Digital Culture Jamming and Cultural Populism: A Semiotic Analysis within the Framework of McGuigan's "Cool Capitalism"

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ABSTRACT

Digital culture jamming draws on the richness of digital materials and the dissemination power of online networks to subvert media messages, as well as the dominant and popular discourses produced by political and economic power actors, through humorous and aesthetic means. This study examines how digital culture jamming transforms cultural images employed by capitalism, including symbols of high culture, through the lens of McGuigan's concepts of cultural and critical populism. The primary aim of the study is to analyze the critical stance that digital culture jamming adopts towards popular culture and to evaluate how such content intervenes in the reproduction or concealment of social inequalities. The study applies a qualitative semiotic analysis, adopting Roland Barthes' three levels of meaning, denotation, connotation, and myth, to examine four images selected from a carousel post shared on the public Instagram account @canavarkara. The selected post was considered particularly relevant due to its critical engagement with consumerism and populism, as well as its suitability for semiotic analysis. The findings indicate that these visual interventions not only highlight issues such as labour invisibility, surveillance, and social isolation but also demonstrate how they can simultaneously challenge dominant ideologies under McGuigan's concept of cool capitalism. This study contributes to the literature on digital activism by offering a critical perspective on the visibility of power relations and ideological manipulation. Given the study's focus on a single account, its limitations are acknowledged, and future research should further explore the erosion of culture jammers' anonymity, content production practices, and the populist potential of digital culture jamming.

Keywords : Culture Jamming, Critical Populism, Digital Activism, Semiotics, Popular Culture

Dijital Kültür Bozumu ve Kültürel Popülizm: McGuigan'ın "Havalı Kaptalizm"i Çerçevesinde Göstergebilimsel Bir Çözümleme

ÖZ

Dijital kültür bozumu, dijital materyallerin zenginliğinden ve çevrimiçi ağların yayılma gücünden yararlanarak siyasi ve ekonomik güç aktörleri tarafından üretilen baskın ve popüler söylemlerin yanı sıra medya mesajlarını mizahi ve estetik yollarla altüst etmektedir. Bu çalışma, dijital kültür bozumunun, yüksek kültür sembolleri de dahil olmak üzere kapitalizmin kullandığı kültürel imgeleri, McGuigan'ın kültürel ve eleştirel popülizm kavramları perspektifinden nasıl dönüştürdüğünü

incelemektedir. Çalışmanın temel amacı, dijital kültür bozumunun popüler kültüre karşı benimsediği eleştirel duruşu analiz etmek ve bu tür içeriklerin toplumsal eşitsizliklerin yeniden üretilmesine veya maskelenmesine nasıl müdahale ettiğini değerlendirmektir. Çalışma, Roland Barthes'ın gösterge, çağrışım ve mit düzeylerini dikkate alarak nitel bir semiyotik analiz uygulamakta ve @canavarkara adlı kamuya açık Instagram hesabında paylaşılan çoklu-görselli bir gönderiden seçilen dört görseli incelemektedir. Bu gönderi, tüketimcilik ve popülizmle eleştirel bir ilişki kurması ve semiyotik analize uygunluğu nedeniyle özellikle seçilmiştir. Bulgular, bu görsel müdahalelerin yalnızca emek görünmezliği, gözetim ve sosyal izolasyon gibi konuları vurgulamakla kalmayıp, aynı zamanda McGuigan'ın "cool kapitalizm" kavramı altında baskın ideolojilere nasıl meydan okuyabileceğini de ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışma, güç ilişkilerinin görünürlüğü ve ideolojik manipülasyon üzerine eleştirel bir bakış açısı sunarak dijital aktivizm literatürüne katkıda bulunmaktadır. Çalışmanın tek bir hesaba odaklanması göz önüne alındığında sınırlılıkları kabul edilmektedir ve gelecekteki araştırmalar, kültür bozumunun anonimliğinin aşınmasını, içerik üretim uygulamalarını ve dijital kültür bozumunun popülist potansiyelini daha fazla incelemelidir.

| **Anahtar Kelimeler** | **:** | Kültür Bozumu, Eleştirel Popülizm, Dijital Aktivizm, Göstergebilim, Popüler Kültür |

INTRODUCTION

Culture jamming is not only the critical and subversive re-generation of media messages targeted at consumers by brands and commercial companies, but also political activism that questions economic, social and cultural production processes.

The emergence of culture jamming as a concept and the problematization of the critical approaches to consumerism within the framework of activism occurred in the last quarter of the 20th century. Various factors, such as the Cold War, the bipolar competition in industries like defense, space, information and communication and transportation technologies, and the globalization process, contributed to consumerism becoming a source of both global and local problems.

Focusing particularly on issues such as consumer culture, ecological crises, gender inequality, authoritarianism, and media monopolies, culture jamming has gained an expanded field of expression in the online environment since the 2000s, driven by the rapidly increasing number of digital network users.

Since culture jamming involves the subversion or creative transformation of political or commercial messages, digital technologies have significantly altered their production processes. Once primarily manifested in printed magazines, posters, and billboards in public spaces, culture jamming has rapidly transitioned to the online environment. In this process, social media platforms and content creation tools, which enable fast content production and

aim at a wider audience, have also been adopted by culture jammers as a means to preserve anonymity.

