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Embodying the Nation: Self-Representations of "Sultans of the Net" on Social Media

Ulusü Cisimlendirmek: Filenin Sultanları'nın Sosyal Medyadaki Öz Temsilleri

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Abstract

This article considers how Turkish women volleyball players (Sultans of the Net) connect and represent themselves on social media with a trope of Turkishness emphasizing the emancipation of women. Turkish women volleyball players use their social media accounts to leverage and build upon their considerable popularity with the Turkish public and beyond. Theoretical strands on media, nationalism, feminism, and representation theory are used to support our arguments. The data covered in this research consists of 351 posts on Instagram by five players (Hande Baladın, Zehra Güneş, Melissa Vargas, Eda Erdem, and Ebrar Karakurt) between the dates August 2023 and August 2024 including when the Sultans of the Net were crowned the champions of Europe and featured in the Paris 2024 Olympics. Findings problematise Global North feminism which tends towards a hostility towards nationalism. The case of Türkiye, with the samples from five athletes, shows that this relationship has a more complex and nuanced nature. Both gender and nationalism are understood differently within various iterations of the nation, and by choosing a Kemalist iteration of nationalism in the Turkish case. In addition, the players' choice to align themselves with Türkiye's broader journey as a modern liberal nation is particularly noteworthy.

Keywords: *Volleyball, Female Athletes, Social Media, National Identity, Türkiye*

Öz

Bu makale Türk kadın voleybolcuların (Filenin Sultanları) sosyal medyada kendilerini nasıl temsil ettikleri ve kadınların özgürleşmesini vurgulayan bağımsız Türkiye Cumhuriyeti ideali ile nasıl ilişkilendirdiklerini ele almaktadır. Türk kadın voleybolcular sosyal medya hesaplarını, Türk halkı ve ötesinde hem kendi önemli dışavurumlarını gerçekleştirmek hem de popülerliklerini artırmak için kullanmaktadır. Milliyetçilik teorileri, çeşitli feminizm dalgaları ve temsil teorisi bu çalışmanın argümanlarını destekleyen teorik zemini oluşturmaktadır. Bu araştırmada ele alınan veriler Ağustos 2023 ile Ağustos 2024 tarihleri arasında beş oyuncunun (Hande Baladın, Zehra Güneş, Melissa Vargas, Eda Erdem ve Ebrar Karakurt) Instagram'da paylaştığı, Filenin Sultanları'nın Avrupa şampiyonu olduğu ve Paris 2024 Olimpiyatları'nda yer aldığı tarihleri içeren 351 gönderiden oluşmaktadır. Çalışmanın bulguları milliyetçiliğe karşı çekinceli olan Küresel Kuzey feminizm anlayışının tartışmalı olduğunu Türkiye'den beş sporcudan alınan örneklerle bu ilişkinin daha karmaşık bir yapıya sahip olduğunu altını çizerek göstermektedir. Hem cinsiyet hem de milliyetçilik, ulusun çeşitli yinelemeleri içinde farklı şekilde anlaşılmakta ve Türkiye örneğinde milliyetçiliğin Kemalist bir yansımasını seçerek, her iki kavram için de belirli bir anlayış benimsemektedir. Ayrıca, kadın sporcuların kendilerini Türkiye'nin modern bir liberal ulus idealiyle geniş perspektifte ilişkilendirmeyi tercih etmesi de özellikle dikkat çekicidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Voleybol, Kadın Sporcular, Sosyal Medya, Ulusal Kimlik, Türkiye*

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Introduction

The present cultural moment is characterised by a peculiar paradox. There is a recent clear surge of interest in women's sport. For example, over 2 billion people tuned in to watch the most recent Women's World Cup football tournament in 2023 (*Women's World Cup 2023 Viewership to Cross 2 Billion, Double from 2019, 2023*). A greater number of sportswomen than ever are household names, earning ever more lucrative contracts and increased prize monies, embedding them within the neo-liberal global sports system we inhabit. Finally, crucial to this article and in a similar vein, sportswomen have amassed and leveraged significant followings on social media reflecting the level of public interest. Stubbornly running counter to this, the flagrant lack of visibility for women's sports across traditional media, both online and in print form remains salient (Cooky et al., 2015; Musto et al., 2017; Souza & Knijnik, 2007). When afforded much needed mediatic visibility, there are particular nuances characteristic of the present transitional moment in the growth of women's sport. In media coverage there is a strong tendency towards a procedural reporting of a few main facts about the game, bereft of the emotive and impassioned discourse which characterises the coverage of men's football for example. In a similar way, consistently gendered commentary for sports matches is far from coincidental (Messner et al., 1993). It is deployed in defense of hegemonic notions of gender, which are under attack, not only in the arena of sports, but on a more universal level. Sports is a particularly important symbolic arena, given its historically masculine connotations. For that reason, its position in defending a creaking gender order characterised by the segregation of genders across occupations and professions, is of manifest importance.

In this regard, a particularly insightful case is that of the Türkiye's Women's Volleyball Team, known as '*Filenin Sultanları*' (Sultans of the Net) in their homeland. Their de-facto position as the standard bearers of a liberal emancipated iteration of gender in a complex nation make them an excellent case study for understanding not only modern Türkiye, but also conflicting visions of a contested gender order more generally. Due to the discursive purchase of the Sultans of the Net, even state-controlled traditional media must at least pay lip-service to their achievements. Both television and print media tend to dedicate attention to them and to give them due praise for their achievements. Much like the Brazilian case, where women's volleyball also has a prestigious and highly consolidated tradition, the media have no option but to acknowledge the sense of cultural attachment Sultans of the Net engender within the Turkish nation.

