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Diasporic Cosmopolitanism and Digital (Dis)Connectivity Among Turkish Women in Rome

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Abstract

This study advances the field of disconnection studies by examining how digital (dis)connective practices intersect with diasporic identity construction and the articulation of belonging, focusing on the experiences of Turkish migrant women in Rome. Based on in-depth interviews and participant observation with 10 Turkish women, the research highlights the central role of social class in the emergence of a "diasporic cosmopolitan" identity that is culturally and socially detached from, or even opposed to, their national identity. It further shows how this "cosmopolitan" identity intersects with the performance of specific digital (dis)connective practices and explores the cultural, political, and social dimensions of these dynamics. Particular attention is given to the influence of contemporary Turkish politics on online and offline diasporic sociality, which fosters tensions and segmented solidarities. Through this lens, the study identifies emergent forms of digital (dis)connective practices among Turkish women in Rome, which shape transnational and local social alliances and disruptions.

Keywords

cosmopolitanism; digital media; disconnectivity; Italy; migrant women; Turkish diaspora

1. Introduction

"It is hard to define it as a diasporic *community*." This was one of my initial observations during my fieldwork in Rome, investigating Turkish migrant women's digital practices for diasporic networking. Turkish migrants in Rome were scattered, difficult to locate, and largely invisible both in public and digital spaces. At the outset, I found only a few local associations linked to the Turkish embassy in Rome and discovered two private Facebook groups for Turkish migrants residing in Italy through my first respondent, Selda. When

asked if she knew many Turkish people in Rome, she replied, "I am telling you, I have just a couple of friends." Despite this, her social network was wide, consisting mostly of Italians and internationals. Through our conversation, it became clear that her disconnection from the Turkish community was due to its small size and internal division, with most Turkish migrants residing in Rome moving there because of their marriage to Italian citizens.

The Turkish women in this study, like Selda, shared several common traits: They were predominantly skilled professionals with affluent backgrounds and high levels of education. As I show, social class (Crossley, 2014) played a key role in shaping their everyday diasporic lives, identities, and digital practices, influencing both the nature of their relationships and their limited connections with other Turkish migrants in Rome. My objective is to highlight how this offline disconnection articulates women's online forms of sociality, or lack thereof, specifically looking at the implications for their identity construction as diasporic subjects.

The research intervenes in the field of disconnection studies at its intersection with digital migration studies, offering a fresh perspective on the study of migrants' (dis)connective behaviours. While digital migration research has rarely focused on disconnective practices among migrant women (Cascone & Bonini, 2024; Dhoest, 2016; Ogan & d'Haenens, 2011), existing research on disconnective practices has predominantly examined the political and psychological consequences of such behaviours (Bozdag, 2020; Zhu, 2023) rather than their role on identity formation and belonging. This article aims to address this gap by asking:

> RQ: How do digital (dis)connective practices shape the construction of Turkish women's diasporic identity and sense of belonging?

In order to answer it, I draw on findings from in-depth interviews and participant observation with 10 Turkish women residing in Rome. Using the term (dis)connection, I highlight the contested and often ambiguous nature of disconnective practices that, as Light (2014) points out, frequently interplay with connective ones. I demonstrate how the paradoxical and, at times, contradictory character of such practices emerges, whereas disconnective behaviour leads to alternative forms of digital sociality. The study begins with a review of the debates about (dis)connective practices, and how they relate to cultural cosmopolitanism. Following this, I outline the unique character of the Turkish community of Rome and its recent migration history. I use empirical data to explore the socio-political tensions that brought Turkish women to articulate a cosmopolitan identity in the diaspora. Finally, I present two empirical cases that show this dynamic focusing on Turkish women's digital (dis)connective practices: The first examines Turkish women's digital practices within Facebook groups such as İtalya'daki Türkler | Turchi in Italia | Turchia & Italia, and Italyada Yasayan Turkler, as mirroring the socio-political tensions previously identified; the second explores the use of WhatsApp by Turkish women for local and transnational political activism, revealing how digital (dis)connectivity is shaped by concerns over state surveillance and political divides.

2. Methodology

This study is the product of a one-year ethnographic fieldwork study conducted in Rome from October 2017 to September 2018. It comprised participant observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 10 (N = 10) Turkish women living in Rome, reached through snowballing sampling. Most of the women interviewed were skilled migrants or graduate students who had moved to Rome during their university

years and whose ages ranged from 23 to 44. Most participants were from Istanbul and came from middle-class or upper-middle-class families.

It was not uncommon to hear how their educational background was characterised by being former students of private international schools and universities. They were exposed to a highly international environment and taught European languages such as French, Italian, and German before their experience of migration to Europe. They were fluent in multiple languages, including Italian or English, making communication easy and the interviews rich in content. The research participants resided in Rome mainly because of their relationship with Italian men, their profession, or for study reasons. Their residency in Italy spanned from 13 to five years before the interview.

Snowball sampling might be considered responsible for the homogeneity of the sample, which does not allow it to represent the whole diasporic community (Hennink et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the reduced size of the Turkish community of Rome and the even smaller number of Turkish women residing in the city was such that this technique allowed me to reach a sample that was quite characteristic of the community. The Turkish diasporic community of Rome is relatively small, with a total number of 1,106 registered migrants, of which only 419 are women (Comune di Roma, 2023). At the time of fieldwork, in 2018, these numbers were even lower. The Turkish population in Rome comprised 720 residents, of which only 167 were women (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2018). The homogeneous social positioning of the female population is linked to Rome's economic unattractiveness for low-skilled migrants (Marinaro & Thomassen, 2014), which makes the city appealing mainly to those who already have financial means and social connections or who moved there to pursue higher education.