However, as social media has reached a broad audience and prosumers, culture jamming has largely shifted away from its emphasis on anonymity. Culture jamming content can now often be disseminated through public and sometimes even verified social media accounts. This situation conflicts with the critical ethos of culture jamming, given that the dominant social media platforms on which such content circulates are owned by monopolistic technology corporations, frequently criticized for their ecological and economic harms. Nonetheless, it is observed that these contradictions can be overlooked due to the limited reach, smaller user bases, and lower engagement rates of alternative online platforms.

Although McGuigan's concept of cultural populism is not directly linked to political populism, McGuigan is critical of the celebration of popular culture as a form of resistance within power structures shaped by elites (Herkman, 2010). This study first explores the concept of culture jamming within the context of both historical and digital activism literature. It then offers a semiotic analysis of content shared on Instagram, using McGuigan's notion of critical populism in response to the cultural populism as a theoretical framework. The research aims to assess the kinds of meanings generated by digital culture jamming practices in relation to forms of cultural populism.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Culture Jamming

In December 1990, the term *culture jamming* was brought from academia to the mainstream sphere through an article by Mark Derry in The New York Times titled "The Merry Pranksters and the Art of the Hoax." The piece highlighted several individuals "who used semiotic appropriation, sociopolitical satire and media hoaxes to articulate dissent" (DeLaure & Fink, 2017, p. 8).

Although many original academic studies have been meticulously addressed in the literature, the expression culture jamming has not yet become a topic of daily conversation in Türkiye and elsewhere compared to other digital activities (such as hacktivism, hashtag activism, and petition campaigns). This is not due to a lack of interest in culture jamming or its complexity in understanding and application. In fact, with 88% of Türkiye's population connected to the Internet and 67% engaged in social media (Kemp, 2025), considering the high level of online activity, culture jamming is actively taking place on social networks such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Reddit, and Ekşi Sözlük, where political discussions are concentrated.

Culture jamming directly engages with everyday life and society itself. However, as a term, culture jamming faces challenges in finding a place in Turkish literature beyond academic publications. Culture jamming is directly intertwined with daily life and society. However, as a concept and term, it has difficulty gaining a meaningful place in everyday discourse beyond academic publications. Since the 2010s, memes, circulated intensively by users, especially on platforms such as Reddit and Tumblr, have gained widespread recognition, as exemplified by the Occupy Movement (Milner, 2013). In contrast, the more inclusive concept of "culture jamming" lags in terms of terminological visibility. Another reason is that digital activists tend to focus on actions that can be carried out with just a simple click, such as hashtag activism and petitions. These organized and frequently repeated digital actions are used to set the agenda on social media (Erben, 2023).

Lexically, the word 'jam' in 'culture jamming' stands out, often used to indicate the prevention of radio signals from reaching those who want to receive them (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). In other words, jamming is preventing the desired and expected movement of the signals by mixing/distorting the signals. Culture jamming, on the other hand, is defined as a type of social and political activism, and culture jamming aims to draw attention to the power of governments and large corporations; to control and distort the information they present to the public and in the process weakening them (Collins Dictionary, 2012; Winters, 2020).

The Center for Communication & Civic Engagement at Washington University (2002) defines culture jamming as follows:

"Culture jamming presents a variety of interesting communication strategies that play with the branded images and icons of consumer culture to make consumers aware of surrounding problems and diverse cultural experiences that warrant their attention."

According to Wettergren (2005, p. 100), especially with late capitalism, corporate interests and commercial mass media restrict freedom of expression while controlling the public space. Wettergren defines culture jamming as a protest strategy, pointing out that its aim is to decipher the political and ideological content by targeting the symbols of discourse and re-presenting these symbols in alternative forms. Similarly, while Kuehn (2015) treats culture jamming as a form of rhetorical protest, he notes that pranks, hacking, and trap/hoax content can also be employed in culture jamming.

All of these definitions indicate towards culture jamming is considered a rhetorical or communication strategy rather than a movement, mainly associated with disrupting or obstructing the flow of commercial messages (DeLaure & Fink, 2017, p. 7). In this study, although the role of commercial companies and late capitalism in culture jamming is not

ignored, culture jamming against populism is discussed as a type of political action, taking into account the demand for social change and the call for mobilisation.

1.2. From Streets to Online Culture Jamming

Culture jamming has gained a place in media and activism literature as a critique of modern media culture, starting from the 1990s (Day, 2016, pp. 503-504). DeLaure and Fink (2017, pp. 12-24) evaluate the common features of interventions in culture jamming under eight subheadings, although culture jamming practices vary according to geographical and historical contexts:

- The materials used in culture jamming can be a part of an existing advertisement, logo, or work itself. Culture jammers can work on or with these materials, rearranging and mixing them with each other or other materials. It is, therefore, not surprising that copyright disputes arise, and culture jamming practitioners may be subject to legal sanctions.

- Culture jamming activists not only subvert a commercial or political message, but they also create new content with creative and subtle elements. At this point, DeLaure and Fink point out the generation of new pieces in eye-catching forms with aesthetic elements and cleverly used visual or verbal word games.

- Culture jamming often includes humorous indicators and discourses while it targets serious issues such as capitalism, political corruption, election campaigns and ecocide. According to DeLaure and Fink, this makes culture jamming even more tempting.

- Culture jammers often do not reveal their identity through the use of pseudonyms, using the opportunity to become anonymous online. DeLaure and Fink note that anonymity not only protects activists but also draws attention to criticism instead of content creators. In other words, culture jammers direct people's focus to what is done and why rather than who does it. Furthermore, the use of pseudonyms brings with it the questioning of ownership and authority. On the other hand, pseudonyms adopted by activists might create a collective identity.