True to what has been observed across a range of other settings, we found that on the great majority of occasions coverage of Sultans of the Net is perfunctory, limiting itself to a dull chronological listing of the main occurrences during the games, intentionally eschewing the usual journalistic strategies which bring colour to the coverage. This stubborn refusal to cater to the public's interest is driven by a transparent attempt to defend male sporting privilege and hegemony, leaving sportswomen to self-promote across a range of available digital media.

It is for the above reasons that this article chooses to focus on the self-representation of Turkish women's national volleyball team players on the platform on which they have amassed the largest followings: Instagram. On this platform, it is likely that we can discern



much more from the players self-representations than traditional media sources are prepared to tell us. In this vein, this article focuses on five players who are not only the most popular (by Instagram following at least) in the Turkish Women's National Team but also exhibit different gender identifications: Hande Baladin, Zehra Güneş, Melissa Vargas, Eda Erdem and Ebrar Karakurt. Further justification for the selection of each player will follow in the methodology section. Suffice to say, for now, that each is highly germane to debate about the role of sportswomen within the nation in different ways. The article chooses to focus on how the players go about portraying themselves as part of the Turkish nation.

In this regard, Demir and Öztürk (2023) lead an insightful debate vis-à-vis the wider significance of women's sports in debates between modernism and traditionalism within Turkey. They explain how successful female athletes like the 'Sultans of the Net' have become lightning rods for articulating contrasting visions of the nation. With regard to the national polity, as Goalwin (2018) argues, Turkish nationalism has long proved an enigmatic formulation for scholars, oscillating between rhetoric privileging a secularist civic territorial ethos and a long-standing emphasis on ethnic and religious purity. In this regard, Uluöz (2016) reduces the ideological confusion to an oft-invoked dichotomy between Easternisation and Westernisation (both of which realistically are Western inventions). This article looks to go beyond these formulations considering the multiplicity of ways in which incorporation into this polity is represented. In order to flesh out some of the other relevant background it is worth recounting the recent history of women within the modern republic of Türkiye.

This study approaches self-representation through a gendered and feminist theoretical lens while remaining attentive to the contextual specificity of the Turkish case. It does not presuppose femininity as an essentialised, fixed category; rather, it understands femininity as a socially constructed and contextually negotiated identity position that is continually performed, negotiated, and contested in both subtle and more confrontational ways (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Drawing on critical feminist theory, the analysis examines how these athletes' self-representations both align with and diverge from the hegemonic norms of femininity as understood by Butler, including those embedded in nationalist discourse. In this sense, the study neither uncritically applies a single feminist theory nor rejects feminist theoretical engagement altogether. Instead, it adopts a situated feminist nationalism framework (West, 1994; Broch, 2016) which, unlike earlier scholars, also recognises the potential for gender-progressive iterations of national identity. Within this framework, self-representation is framed as the intersection of gender identity, national affiliation, and commercial self-branding, where performances of femininity may serve strategic, resistant, or integrative functions. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following fundamental research question:

How do elite Turkish women volleyball players use Instagram to negotiate and perform gendered and national identities, and to what extent do these performances align with, challenge, or reconfigure dominant norms of femininity in the Turkish context?

To answer these, we employ a mixed-method content analysis on 351 posts from Instagram, drawing on Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, critical feminist perspectives (West, 1994; Broch, 2016), and Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism. The approach integrates quantitative categorisation of social media content with qualitative interpretive analysis,



enabling a systematic mapping of self-representation patterns while situating them within their broader social and cultural contexts.

1. Particularities of the Turkish Case

Türkiye provides a particularly insightful case for the study of the role of women. From the early days of the Modern Turkish Republic, the emancipation of women has been a prominent motif within the context of the secularisation and bureaucratisation of the nascent Republic. Although social relations are complex, in the new nation's secular outlook, improving women's status was seen as part of becoming modern, drawing on European Enlightenment ideas but not simply imitating them. These principles were in line with the ideals of the nation-state, seeing both men and women as equal citizens of the Republic. To illustrate, Turkish woman citizens were granted the right to vote and be elected as early as 1934, while some European countries were still excluding female citizens from practising such rights.

The founder of the modern Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk envisioned a modern nation state geared towards scientific progress and rapid industrialisation. As part of this modernisation, physical education was greatly encouraged for all citizens. By doing that Mustafa Kemal positioned women within the modernization project and did so on the basis of secular citizenship. Positioning women in the modernization project is discussed by various scholars mainly referring to the works of (Yuval-Davis, 2003). For the Turkish case, there is a clear connection between the independence period and the success of the modern-day Turkish Women's Volleyball team. In the post-independence period, the transition of women towards a vigorous and sometimes even athletic physique became a marker of the country's progress towards modernity together with being a point of pride for a new nation emboldened with new self-belief. Of course, this secular vision of the nation has long been contested and has co-existed with other visions of the nation rooted in more traditional values.

In the specific case of volleyball, it emerges as the main sport for primary and secondary school girls (Koca & Bulgu, 2005) in the second decade of the 20th century in Türkiye through the initiative of Selim Sırrı Tarcan, who is a well-known pioneer in Turkish sports serving as an educator, sport official and also a politician. Regarding the presence of sports in the media, while there was more in the early period as engaging in sports becoming mandatory as part of the physical education policy, in 1950s when football became more popular, women athletes and their activities in Turkey became left behind by getting much less attention (Şenol Cantek & Yazar, 2009).

