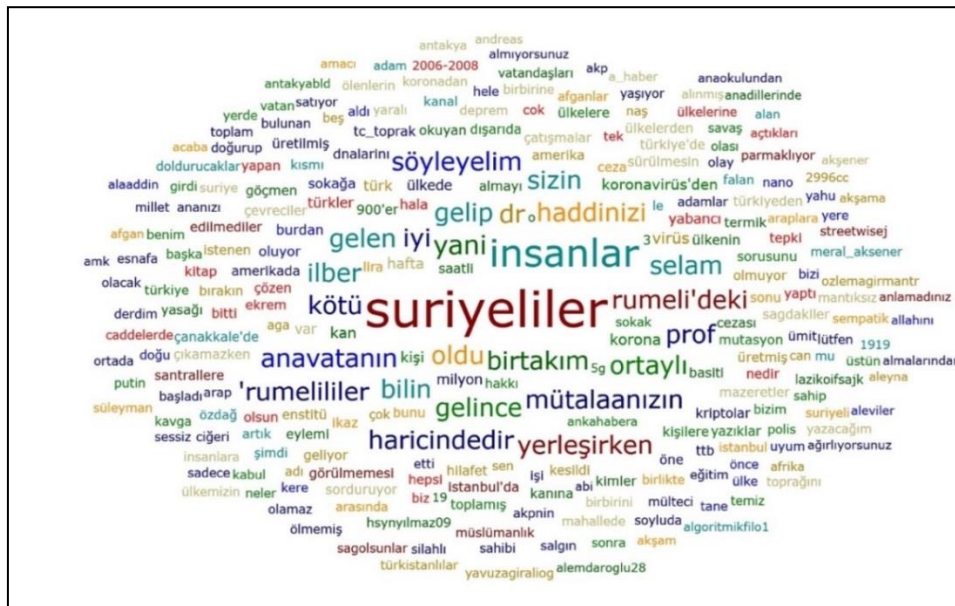


Image 3. The Word Cloud for the codes of "Dehumanized Groups", "Backward" and Illegal Aliens

When we look at the most frequently used words (with English translations) in the codes of "dehumanized groups", "backward" and "illegal aliens", these words below are prominent.

Table 4. Word List for the codes of "dehumanized groups", "backward" and "illegal aliens"

Word	Frequency
Suriyeliler (Syrians)	105
İnsanlar (People)	72
Onlara (To them)	37
Anavatan (Homeland)	36
Haricindedir (out)	36
Rumeli'deki (In Rumelia)	36
İlber	36
Ülke (Country)	19
Akp	16
Türk (Turk)	13





<i>Türkiye (Turkey)</i>	11
<i>Virüs (Virus)</i>	10
<i>Korona</i>	10
<i>Akşener</i>	9
<i>Kan (Blood)</i>	8
<i>Yabancı (Stranger)</i>	6
<i>Arap (Arab)</i>	5
<i>Sokak (Street)</i>	5
<i>Vatandaş (Citizen)</i>	4
<i>Ülkelerine (To Their Country)</i>	4
<i>Göçmen (Immigrant)</i>	4

When the most frequently used words about Syrians are examined, important findings are found in the codes of "dehumanized groups", "backward" and "illegal aliens". It's observed that words such as "people", "them", "motherland" are mostly used terms for "Syrian refugees.

Just as Bauman mentions they have no place on earth even if they are settled in Turkey. There is a fragile acceptance of refugees in Turkish society. Syrians were regarded as a threat, not individually but as a large and homogeneous population group. At this point, the tweet of İlber Ortaylı comparing Syrians with Rumelians was taken as a reference, and Syrians are placed lower than citizens from Rumelia. Refugees are considered outside of homeland borders. These findings reveal that neo-orientalist discourse and the self-orientalist approach is quite effective in Turkey and on Twitter. The findings show that the Syrian identity is represented in line with the othering Western policies and discourses and that Syrians are wanted to be kept outside of the borders as unidentified strangers of the modern age. This hate speech, especially shaped by digital platforms, produces and strengthens false stereotypes about Syrian identity. The Eastern identity, which is the object of orientalism, has been identified with the Syrian refugee identity during the global migration period. This situation poses a major obstacle to social integration.

## CONCLUSION

In the new media age, where information is the power, the most fundamental conflicts take shape at the level of the discourse. The neo-orientalist discourse, which goes far beyond Said's perspective, has increased its dominance much more with the impact of the digital media. Concentrated and exaggerated ideas find a place on Twitter instead of vital concerns and human issues of the physical world and as a result, these platforms spread hate speech and fuel othering.

In such a period where technology and society are intertwined more than ever before, a significant portion of the young people called “digital natives” and prosumers ensure the







continuity of the global dominant discourse. The anti-refugee tweets they share as a form of slactivism are put into circulation and they deepen the holistic perspective of the dominant discourse. This situation makes the process of othering which can be called self-orientalism stable and permanent. The examined tweets support the thesis put forward in the study. When the whole research is evaluated, in only 16% of the tweets shared, Syrian refugees were represented as individuals instead of representing as a victim or a threat. Features such as "oppression", "backwardness", "dehumanization", "being an economic threat" have become features identified with the concept of refugees. Syrians, who are seen as representatives of nothingness in digital discourse, are rarely represented at an individual level.

The West's policy of closing borders and excluding refugees is globally internalized as the right and rational policy. Hegemonic discourse prevents alternative approaches against the internalized stereotypes towards refugees. Ignoring the humanitarian dimension of the refugee issue for security reasons is accepted as a universal and approved right. For this reason, most of the tweet contents include criticisms against the Turkish government. It's common for countries to exclude "strangers" to protect themselves. However, there's no humanitarian solution for these strangers who cannot return to their countries or asylum to other countries. They are expected to stay in the camps forever. Limited refugees who are good enough and who are close to Western values are accepted by Western countries as a global PR campaign to silence the reactions.

Outsiders have no identity. Traditional and digital media confirm this. The individual stories of the crowds identified with the word "Syrians" which is settled in our language are never known. Rather, this word refers to an inferior lifestyle and social stratum. This study shows how big the influence of digital and social media, especially Twitter, in spreading hegemonic discourse.

It's clear that some of the refugees have difficulties at the point of social integration, some cultural differences cause fear. It's normal that such anxiety arises in the receiving societies. Both in Turkey and in the Western countries, for the social integration of these people, it's necessary to remove the refugee issue from the neo-orientalist and political framework and bring it to a humane dimension.

The study revealed how false news and information shape the digital discourse about refugees. Accordingly, it's understood that the new media literacy needs to be developed from a broader and humanitarian dimension.

Digital media should be used actively to circulate alternative discourses instead of the internalized orientalist discourse that's settled in society. Thus, negative attitudes, othering and hate speech will be reduced. Strong alternatives should be created against the superficial self-orientalist representations of refugees on Twitter and fake news to prevent the discourse





from causing discriminatory behavior and to eliminate social tension.

To achieve this, it’s necessary to benefit from intellectuals and discreet, young social media users who’ll spread alternative discourses, such as the carrier elites of the self-orientalism in society. Alternative discourses of the people who use digital media well and get the approval of the audience from all parts of the society can be a solution to demolish dominant thought models.

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