- Culture jammers invite other activists or users to join their actions by providing materials, textual content and symbols. DeLaure and Fink underline that this shows the importance of collaboration and sharing in culture jamming. It is noteworthy that culture jammers, unlike many artists, prefer to be imitated when the artistic aspect of culture jamming is considered.

- A humorous, artistic, imitative, and often playful form of action, culture jamming is political in nature and purpose. DeLaure and Fink (2017, p. 19) explain this

characteristic of culture jamming as it questions existing power structures, aiming to reveal hypocrisies and injustices, ignite public anger and encourage collective action. At this point, it can be better comprehended why culture jamming is not considered a rhetorical or protest strategy in this study. Rather, it is approached as a social and political practice aimed at generating resistance and opposition, instead of being confined to a narrow definition as a mere communicative tactic.

- The content created in new forms in culture jamming is not in a single original manner. On the contrary, as DeLaure and Fink state, it can be effortlessly adopted and reproduced by others, and its area of influence can expand. Therefore, rather than being a purely individual form of expression, it serves as a vehicle for social expression through its reproducible structure.

- Culture jamming challenges social norms, rules, cultural premises and boundaries imposed by power and authorities. In this respect, DeLaure and Fink (2017, 22) state that this violation triggers surprise, confusion, amusement and even shock. Moreover, it is illegal due to copyright infringements. Given all of this, it can be said that culture jamming poses a challenge to generally accepted social and cultural norms.

Mark Dery (2017) states that the notable actions in culture jamming include subvertising, media hoaxing, audio agitprop, and billboard banditry. However, Dery's approach, frequently used in culture jamming literature, dates back to the 1990s, when the Internet was not yet widely used and online mobile technology could not come close to the current usage intensity in terms of actions and applied technology. Cirio (2017, p. 426) writes that the new media infrastructure and network culture offer great opportunities for technology-savvy culture jamming activists. It is not surprising that Cirio touches on the technical side of digital literacy, because although users may not be familiar with complex calculations and algorithms, digital culture jamming often requires SaaS (Software as a Service) or offline digital tools. On the other hand, mobile applications often provide a development and distribution opportunity for simple culture jamming.

In culture jamming, the distinctions between digital and physical environments have diminished over time, except for some forms of action (interference with physical billboards or hacking that takes place only through digital tools). Below, in addition to digitally enabled manifestations of culture jamming, forms of culture jamming in physical media that can be quickly circulated, modified or reproduced as photographs or videos due to digital technology, are also included.

1.3. Subvertising

Subvertising creates counter-advertising by subverting the symbols and indicators of political or corporate advertisements. Wiggins (2019, p. 46) draws attention to two points in their destructive advertising definition. The first is to preserve the most recognizable elements of an ad. This may involve retaining a recognisable logo, figure, or design layout of an advertising poster and modifying other design components. The other is that it aims to activate cognitive dissonance with the advertisement, which is politically motivated and adds criticism and satire. The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, put forward by Leon Festinger, is a theory that has found a broad place in psychology research. In short, people who have a dissonance between different pieces of information try to reorganise their conflicting thoughts (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019, p. 3). For example, a consumer who is against the enslavement of animals for humans may believe that a product will provide them with comfort, and may be confronted with the suffering of animals in the production of the relevant product once they encounter a subvertising. In such a case, a person may either stop consuming animal products or believe these products do not cause animal pain to resolve the conflict between the two pieces of information. In this context, it can be said that the purpose of subvertising is to reveal cognitive dissonance regarding the product and the desire for the product.

Dery (2020) states that culture jammers that produce subvertising prevent consumers' attention from being drawn to a particular point. Dery notes that sniping, usually carried out secretly at late hours, takes place in public spaces with brushes, posters and adhesives. However, it is not limited to those and can be applied to magazine and television advertisements. It can range from criticizing consumer culture to criticizing a specific product at a more specific level (Nomai, 2011, p. 150).

The contribution of Adbusters, one of the most well-known communities worldwide when it comes to subvertising, cannot be ignored. At Adbusters.org, the community describes itself as a global community that has been disrupting commercial advertising and speaking truth to power since 1989. As a non-profit organisation, the income from the magazine and other products is transferred to the reproduction process and campaigns. The reason Adbusters has become so recognised is its reputation as a pioneer of a rebellious political movement and its aim to weaken the strong discourses used by multinational companies in marketing (Harold, 2017, p. 63).

Figure 1: Adbusters – Coca Cola COP27 Sponsorship

Adbusters undoubtedly had the most considerable impact on the counterculture of the United States with the Occupy Movement. With the call of Kalle Lasn, one of the founders of Canada-based Adbusters, and the team, they made a call to gather at Zuccotti Park on Wall Street, which is considered the financial centre of New York, and to raise their voices against social and economic inequalities. The protests shifted into the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement and continued for about two months.

In online subvertising, subvertisers often spread their messages using social media, providing information about upcoming offline sniping and events and displaying subvertisements on their websites. For example, Adbusters, which offers an online subscription option, has a printed magazine, but it revitalises the counterculture by using digital communication channels with digital images on international issues. Of course, Adbusters – despite its reputation – is not the only organisation involved in culture jamming. Subvertising is not the only aspect of culture jamming.

1.4. Media Hoaxing

Media hoaxing is the reporting of events constructed with almost unmistakable reality to attract the attention of journalists, reporters and media professionals. Nomai (2011, p. 151) states that in media hoaxing, journalists are made to believe that an honest story is presented, and in fact, it is hidden that the story is completely fabricated. However, media hoaxing is undoubtedly more than just a joke or arbitrary action; it has a political purpose and confrontation with hidden truths. According to Nomai, this tactic in media hoaxing is used to demonstrate flaws in journalistic practices.