The women's volleyball team played their first official international match in 1957 in a tournament called the 'International Istanbul Tournament'. Their first participation at European level was the European Volleyball Championship in Romania in 1963. Over the years, the team improved its success and evolved into becoming a symbol of women's team sports. The popular nickname of 'Filenin Sultanları' ("Sultans of the Net") was coined by the TRT (Turkish Radio Television) announcers during the European Championship in 2003 where Turkish Women Volleyball team made a particularly powerful performance as an emerging team finishing as runners-up. From there on, their salience on a cultural level has been notable. The word 'sultan' refers to Ottoman Empire's imperial rulers, and it is used as a gender-neutral form considering Turkish language's grammatical structure (e.g., Fatih Sultan Mehmet-male, Hürrem Sultan-female). The location of the word 'sultan' might indicate the



gender. While Sultan Süleyman is male, Nurbanu Sultan is female as the word comes after the name.

2. Literature Review

With the differential gendering of each sport in mind, Firmino and Ventura (2015) show how traditional media tend towards pushing a highly gendered supposed female emotional fragility, together with other more stereotypically female tropes. Crucially, Gainor (2017) found that when self-representation focuses on athletic performance, these glib but effective narratives are significantly challenged. Conversely when female sportswomen post about their personal lives, at times, inadvertently, they may even serve to bolster the discourses which they are hoping to challenge.

This article seeks to fill a lacuna in work on female sportswomen's online representations in so far as much of the work on women's self-representation tends to emanate from metropolitan Global North contexts where a certain feminist context and subtext is assumed as a background to each representation of female athletes. For example, Thorpe et al. (2017) lead a thoughtful dialogue between three theoretical iterations of feminism (Neoliberal feminism, third-wave feminism and postfeminism) to see how current discourses are internalised, embodied and articulated in the case of a professional surfer Alana Blanchard. This dialogue assumes the arrival and full consolidation of each of these waves of feminism and beyond. This article is hesitant to take this for granted – but does not necessarily locate the position of Turkish feminist thought in an inferior or subordinate position to its Western counterparts. Indeed, in the section titled 'the particularities of the Turkish case' an argument is made for the progress of women being a central plank of the liberal secular nation which emerged just over a century ago. However, Kandiyoti (1987) argues that despite Turkish women gained legal rights, these did not equate to true liberation and underlying patriarchal systems and cultural norms that continued to oppress women.

In part, this article is influenced by a discussion by Ott (2018) who considers whether social media can be a productive space for the advancement of a multiplicity of feminist agendas and goals. Her belief that feminists ought to strategically engage with the various values and opportunities of social media ties in well with the ethos, aims and representations of Turkish athletes online. Their emphasis on openness, collaboration, and networking to increase participation while being at times critical of the paradigm in which they operate fits in well with the aforementioned work. Deploying these technologies has the potential to reinforce, disrupt, and also to transform communities and the individuals interacting with them in as multidirectional a manner as the technology itself operates. However, promises of feminist values in platform design place too much emphasis on a singular component of social media and may not accurately assess all aspects of design or use. Building on this, Pereira Caldeira et al. (2019) illustrates how young females understand representations of femininities on Instagram in extremely nuanced ways. These understandings can run into tension with Instagram's ability to embrace and reproduce preexisting conventions. Regarding the Turkish case, the existing studies investigate gender representations in media by different circles (Durna, 2024; Altınay & Arat, 2007))Whilst the available literature on the Turkish context is insightful and suggestive of future academic agendas, it has yet to be developed in terms of



the nexus between globalisation, the nation and the prevailing gender relations both nationally and globally.

3. Theoretical Frame

This article draws on Erving Goffman's seminal text 'The theory of self-presentation' released in the USA in 1959 (Goffman, 1959). Interestingly, Goffman's text retains or increases in relevance in the digital era, outlining how individuals inevitably often present different iterations of themselves depending on the dynamics of the interactions they are involved in. This is done strategically with the intention of honing an overall positive image. A central tenet of his theory of self-presentation is that individuals seek to shape others' perceptions by crafting an image through the obvious and clear expression of 'frontstage' behaviour and the subtler or even covert 'backstage' behaviours which also contribute to wider discourse. In this regard, the 'frontstage' content is a closer approximation of the version of the self that the individual wishes to centralise and project to the wider public as their best-known image. Their 'backstage' content, on the other hand, is also important but uses more relaxed and less filtered forms. 'Backstage' gives the impression to the viewer (in the case of Instagram) of looking at rare and unfiltered material that gives them a fleeting glimpse of what the person is really like beyond their 'frontstage' façade.

As alluded to in the literature review, the crucial nexus between progressive iterations of the nation centralising gender takes on a central role in this text. Traditionally, of course, in Western liberal feminist thought, there is a stubborn hostility towards nationalism – which often opaques views progressive views of women within their respective nation states. This is typified by (McClintock, 2016) who argues that 'all nationalisms are gendered, invented and all are dangerous'. She argues that all nations are contested systems of cultural representation which limit and delimit access and prestige within the nation-state. This essentially means that 'nationalisms constitute the sanctioned institutionalisation of gender difference' (McClintock, 2016, p. 260). Nonetheless, for two reasons, first that of pragmatism and second, challenging the precepts behind McClintock's view, there is a strong argument that the Turkish case problematises and runs into considerable tension with these traditional Western interpretations of how nationalism and gender intersect. Firstly, the emancipation of women was a central plank within the dominant liberal thinking about how the new post-Ottoman republic would look. In this sense, it seems worthwhile to take a step back in the Turkish context. The era of post-national feminism posited in recent literature seems less relevant than the iterations of feminist nationalism set out in the 1990s by scholars like (Walby, 1992; West, 1994) and latterly Broch (2016). In *Women and Nation*, Walby (1992) noted that whilst not hegemonic, feminist iterations of the nation are more committed to equality between the sexes and less towards militarism. Going further, West (1994) set out a feminist nationalism capable of re-defining the public and private spheres in a way that was not mutually exclusive and defined by binary roles as imagined by hostile interpretations of nationalism like that of McClintock. In the vision of West, and perhaps in representations of Turkish women volleyball players, nationalism is espoused as complementary and unitary. In a sporting sense, Broch (2016) understands how sports constitute a performance of national identity which may highlight certain aspects of a national culture whilst sidelining others. Each nation, by its nature, is extremely diverse, but sporting performance has the potential to push a gender



progressive iteration of the nation if it strikes a chord with sufficient members of the imagined national community (Anderson, 1983).

Together with the aforementioned thinkers, this article also draws on Michael Billig's theory of the presence of *Banal Nationalism* in the everyday sphere (Billig, 1995). The sporting arena is ridden with particularly potent forms of banal nationalism. As Billig sets out, banal nationalism refers to the various everyday representations of a nation, which go towards building a sense of shared national identity. Examples of banal nationalism include the use of national flags in everyday contexts (particularly common at sporting events), national songs, symbols on money, popular expressions and turns of phrase, references to national symbols and dates which need no explanation to those who are part of said 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) and any number of other expressions of implied togetherness which are not explicit and are understood on a subconscious level.

4. Methodology

This article chooses to focus on five particularly successful figures from the European Championship winning Turkish Women's Volleyball Team. These players, as mentioned earlier on are Hande Baladin (1.2 million followers), Zehra Güneş (4.1 million followers), Melissa Vargas (1.7 million followers), Eda Erdem (1.1 million followers) and Ebrar Karakurt (1.6 million followers) as of September 2024 respectively. There is a dual justification for these selections. They are chosen for the size of their following, guaranteeing them a certain reach with the Turkish public and beyond. Secondly, the players offer bring together many of the aspects which have dominated the academic agenda together with less covered issues such as the position of naturalised athletes and issues around nationality transfers and sport in Türkiye (Istif Inci et al., 2023) and the acceptance of gay and lesbian players within the national polity by the different segments of Turkish media (Durna, 2024). Familiar topics on the agenda include how the dilemma of presenting femininity together with muscularity is negotiated (Royce et al., 2003). In the cases of these players, the article will investigate how this athletic femininity interacts with notions of the Kemalist ethos of a vigorous and robust physique for citizens (in this case for women) being part of the vision during the formation of modernity in the Turkish national project.

The sample of Instagram posts runs from 1st August 2023, when the Sultans of the Net were crowned the champions of Europe, through to 1st August 2024, including the Paris 2024 Olympics. The methodological approach adopted in this study is a mixed-method content analysis that is informed by Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, by critical feminist theory (West, 1994; Broch, 2016), and leans towards Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism. This approach combines quantitative categorisation of social media content with qualitative interpretive analysis to ensure that patterns in self-representation are both systematically mapped and contextually interpreted.

The quantitative stage involves coding all 351 Instagram posts published by the selected athletes between August 2023 and August 2024. Instagram stories are not included because of their disappearance in 24 hours. Each post, including all images or videos contained within it, was coded by the authors for variables such as content type (professional, personal, or collaborative/advertising), linguistic choices, explicit references to the national team, and visual/textual national symbolism. Coding categories were piloted on 10% of the dataset to



ensure clarity and reliability, and subsequently refined before full application. The purpose of the frequency counts is not to operationalise Goffman's theory as a numerical tool, but rather to provide a structured overview that identifies salient patterns warranting deeper interpretive attention.

The qualitative stage then applies a discursive and semiotic reading to selected posts, interpreting them in light of feminist nationalism and banal nationalism frameworks. This enables an exploration of how athletes negotiate gender, national identity, and commercial imperatives in their self-representations. In this sense, quantitative results function as a scaffold for identifying areas of interest, while the interpretive component addresses symbolic meaning, ideological positioning, and cultural context.

This two-stage design responds directly to the need for methodological transparency, providing a clear rationale for when frequency-based categorisation is appropriate and when semiotic or discursive interpretation is required. It also reflects established practices in feminist media research, where numerical trends and qualitative depth are treated as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

5. Data and Analysis

This article nourishes a range of quantitative data with qualitative analysis. In order to get a preliminary feel for the type of content players use to engage their audience we counted a range of data pertaining to whether players posted mostly professionally or in a personal capacity. Allied to this we considered to what degree they are engaged in commercial collaborations with national and international businesses. Finally, it is insightful to consider what percentage of their posts are connected to their Sultans of the Net activity, and how much is dedicated to their club teams.

Table 1. Statistics categorising the number of Instagram posts made by five players in our dataset

Player's name	Sport-related posts	Personal posts	Collaborative posts (Ads)	Language of posts	Total number of posts
Ebrar Karakurt	55 (68%)	6 (7%)	21 (25%)	Turkish and English	81
Melissa Vargas	40 (58%)	12 (17%)	18 (26%)	Turkish, Spanish and English	68
Eda Erdem	29 (46%)	12 (19%)	21 (33%)	Turkish	62
Hande Baladın	27 (46%)	32 (54%)	19 (32%)	Turkish and English	59
Zehra Güneş	38 (46%)	43 (53%)	25 (31%)	Turkish and English	81

Source: Authors' data collection from Instagram

Table 1 shows an overall preference for posts emphasising the players' athletic performance over their personal lives. Only two players, Baladın and Güneş, appear to have reached a tipping point, whereby their sporting fame has grown to a point where they are self-confident enough to put their frontstage identity as sportswomen to one side in order to continue curating their images as famous people per se. This is perhaps easier for the two aforementioned players as they do not face some of the prejudicial attitudes which have been directed at Karakurt for her sexuality or at Vargas for being a naturalised Turk for example. In



the cases of the other three players, their frontstage identity as sportswomen is always foregrounded overwhelmingly.