When media hoaxing is mentioned in culture jamming, one of the first names that comes to mind is Joey Skaggs, and he has managed to have his fabricated stories published as trustworthy news in newspapers with a worldwide readership. For example, the television reporter who covered the *pet brothel* story won an Emmy Award. While Skaggs offers a critical approach to media professionals reporting deceptive stories without researching and questioning, he states that the media, far from being sceptical, wants to believe these stories (ABC News, 2020).

Media hoaxing attempts in the print media today manifest themselves in satirical news websites / hoaxing websites. Zaytung, founded in 2010 in Türkiye, is an example. As Oklay (2018, p. 293) notes, such websites share a similar appearance with newspapers. However, their news coverage focuses on current issues, the decisions and lives of politicians, and religion in a humorous manner.

On the other hand, parody accounts and trolls that impersonate well-known people on social media can also engage in media hoaxing. The most significant point that distinguishes them from similar imitative and discriminatory profiles is their critical and ironic approach to current issues. Instead of spreading hate speech, cyberbullying, etc., these accounts encourage mainstream media messages to be read backwards.

1.5. Audio Agitprop

Agitprop, a portmanteau of 'agitation' and 'propaganda,' refers to the dissemination of potent political ideas or arguments, often through various media such as games, art, books, and more (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). According to Salih (2019, p. 8), an audio agitprop simply means agitation propaganda in audio format. Davis (2011, p. 510) defines agitprop, which he evaluates as related to street theatre, as a theatrical performance performed by political activists to attract the public's attention in a particular direction.

According to Dery's (2017, p. 51) definition of audio agitprop, although the political context is preserved, digital samplers are used instead of street performance. Accordingly, although it contains a harsh criticism of media culture, it also presents a challenging perspective on legal regulations regarding copyrights. Binay (2005, p. 3) states that collaging groups that accept the world as a studio in audio agitprop use sounds from many online and offline sources and that audio agitprop is used as a method of culture jamming because copyright infringement is considered piracy. The use of artificial intelligence applications in user-generated content, combined with the general features of the online environment, such as speed and anonymity, makes digital audio agitprop easier to implement and reach a broader audience.

1.6. Billboard Banditry

Billboard banditry, a social action that emerged in Sydney in the late 1970s, became the pioneer of many movements in the following years. Founded by three individuals known as BUGA-UP (Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions), one of the primary goals of this community was to take action against tobacco advertisements that dominated the Australian environment in the 1970s. BUGA-UP quickly expanded with other artists joining it against the government's hypocrisy in marketing unhealthy products. With its prolific output, surprisingly remarkable to both industry and government, the community has grown up with the idea of using advertising against itself for culture jamming, using the same medium and location.

Figure 2: BUGA-UP's Billboard Banditry Sample

BUGA UP is not the only example of distorting company messages that are carried from billboards to the public. Although activists are sometimes accused of vandalism with their interventions on billboards, culture jamming, with its creative and often entertaining face, is far from vandalism (Hearn et al., 2009).

Billboard interventions that transform streets into spaces where alternative political discourses are advertised (Cammaerts, 2007) manifest themselves as hacktivism and remixing content in the digital environment after the rapid commercialisation of the Internet. Hacktivism changes the appearance and content of websites and shares their hidden messages and actions with the public. Content remixers, on the other hand, are very generous in using and rearranging content without regard to copyright and create new content forms to contribute to change (Jenkins, 2017, p. 134).

1.7. Meme

Just as genes carry genetic information from one generation to the next, memes carry cultural and behavioural information from one person to another. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, in The Selfish Gene, first published in 1976, stated that memes reproduce themselves by jumping from one brain to another through a process (Dawkins, 2004, p. 312).

DeLaure (2017, p. 21) says that today, this metaphor of biological inheritance is used to describe the rapid spread of a meme or other cultural piece on the Internet through social media, with the enormous popularity it has gained. Lasn (2000, p. 123) evaluates a meme as a body of information adhering to Dawkins' meme definition. According to Lasn, this information can be a concept, a melody, a political concept, a remarkable phrase, etc. As memes try to proliferate and become incorporated into a population, they can change the behaviours and ways of thinking that influence them and transform the culture.

Memes appear and circulate online mostly as user-generated content. However, Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, pp. 19-20) object to Dawkins' approach at one point. According to them, the idea of self-replication of memes includes a contradiction because human-made culture can only be reproduced by human hands. Furthermore, the proliferation metaphor on which memes are based positions users as passive. However, users are involved in many decision-making processes, from which social network to use to what kind of content to produce and upload online (Jenkins et al., 2013, pp. 19-20).

While Jenkins, Ford, and Green have objections to this analogy, memes are generally accepted as units of information in culture that are transferred from one mind to another, from one society to another (Mazar, 2010, p. 568). In a study involving participants highly familiar with memes, Ayele (2020, p. 14) identified eight features in their intuitive definitions of memes: humour, virality, images, videos or GIFs, sharing, the Internet or social media, captions/text, and relatability/context (Whyte & Joyce, 2010, p. 219). These memes, which can be edited countless times by internet users, encompass a wide range of topics from current news to scientific discussions. They can be used for humorous and critical purposes across various subjects, spanning from sports to philosophy.