All of the players dedicate between 25-35% of their posts to advertising related activity. As is well documented, in many cases sportswomen earn much more from endorsements than they do from salary, so this is inevitably an important aspect of their social media activity. Later in the article, there will be further qualitative analysis of the chosen endorsements in terms of what it means for the identities they are trying to present of themselves.

All of the players also oscillate between Turkish (native language) and English (de-facto lingua franca) in order to ensure that they connect with the audience they feel closest to and most connect with (fellow Turks) and also with the wider international community. Added to this Vargas also posts in Spanish, maintaining links with the culture of the land of her birth. She takes care to post in Turkish as well in order to convey the clear enthusiasm she has for her naturalised country.

Table 2. Statistics categorising brand collaborations of the five volleyball players in our dataset

Player's name	Brand types	Themes
Ebrar Karakurt	-international makeup brand -leading international sport apparel -leading jeans brand in Türkiye -soft drink company in Türkiye - language practice app -leading online shopping platform	-her own style -freedom - self identification
Melissa Vargas	-leading online marketing company in Türkiye -leading sport apparel -mobile phone brand -jewelry brand -hair straightener (as a team) -leading vitamin brand	-stylish and comfortable
Eda Erdem	-crypto currency -detergent brand (as a team) -hair straightener brand (as a team) -leading sport apparel brand -leading toy brand -supermarket in Türkiye -leading technology store	-hard work -quality -fair play
Hande Baladin	-detergent brand (as a team) -sports drinks -Leading online shopping platform	-fitness -hard work -winner
Zehra Güneş	-fashion and leisure magazines -Paris Olympic games ambassador -cosmetics/skincare products -car companies	-fashion icon -female empowerment

Source: Authors' data collection from Instagram



As we see above, there are a variety of different choices made with regard to which products players choose to endorse and thereby what kind of backstage identity the players are curating alongside their principal identity as sportswomen.

All these lead us to the final section of the article which deliberates on how the players link their identity as sportswomen with nascent liberal iterations of the independent nation which recently celebrated its 100th anniversary in October 2023.

Table 3. Statistics showing number of posts explicitly foregrounding Türkiye National team and club team identification for each player

Player's name	Themes	National posts vs. Club posts
Ebrar Karakurt	-reflection on national codes linking with founder of nation Atatürk quotes -proud of her own athletic performance	29-7
Melissa Vargas	-highlighting her positive naturalization experience together with her ever-growing national identification with Türkiye -club attachment with Fenerbahçe	29-10
Hande Baladin	-pride in National team linked to founder of nation Atatürk -athletic femininity foregrounded, partnerships with sportswear and sports drinks companies emphasise this -presents self as a 'winner', as a serial collector of trophies	25-6
Zehra Güneş	-pride in National team linked to founder of nation Atatürk -despite largest number of personal posts and highest profile 'backstage' presence, Güneş still prioritises national pride expressed through Turkish language and symbolism	23-12
Eda Erdem	-strong club attachment with Fenerbahçe -account tilted strongly towards professionalism, fighting spirit and leadership, which is also connected with national independence and the Kemalist vision of the nation	16-9

Source: Authors' data collection from Instagram

In Table 3 we see an overwhelming tendency to foreground national team activity as the most important element of the players' frontstage sporting identity. At this point it is worthwhile delving a bit deeper into qualitative analysis of the discourse of each player. The distinct representations of each player shows the variegated ways in which a performance of a liberal iteration of feminist nationalism (Broch, 2016) of the players is deployed.

5.1. Detailed Analysis of Self-Representations in the Social Media Posts of Five 'Sultans'

Starting from Ebrar Karakurt, she is a player who has been a lightning rod in debates with contrasting visions of the nation. Karakurt is openly LGBTQ+ and has been targeted for this by a number of retrograde sources in the country, especially by the conservative far right media in Türkiye. She has been labelled on distinct occasions 'our national shame' (*Milli utancımız Ebrar Karakurt'tan şampiyonluk mesajı!*, 2023) and a 'homosexual deviant' (*Türkiye Voleybol Federasyonu'nun Ebrar Karakurt umursamazlığı! Eşcinsel sapkın hala Milli Takım'da*, 2022) among other things. Rather than hide or distance herself from being part of the nation, Karakurt has actively embraced who she is and regularly posts to try to inspire others suffering from prejudices in Türkiye and beyond. Karakurt has been featured in magazines like *Cosmopolitan Türkiye* talking in detail about her lifestyle (@ebrarkarakurt18 2024a). By not shying away from representing herself in an authentic way Karakurt performs a progressive



iteration of the national polity in the symbolic sporting arena (Broch, 2016). Similarly her collaborative posts represent a reflection of her sense of comfort among ‘like-minded’ people, her sense of “freedom”, and her “self-identifications”. She also indicates a sense of having re-discovered herself by using the example of wearing make-up as she was hesitant to make up before being introduced to this brand she collaborated with.

One of the most salient themes in Karakurt’s account is her insistence on showing no fear whatsoever of those who condemn and belittle her. For example, she makes a post with a partner in St. Petersburg, Russia (a country known for its appalling LGBTQ+ record) with them openly embracing and enjoying their holidays together (@ebrarkarakurt18 2024b). However, there is no visible explicit collaboration with organisations advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in her posts. She prefers to make personal statements rooted in her own lived experience. From there, she connects herself with a non-hegemonic but strong iteration of the nation which is rooted in the type of liberal, unitary and complementary feminist nationalism set out by West (1994) and represented in short-hand in the Turkish context by references to the founder of the nation Atatürk.

On her Instagram account, like many of the other players, Karakurt is keen to underline her position as a proud Turk representing not only her country but everything that is positive about her homeland. She also posts a montage of clips where she is draped in a national flag and where the founder of the nation, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk appears to celebrate 100 years of the Turkish nation (@ebrarkarakurt18 2024c). Her posts explicitly link both her personal success and the team achievements using the quotes of Atatürk. This leaves the reader in no doubt that she is a strong patriot discursively connected to the Kemalist strain of nationalism which struggles for hegemony in twenty-first century Türkiye.

Melissa Vargas (Melissa Teresa Vargas Abreu) was born in Cienfuegos, Cuba in 1999 and started playing volleyball early on the streets there. Recognised early as a natural talent, she managed to secure her first international contract in the Czech Women’s Volleyball League where she played for Prostějov in the season of 2015-2016. Unfortunately, during the season there she sustained a long-term injury which kept her out for long enough to render her visa no longer valid as she was not actively ‘working’. After a long-drawn out legal case, and an attempt by a Swiss club (Volero Zürich) to sign her, she was “rescued” by Fenerbahçe. Her eternal gratitude to the Turkish club forms a large part of her posts on Instagram. To underline how important Fenerbahçe was to her in saving her at the vital moment in her career, Vargas puts the club on an equal plain with the nation by writing “Merhaba Türkiye Merhaba Fenerbahçe” in one of her posts accompanied by a picture of her with a Fenerbahçe scarf (@abreumelisavargas 2024a). On 9 July 2024, Vargas makes a post which celebrates her completing 3 years with the Istanbul club, thanking the clubs fans for supporting her. In reality, of course, her story in Türkiye was not only shaped by club Fenerbahçe but also by the possibility of her naturalisation as a Turkish citizen which then made her eligible to play for the Turkish national team. Vargas obtained Turkish citizenship in 2021 by benefiting from “exceptional case” status as regulated by Article 12 of Turkish Citizenship Law. There is a wealth of literature on the nationalisation of athletes (Istif Inci et al., 2023). Vargas clearly contributes by performing this progressive view of the nation which is willing to embrace outsiders stepping beyond ethnic nationalism. Vargas’ naturalisation journey started with the initiative of Mehmet Akif Üstündağ’s (President of Turkish Volleyball Federation) and her



naturalisation ceremony was widely covered by the media with the picture of President Erdoğan personally awarding her with her Turkish ID card (see *Voleybolcumuz Melissa Vargas Türk vatandaşı oldu - Fenerbahçe SK, 2021*).

It is clear from Vargas' profile that she is proud of her Cuban heritage. She regularly posts inspirational phrases in Spanish that are testament to her perseverance and determination to make it as a high-level high-performance athlete (@abreumelisavargas 2024b, 2024c). It can be inferred that by posting in Spanish she is looking to inspire other young girls in her homeland and across Latin America. Occasionally, her messages are somewhat lost in translation, and some of the other players gently tease Vargas in their responses as they have not perhaps captured the full nuances of the message in Spanish (@abreumelisavargas 2024d). In spite of this, it is clear that there is a deep camaraderie and horizontalism with each of the other players in the study, in particular with Karakurt, who has also suffered discrimination from certain sectors of society for her sexuality. In a moving show of solidarity, the players repeatedly respond to Vargas how they are 'so proud of her'. The message could not be clearer, within their understanding of what the Turkish nation is and what it means, Vargas is welcome in Türkiye whatever her nation of birth and whatever her sexuality. Much like Karakurt, though for different reasons, Vargas has long a lightning rod for numerous ongoing debates, and the other players are not shy to show what kind of country they identify with and belong in. Vargas responds by respectfully acknowledging Turkish festivities and moments throughout the year (@abreumelisavargas 2024e). She appeared in collaborations with both local and international brands with the themes addressing wearing her "own style" and being comfortable at the same time.

The profile of Eda Erdem, a legendary figure in Turkish Women's Volleyball circles and much beyond, is characterised by a deep sense of authenticity. Unlike the other players, Erdem is particularly synonymous with her club team Fenerbahçe. Indeed, such is her appreciation at club level, there is even a statue of her at the Fenerbahçe Sukru Saraçoğlu Sports Complex (@edaerdem, 2024a). At the time of writing, Eda Erdem has been playing for the club for 16 years (since 2008), so for that reason, it is perfectly understandable that she has a greater level of identification with her club side than the other players. Her club, Fenerbahçe, even crowned her contribution to the club and national team by building a statue of herself in the entrance of the football stadium in Istanbul, Kadıköy. The statue's unveiling ceremony was held on International Women's Day in 2024 (TVF, 2024).