2. ON HOW TO DEFINE "CULTURAL POPULISM"

The debate regarding the definition of "populism" has persisted for over six decades. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse by briefly examining several definitions. However, given the diverse range of definitions, it becomes imperative to clarify the specific perspective from which researchers approach the term.

At the conference "To Define Populism" at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1967 (MacRae et al., 1967), the challenge of reaching a consensus on the definition of populism became apparent. The definition there was based on regional perspectives, and following extensive discussions, it was suggested that George Hall's general definition of populist movements could be considered. According to this definition, populist movements typically arise when disgruntled intellectuals respond to rapid economic, social, cultural, and political changes by seeking power for the benefit of the majority. These movements tend to embrace simpler, traditional values (Berlin et al., 1968, p. 179).

Even after decades, the inclusiveness of each attempt to define populism in terms of its cultural, social, psychological, historical, and political dimensions remains a subject of controversy. Nevertheless, these debates do not deter endeavours to establish a framework for populism in academic and political studies. As Oswald, Schäfer, and Broda (2022, pp. 3-4) assert, the definition of populism evolves according to the generation of its researchers.

Mudde (2004, p. 543) draws attention to the relationship established between the elites and the people and defines populism as follows: "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people". Herkman (2022, p. 12) sees Mudde's as a minimal definition of populism and that many of the most frequently repeated themes in this area, such as the concept of the people, group formation, conflict between different groups and the ideology behind these conflicts, are touched upon in it.

According to Herkman, although the concept of the people themselves is as ambiguous as the term "populism", populism carries forward the claim of 'appealing to the people. Some individuals who are not politically active and feel excluded from political life enthusiastically embrace populist promises for the sake of democratic participation. However, in the background of populism— which Herkman avoids categorising as a full-fledged ideology like socialism or liberalism — ideology still plays a significant role. Defined briefly as a system of beliefs and ideas that influence people's behaviour, ideology in this context is not seen as singular; populism is understood as not being dependent on any one specific ideological framework.

On the other hand, Herkman argues that by solely considering populism as a political style and rhetoric, one overlooks its connection to ideology. Emphasizing that populism positions the 'forgotten people' against elites or other groups, such as immigrants, Herkman contends that populism is distinct from political movements seeking alternatives. Populism primarily relies on a charismatic leader for its manifestation. Herkman highlights the conflicts and oppositions between the marginalised and misunderstood people and the 'imaginary parties,' such as elites and minorities, who are perceived as threats to their sovereignty, in constructing a political identity. Populism engenders intense emotional experiences and employs suitable rhetoric to convey this (Herkman, 2022, pp. 12-35).

Although Herkman states that populism is based on an ideological and political ground because it is based on establishing oppositions, he emphasises that a "unified ideology" cannot be defined as an ideology (Herkman, 2022). In this respect, the formation of a populist language or identity is closely related to people's cultural practices. However, Herkman draws attention to McGuigan's (1992) concept of cultural populism, which

emphasises the revival of critical thought against the cultural approach which sees popular culture as the source of practices that strengthen the current status quo (Herkman, 2010).

According to McGuigan (1992), cultural populism opposes views that value popular culture as a meaningful and valuable form of cultural expression or reject it as unimportant. While the importance of ordinary people's cultural practices and preferences is underlined, cultural populism criticises the elitist understanding of culture. McGuigan draws attention to Hall's perspective on ideology, as Hall is one of the founders of British Cultural Studies. Ideology consists of ideas referred to as "common sense," which people internalise naturally and unconsciously while making sense of the world. Ideology can remain adequate for certain segments of society, even in situations that run counter to their own interests (Hall, 1988). Hall (1996) also defines ideology as the mental framework that shapes how people perceive the world, involving various elements ranging from language to systems of representation.

Building on this perspective, McGuigan identifies a shift in British Cultural Studies since the 1980s and argues that the field of Cultural Studies has lost its critical stance. Instead of culture, which it treats as an ideological field, it has focused on cultural consumption processes with an affirmative approach. Thus, Cultural Studies have become identified with the existing cultural structure and have lost its critical nature. McGuigan's concept of "cool capitalism" also helps explain this situation: It points to the neutralisation of opposing cultural values (such as freedom, rebellion, originality) by the system and the continuation of the economic system through these values.

In this process, cool capitalism presents a "cool" image in the foreground while hiding exploitation, inequalities and ecocide in the background. The aspects of the capitalist system that cause discomfort and criticism are softened or made acceptable through "cool." Thus, critical discourses, images, or manifestations cease to be opposed to the system and become an integral element within it (McGuigan, 2009, 2011, 2012).

In response to this condition, the approach known as "critical populism" gains importance: This approach values the everyday joys and preferences of the people but aims to analyse them within the political economy framework with a critical perspective that questions how desires and identities are (re)produced. Critical populism can draw on theoretical perspectives such as cultural studies and political economy to analyse popular culture more comprehensively. Critical populism thus provides a critical outlook against the structural inequalities and ideologies that affect the processes of cultural production and consumption (McGuigan, 1992).

3. METHODOLOGY

With the widespread use of gen-AI (generative artificial intelligence) technologies, online users can quickly produce visual content in a digital environment without the need for

design or advanced computer skills; thus, content production is rapidly transforming in terms of form and thought. The primary purpose of the study is to reveal how culture jamming content shared on digital networks produces meaning through the critique of cultural populism.

In line with this main purpose, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. In what ways does digital culture jamming content operate within McGuigan's concepts of cool capitalism and cultural populism?