The other aspect which differentiates Erdem from the others is that she is at the end of a glittering career in which she has honours too numerous to consider enumerating. Each of the other players are between 24 and 27 years old with Baladin the oldest of the rest. This gives Erdem licence to curate herself more as a 'legacy player' who is passing the torch on to others and who is taking care of the long-term future of the sport in her country. In this vein, she portrays herself as a player who struggles through difficult moments and who ultimately leads others. There are numerous posts of Erdem as 'kaptan' (captain) in which she draws attention to her 'never-say-die' spirit – a spirit rooted in that of the founder of the nation – a true heart, a fighter and ultimately a victor (@edaerdem, 2024b). Beyond this, she posts photos of herself attending an event to celebrate 70 years of women's volleyball at Fenerbahçe (@edaerdem, 2024c). This clearly displays the multi-sport ethos of clubs in Türkiye, and that the club has long had a commitment to the incorporation of women into sporting activity. In this way,



Erdem is also highlighting the longer sporting tradition of the independent Turkish republic, but in less overt ways than other players who use Atatürk quotes and references to the independence period in the country. Erdem does also post to acknowledge the 100th anniversary of the country together with a montage of clips of Sultans of the Net playing (@edaerdem, 2024d). It is interesting in the case of Erdem, that even players who do not invoke national symbolism quite as explicitly and overtly as the others, are still doing it in ways which are consistent with the Billig (1995) iteration of banal nationalism, which argues for the covert ways in which the national is subconsciously given precedence. Erdem, in this way, is also contributing to cultural diversity by being part of the intersection between national identity and gender identity. Her status as a pioneering player in women's volleyball affords her a great deal of respect among her peers and more widely among the Turkish public. Her posts on commercial activities also address the themes of hard work, fair play, and trustworthiness. Due to her long-term appearance on the club level, she frequently shares the collaborative ads of Fenerbahçe within the same themes.

The 2023-2024 season is quite an insightful period for examining the self-representations of Baladın as the player achieves considerable success both at a club and a national team level. As mentioned with the other players, Türkiye achieved a number of collective triumphs. A month before the period in question they won the Volleyball Nations League (WVNL) in July 2023. Shortly after this, they added the European Championship held in Belgium (September 2023). Baladın completed a perfect season by adding the World Club Championship with Eczacıbaşı in December 2023 in China. The way in which Baladın celebrates these triumphs say a lot about the self-identification of Baladın not only with the nation but also with the longer trajectory of the centenary of the liberal modernising national project of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

The extent to which the Sultans of the Net link themselves to Atatürk is notable within a number of posts. To a reader not versed in modern Turkish history it is crucial to note that Atatürk, as well as being a venerated father of the nation, is shorthand for a number of meanings – most notably in this case, modernisation and the liberal iteration of the new nation.

When *Zafer Bayramı* (Victory Day) comes on 30 August. This public holiday in Türkiye commemorates the final victory in the Greco-Turkish War on the same date in 1922. On this occasion Baladın posts a quote from the founder of the nation “Ey yükselen yeni nesil! Gelecek sizindir. Cumhuriyeti biz kurduk, onu sonsuza kadar yaşatacak olan sizlersiniz. - Mustafa Kemal Atatürk” (Dear rising new generation! The future is yours. We built the Republic, you are the ones who will make it live forever. - Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) (@handebaladin, 2024a). With this quote Baladın posts a picture of the team as a collective, together with all the coaching and backroom staff which presents them as an army. This post encapsulates the frontstage image that Baladın wishes to present of herself, fighting on the frontline of the new republic, occupying a quasi-militaristic space traditionally, but not exclusive, reserved for males. It is to be noted, in the Turkish context, that the first female fighter pilot in the world was Sabiha Gökçen. In a similar way to her peers, Baladın, whether semi-unwittingly or otherwise, is also highly engaged in a performance of national identity Broch (2016) which seeks to de-gender tropes which have long underpinned hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1993).



In a similar fashion, when another significant national holiday coincides with a game, Baladin does not pass up the opportunity to make a similar connection and underline her sense of belonging to the still burning independence period ethos and passion of her nation. In Türkiye, May 19th marks the Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day when independence leader Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) and his troops successfully landed at Samsun in 1919 marking the onset of the Turkish War of Independence in the official historiography. On the same day of 2024 Baladin took the opportunity to mark a home victory for Sultans of the Net in Antalya in the Women's Volleyball Nations League by paying homage to Atatürk. She posted "19 Mayıs Atatürk'ü Anma, Gençlik ve Spor Bayramı'mız kutlu olsun! Teşekkürler Antalya!" (Happy May 19th Atatürk Remembrance, Youth and Sports Festival. Thank you Antalya!!!!) (@handebaladin, 2024b) together with two Turkish flags. The post is accompanied by a back view of Baladin with hands on hips wearing a tracksuit top with the name Türkiye on the back to ram home the message that she and the team are very much part of the modern Turkish nation. In this sense, Baladin is clever in sending the subliminal message of banal nationalism in the Billig sense. This is to say that merely by presenting herself in a relaxed pose in her tracksuit, she is still pushing her suggested connection with the nation in reacting the inspiring quote. This point is made repeatedly by the players as they have constant access through digital media to their legions of adoring fans.

In the quantitative section of this article, it was necessary to make a black and white distinction between personal and professional posts to get an idea of how much of the frontstage and backstage image of themselves the athletes wish to share. The qualitative section of the data, however, allows us to look deeper and see that the two are often merged in subtle and intelligent ways. Around the time that Türkiye triumph in both the Women's Volleyball Nations League and the European Volleyball championships in Belgium, Baladin uploads a series of photos of herself and teammates pictured with the respective trophies, portraying herself as a serial winner characterised by athletic femininity (Messner, 2002).