2. Which symbols, metaphors, and myths emerge in this content through semiotic analysis?

3. How do the circulation of this content in digital environments and the shifting conditions of anonymity influence the critical and oppositional potential of culture jamming?

This study applied a qualitative semiotic analysis method in the context of critical populism, based on Jim McGuigan's conceptualisation of "cultural populism". Semiotics is an approach that aims to reveal how the meaning of media messages is structured and organised. According to Erdoğan (2011, p. 228), semiotics is the examination of the sign system of any medium; in this context, any element that can be used as a means of communication, from visual images to music, from flowers to clothes, can be evaluated within the scope of semiotic analysis.

Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method was adopted as the analytical framework. Barthes' approach enables the cultural and ideological meanings of images to be revealed through denotation and connotation (Barthes, 1979).

As semiotics is context- and culture-specific, it should not be generalised. Signs derive meaning from local codes and practices; they vary across cultures, change with context, carry multiple meanings, and evolve over time. Therefore, semiotics relies not on universal generalisations but on flexible, context-dependent analyses (Chandler, 2007, pp. 139-148).

In the research, accounts producing culture jamming-themed content on the Instagram platform were monitored from November 2022 until the beginning of 2025, a period during which gen-AI tools began to be used by users and content production styles started to transform. However, since the term is not widely used in Turkish, no content was found in searches using the hashtags "#culturejamming" (#kültürkarıştırma, #kültürbozumu, #kültürbozma). For this reason, samples reflecting the practice of culture jamming in terms of both content and form were evaluated.

The analysis was conducted on a selection of images from a single carousel post rather than on multiple posts from an account. Since culture jamming posts were not accessible through relevant hashtags, several Instagram accounts producing digital content were reviewed. For example, these included @ertanlabs, which produces Gen-AI-powered content and shares prompts; @alpgenart, which produces Gen-AI-powered social and political content; and @yapayzekautopyasi, which shares content featuring Gen-AI-powered popular culture characters.

However, none of these accounts produce culture-jamming content targeting commercial brands, consumer culture, or mass culture; on the contrary, some accounts appear to collaborate with brands. Therefore, a carousel (multi-image post) from @canavarkara, which targets consumerism and populism with a humorous and critical tone, was selected for this study.

Four images from the account's ten-image carousel titled "commercial-2", dated January 8 2024, were examined. The images in the post were found to both ironically re-present commercialised cultural elements and critique cultural populism by referencing people's everyday culture and lifestyles. The primary reasons for selecting this post were as follows:

- The carousel directly reflects McGuigan's concepts of *cool capitalism* and *cultural populism*. The post both ironises brands' discourses based on consumer culture and develops a critical approach through popular cultural imagery.

- Its use of symbols, metaphors, and irony makes it well-suited to semiotic analysis. The content is loaded with multilayered meanings and facilitates the analysis of cultural codes.

- The post was reshared and discussed on X (formerly Twitter) and other platforms, demonstrating its cultural circulation power and ability to resonate across different spaces, thereby strengthening socially critical discourse.

Only publicly accessible Instagram post images were analysed in this study. As the research focused on online forms of culture jamming practice, the analysis was based on a limited number of visual examples and does not aim to produce generalisable findings.
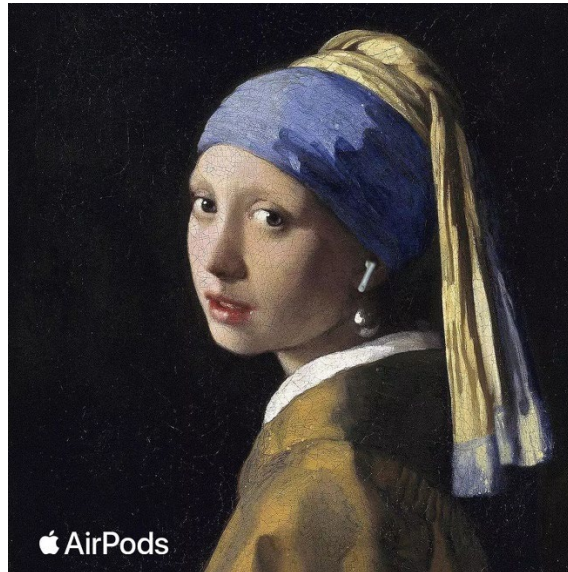
4. FINDINGS

Figure 3: Girl with "AirPods"

Source: Instagram, *commercial-2* post (9th image in the carousel), January 8 2024. https://www.instagram.com/p/C11_FUgo9B1

Denotation

In a subvertising poster example, Apple AirPods are placed in the ear in the Girl with a Pearl Earring, where only the pearl earring was traditionally supposed to get attention. The Apple logo and the word "AirPods" appear in the lower left corner. The visual is arranged like a typical Apple advertisement poster.

Connotation

The original work carries meanings such as pure beauty, silence, mystery, and simplicity, and the figure's identity in the painting is unknown. When looking at the image, the silence in the original image is transformed into the act of listening, enabled by modern technological devices. AirPods are not only headphones but also represent a contemporary consumer product, reflecting minimalist aesthetics and a sense of being "cool."

Myth

When the ideological function of myth is considered from McGuigan's perspective, a critical approach emerges, utilising a piece of art that represents the high culture of Western art history to critique commercial products that reflect minimalist aestheticism through culture jamming. Aesthetic simplicity is internalised as part of commodification within the system. In addition, elements of high culture now become consumable popular culture content via technological devices. If the figure in the painting were alive today, the "cool" AirPods in her

ear would draw attention instead of the pearl earring. Technology functions as a status symbol through brands and visual imagery; under capitalism, technology and art are equated on the level of consumability.