In one of these posts, there is a particularly clever juxtaposition or merging of personal and professional. Baladin uploads a series of photos and videos of herself and teammates with an emblematic night scene of Istanbul and the Bosphorus in the background. The Bosphorus Bridge can be seen, giving the audience a sense of the multiple meanings that the megalopolis conjures within the Turkish social imaginary – it is at once 'the nation' and also a global city signifying cosmopolitanism and modernism, hence the background of prestige projects in the Istanbul skyline signifies both the global and the local simultaneously (Öncü, 1999; Uzer 2016). This plays heavily into the type of banal nationalism which often goes unnoticed but always carries significant subconscious effect on the viewer and reader (Billig, 1995). In this post, Baladin even carries out advertising work for Red Bull, one of her main commercial sponsors making the post particularly multi-purpose. She is pictured with fellow glamorous teammate Zehra Güneş, both in elegant designer dresses, showing off her growing personal backstage profile whilst celebrating her professional achievements. In this case, rather than seeking to 'undo gender' (Butler, 1990), they are overdoing or emphasizing their gender in their backstage profiles. This does not detract in any sense from the claims they are making in terms of embodying feminist nationalism or an emancipated version of the nation; it is simply a personal choice in terms of backstage persona.



Of all the players included in these selections Zehra Güneş is the player whose postings reflect the most global profile. Güneş uses a number of Americanised popular culture clichés to connect with her diverse international audience – for example ‘let me show you my office’ (@zehragunes, 2024a) “but first, coffee please” (@zehragunes, 2024b) and the diva-like Madonna-esque ‘strike a pose’ (@zehragunes, 2024c).

Whilst the profile reflects a far more international feel characteristic of being the most followed and recognised global figure on the team, Güneş carefully curates her image in order to not alienate the Turkish audience. Many of her lengthier and more meaningful posts are written in Turkish and deal with her relationship to the very particular iteration of the liberalised national ethic that the other players naturally link themselves with too.

Like Baladın, Güneş posts to celebrate the Commemoration of Atatürk day posting with a picture in national team kit referring explicitly to the team as ‘Atatürk’ün kızları’ (daughters of Atatürk) (@zehragunes, 2024d). To those predisposed to more Westernised iterations of feminism, it may appear at first glance odd that a post of female empowerment explicitly references a male figure, however as mentioned earlier it is crucial that the references to Atatürk, in the Turkish context imply a shorthand connoting a liberal iteration of the nation and the empowerment of women which recently reached its 100th year anniversary coinciding with the period covered in this article.

Perhaps owing to the more international nature of the player’s profile, Güneş chooses to post to celebrate International Women’s Day on 8th March 2024. She posts “Türk kadınları olarak bizim hikayelerimiz, azmin ve kararlılığın sınırları aşabileceğinin en güzel kanıtı” (Our stories as Turkish women are the most beautiful proof that perseverance and determination can overcome boundaries) (@zehragunes, 2024e). Again, the post includes the *de rigueur* reference to Atatürk whose image appears as the still frame for the video. Innovatively, Güneş includes a range of other famous Turkish sportswomen from other fields. This shows an awareness of where the volleyball players fit within a larger tradition of successful sportswomen that is enviable not only within the region but on a global level, flying in the face of Western prejudices about the position of women in a society like Türkiye.

Discussion and Conclusion

The self-representations of these five athletes on Instagram clearly demonstrate how the theoretical frameworks of feminist nationalism, self-presentation, and banal nationalism are not abstract constructs but rather lived and embodied practices which shape how we perceive and relate to these recognisable national icons. Their posts show both how frontstage performance (in the sense of Goffman) consciously invokes conspicuously Kemalist ideals and national symbolism which promote the officialised sense of the nation, while their backstage identities see them merge both their commercial collaborations, cosmopolitan affiliations, and also their personal narratives of struggle and pride. For example, in Karakurt’s posts we see an unapologetic embrace of her sexuality, in Vargas’s posts we see the complex negotiation between her Cuban roots and her strong sense of belonging to her adopted nation. Meanwhile in Erdem’s posts we see her clear legacy of leadership positioning herself hierarchically as a player who has shaped the others. Finally, in Baladın’s and Güneş’s posts we see a strategic balance of global celebrity with a marked local resonance and sense of



Turkishness. In this way, across the five players we see multiple yet often complementary pathways of performing their place within the nation.

The findings problematise Western feminist analysis privileging anti-nationalistic iterations (Thorpe et al., 2017; Walby, 1992; West, 1994). Both gender and nationalism are understood differently within different iterations of the nation in the Turkish case. By choosing a Kemalist iteration of nationalism which is inclusive of outsiders providing that they are willing to integrate rather than an exclusionary ethnic vision, the inclusion of a Cuban-born player is possible. Similarly, by linking the Kemalist trope of the emancipation of women, the Sultans of the Net continue to present themselves effectively as national heroes, winners and progressive role models for Turkish youth. This counters being effectively sidelined and belittled by the deeply retrograde and misogynistic visions of the nation promoted by the sports media complex. Overall, this study's findings reflect an acute awareness of the players' individually crafted positionality and its ongoing negotiation as different players emerge with distinct discourses. More work on Turkish volleyball players particular and unique self-representations is critically required as this article simply wishes to spark lively further debate on the topic.

Declarations

* *Approval of Institutional Review Board:* Since the study does not involve human factors, ethics committee approval is not required.

* *Publication Ethics:* This manuscript was prepared in accordance with the rules specified in the "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive". In addition, the article was scanned with plagiarism detection software (Turnitin / iThenticate) and no plagiarism was detected.

* *Author Contribution Rate:* The authors' contributions to the study are 50% and 50%.

* *Conflict of Interests:* There is no direct or indirect financial, commercial, legal, or professional relationship or conflict of interest involved in the study.

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