Figure 4: "Privacy. That's iPhone"

Source: Instagram, *commercial-2* post (6th image in the carousel), January 8 2024. https://www.instagram.com/p/C11_FUgo9B1

Denotation

The visual presents an example of subvertising. A Biblical scene—the Crucifixion of Jesus—is depicted. A large crowd of men surrounds the crucified Jesus. Each figure holds an iPhone and is either photographing or recording Jesus on the cross. In the centre appears Apple's slogan: "Privacy. That's iPhone."

Connotation

At first glance, the image resembles an advertising poster. The Crucifixion of Jesus is one of the most prominent representations of suffering, sacrifice, and holiness in Western culture. However, the crowd has been reimagined as a social media audience in this scene. The witnesses are no longer individuals who draw sacred lessons from this suffering and sacrifice, but rather a community of consumers. The iPhone's emphasis on personal privacy is transformed into a shared spectacle. In this context, suffering and the sacred have been converted into content.

Myth

Culture jamming turns iPhone users' belief in privacy protection upside down. The privacy slogan appears at the centre of a scene of mass display. The sacred suffering of Jesus becomes an object of consumption, and the uniformity of the product signifies a homogenised consumer identity and a loss of authenticity. In this context, the culture jamming poster reveals how sacred imagery is aestheticised and commercialised through mobile technology.
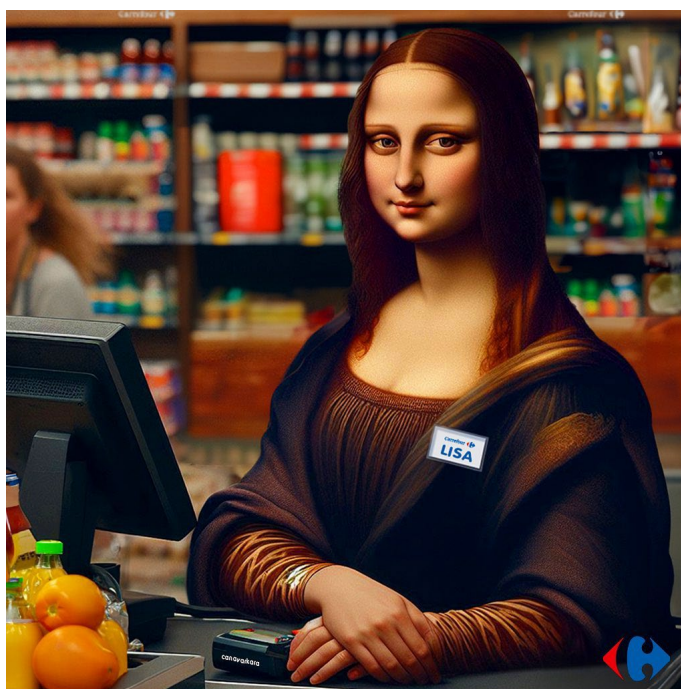

Figure 5: Mona Lisa as a Cashier

Source: Instagram, *commercial-2* post (8th image in the carousel), January 8 2024.
https://www.instagram.com/p/C11_FUgo9B1

Denotation

Leonardo da Vinci's 16th-century painting Mona Lisa has been reconstructed as a supermarket cashier subvertising. The Carrefour logo is at the bottom right of the image; the cashier's name is Lisa on her badge. Supermarket shelves are seen more blurrily in the background. While food products are at the cash register, the cashier holds a POS device in her hand. In the image, classical art and daily life are brought together through the most well-known female figure in art history.

Connotation

The Mona Lisa is one of the symbols of high art. The re-portrayal of a figure of high culture as a supermarket chain cashier creates a contradiction between high culture and low-wage labour. In addition, the fact that the cashier's name is Lisa makes the figure ordinary.

Mona Lisa has become an icon of high culture and a figure of a lower-class employee within the system simultaneously.

Myth

In current economic and social structures, symbols and images with cultural and historical value are now easily ordinary under a brand. Global companies (like the supermarket chain in this example) tend to trivialise everyone and everything, just like Mona Lisa was transformed into Lisa. Instead of being brought to the public, artworks like the Mona Lisa are being devalued by the system, copied, and deprived of their originality and uniqueness by being suppressed on commercial products, just like labour is devalued and turned into a replaceable element.

However, even if art and labour are presented in a "cool" composition with aesthetics, elegance, and a pleasant smile, low-wage jobs, class inequality, and labour exploitation continue in the background.
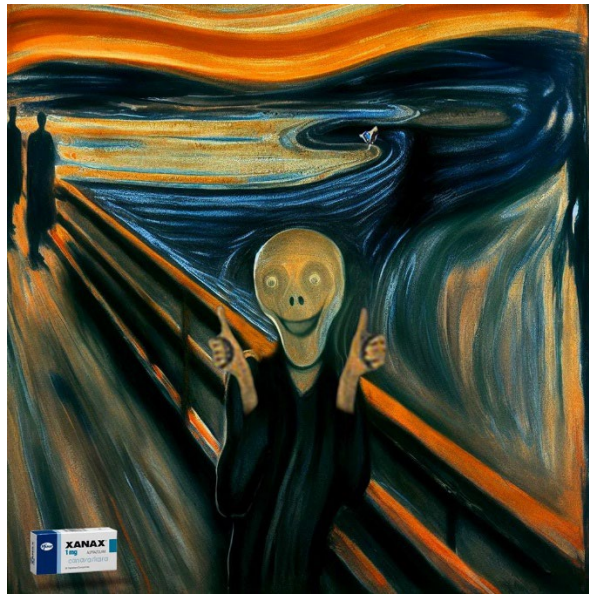

Figure 6: "Not Scream"

Source: Instagram, *commercial-2* post (3rd image in the carousel), January 8 2024. https://www.instagram.com/p/C11_FUgo9B1

Denotation

Edvard Munch's painting The Scream, made in the last decade of the 19th century, has been transformed into an advertising poster and can be described as a digital billboard banditry. The screaming mouth in the figure drawn by the artist has been replaced with a joyfully laughing mouth; the hands holding his head anxiously have been replaced with thumbs pointing upwards. In the lower right corner of the image, there is the psychiatric drug

Xanax, which can only be prescribed by a doctor for psychological conditions such as anxiety disorders.

Connotation

The Scream is an artwork that symbolises the anxiety and loneliness of individuals in the modern world. However, in the image in Figure 4, these feelings seem to have been replaced by happiness with the help of a psychiatric drug. Moreover, this message of happiness or well-being is reflected not only in the statements of individuals but also in their body language. Individual problems, worries and loneliness are presented as problems to be solved with medical drugs.

Myth

By reducing individuals' anxiety to the subjective experiences of individuals and detaching it from social issues, the broader and structural aspects of the problem are ignored. The anxiety of individuals suppressed by drugs can be resolved in a "cool" way. So, the anxiety can be commercialised. The criticisms directed at the pharmaceutical industry, which convey that it is possible to live in harmony with society and overcome problems individually with these drugs, are revealed with this visual. Therefore, it can be said that medicines are prescribed to adapt to the anxiety-filled cry of modern man and the system that ensures the continuation of all inequalities of capitalism.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study discusses how the practice of digital culture jamming can instrumentalise cultural elements as well as high culture symbols and icons for popular culture and consumption, drawing on McGuigan's two main approaches. Culture jamming subverts existing commercial and political messages through humour and criticism, often reusing existing materials to produce content that conveys new meanings. In this respect, unlike the uncritical populism defined by McGuigan, it can be considered a form of activism aligned with the understanding of critical populism (McGuigan, 1992), as it has the potential to reveal class, structural, and gender-based inequalities.

The four culture jamming contents examined in this research consist of examples of subvertising and digital billboard banditry. These contents were shared by a public and verified Instagram account (canavarkara) and were analysed using Barthes' semiotic approach. Accordingly, the three levels of analysis, denotation, connotation, and myth, are employed to reveal implicit meanings that complement and explain one another.

DeLaure and Fink (2017) state that culture jamming content is predominantly produced anonymously and is characterised by structures open to reproduction. However, an

examination of Instagram accounts sharing similar culture jamming content and its derivatives within the scope of this research reveals that content creators do not always strictly adhere to anonymity in digital/online culture jamming practices. This result reflects the transformation of traditional culture jamming through social media.

While critical populism contributes to understanding how popular culture is constructed by economic or political centres of power, *cool capitalism*, on the other hand, exposes how cultural icons, sacred images, and narratives are commercialised through a "cool" aesthetic. This concept is particularly useful for explaining the process by which the system internalises and neutralises elements associated with oppositional and original values or symbols. In this context, the analysed images reveal that, in addition to themes related to personal experiences—such as mourning, anxiety, and simplicity—elements with social and structural dimensions, such as the visibility of labour and loneliness, are also incorporated into the system through commodification.

As defined by McGuigan, culture jamming disrupts the structure through which opposing values are absorbed into the system. However, culture jamming is not always employed in support of egalitarian, anti-capitalist, or anti-consumerist values. Gaugele and Grippo (2025) investigated how the far-right in Germany exploits cultural values through hatejacking and culture jamming. Their research demonstrates that far-right actors adopt strategies that render their ideologies more acceptable by appropriating the aesthetics of mainstream consumer products.

In this study, the systemic exploitation concealed by aesthetics is rendered visible—through examples such as the transformation of the Mona Lisa into a supermarket cashier and the ironic deployment of the concept of "privacy" in the iPhone slogan. Additionally, the surveillance culture, digital privacy violations, and psychopharmacological interventions that contribute to the system's mechanisms of individual isolation are critically exposed. Furthermore, this research demonstrates that, although not its primary aim, culture jamming reveals how capital "C" "Culture," which appeals to elite groups, and small "c" "culture," which has become publicly accessible, can converge under consumerism and standardisation.

While the dissemination of visual culture jamming content on social media platforms facilitates the spread of political messages, digital networks shaped around shared emotions, such as anger, fear, and hope, play a significant role in making this content go viral. In these networks, ideology manifests not necessarily in explicit terms, but through emotional interactions (Bernard-Brind'Amour & Jiwani, 2025).

As a result, culture jamming is a form of activism that can be adopted by actors from various ideological backgrounds. While it often exposes and critiques capitalist contradictions, it can also be instrumentalised by the conservative or far-right to legitimise their ideologies.

Critical populism, as defined by McGuigan, provides a lens through which to understand how cultural elements are shaped. In this respect, culture jamming can reveal class, cultural, and structural inequalities, not only as an aesthetic and humorous intervention.

Given the limited scope of the study, which is limited to a series of posts from a single Instagram account, future research could explore how the ownership of technological tools, content creation practices, and the erosion of anonymity are linked to the critical potential of digital jamming in relation to its specifically populist dimensions.

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