A topic guide was employed for the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The guide tackled two main areas of inquiry: First, Turkish women's personal history of migration; second, their digital practices. Within the large umbrella of these two sections, a series of other sub-topics were approached during the interview. The first section aimed at building rapport by asking general questions about the participant's background. This was followed by topics more focused on participants' experience of migration, their opinion and experience of living in their neighbourhood/city, their social embeddedness in the city and their relationship with people left behind, ending with possible experiences of discrimination concerning their gender and ethnicity. The second part of the topic guide focused on exploring respondents' level of digital literacy, their ordinary digital practices, out-of-the-ordinary experiences through digital tools, and preferred social media platforms and apps. The topic guide further inquired about the websites they consulted and the digital platforms primarily used in communicating with friends, family, and people from their community, locally and transnationally. The signing of informed consent preceded all interviews.

My ethnographic research was not confined to interviews. I coupled it with participant observation (Slater, 1998) to capture the behavioural nuances of my respondents before, during, and after the formal interview, paying attention to how they behaved and interacted across these different phases. This helped me capture elements not emerging through the spoken word and provided insights about their performative behaviour during the interview and during more informal social interactions (Hennink et al., 2020).

At a later stage, I conducted a discourse analysis of the interviews, first by coding the data through NVivo and identifying patterns and themes emerging from it. In a second moment, I identified the linguistic

patterns emerging in those themes, finally interpreting the process of signification that Turkish women discursively formed about their diasporic everyday life. It is at this stage that the "diasporic cosmopolitan" discourse emerged. I further approached the analysis of my participants' narratives and the emergence of particular discourses from an intersectional perspective (Hill-Collins & Bilge, 2016), looking at how language was entangled with gendered, classed and racial power dynamics. In disentangling the grid of power relations emerging from the interviews, it has been essential to critically reflect on how my positioning as a researcher influenced the research process.

Interestingly, certain aspects of my identity have positively influenced my rapport with the participants, such as my age, gender, class, and education, which were similar to theirs. In this sense, my "ethnic" belonging as an Italian researcher was blurred by other elements that created different scales of proximity and distance defined by "interactive processes that construct what are more fluid social locations" (Suarez-Delucchi, 2018, p. 199). Meanwhile, my role as a researcher was, at times, a source of anxiety. Some participants were cautious when not overtly suspicious in our first interactions. The use of the consent form was felt as a form of reassurance, allowing them to open up more freely at a later stage. All participants' personal information and names have been carefully anonymised, including the name of the party in which some are politically active.

3. Disconnective Behaviour and Cultural Cosmopolitanism: An Overview

The realm of digital media studies has often focused on "connectivity," investigating how digital media allows the emergence of new forms of communication and relationships, revolutionizing our way of building communities and articulating our identity. Mediated communication is, in fact, an "essential dimension of contemporary experience" (Silverstone, 1999, p. 2) and even more so for diasporic communities. Indeed, letters, the press, radio, television, and telephone have always been part of migrants' everyday lives (Georgiou, 2006), helping migrants to develop a sense of belonging in a condition of uprootedness and reformulation of a feeling of homeliness and identity in the new context of arrival (Georgiou, 2010; Hegde, 2016). Different forms of mediated communication are employed to build and maintain old and new social relationships at a local and transnational level through different forms of co-presence in physical absence (Alinejad, 2019; Madianou, 2016), now strengthened even more thanks to digital technologies. Indeed, the novelty of digitally mediated communication does not lie in the human need to build and maintain a network of social ties through media. Its novelty lies in the unprecedented scale on which this happens, particularly in terms of time/space compression and ease of access to information and connections, thanks to the relative accessibility of these technologies.

Meanwhile, most digital migration scholarship has focused on diasporic connectivity practices (Leurs, 2023) and their affective dimension (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2020). Only a few studies have investigated public disconnective behaviour intended to "socially disconnect from others by dissolving or suspending digital ties after they have been established" (Zhu, 2023, p. 5355) among migrants and refugees (Cascone & Bonini, 2024; Dhoest, 2016). Practices of "disconnectivity"—such as unfriending, unfollowing, blocking, and silencing on social media—have often been studied mainly concerning political polarisation, as a form of self-protection and selective exposure to contents, social resources, and interactions that do not pose a threat to one's well-being. These practices allow filtering or disengaging with people not in line with one's values and political ideas (Bozdag, 2020) but also for social movements to tactically resist political repression and retaliation (Kaun & Treré, 2018; Lim, 2020). Nevertheless, the literature has rarely tackled how

disconnection from online public spaces (Light, 2014) is also functional in articulating diasporic subjects' identity construction and sense of belonging. This is made through the subjects' digital detachment from other social groups of the diasporic community, which often mirrors the social and political tensions in the homeland that are transposed in the country of settlement. In this article, I analyse practices of disconnectivity from that angle. I show how these strategies are functional to diasporic individuals and groups to construct "a world of *critical proximity*," and to articulate their diasporic identity as "multi-positioned in symbolic and geographical spaces" (Georgiou, 2010, p. 31), in a complex and often ambiguous way. Indeed, disengagement opens up new ways of engagement whereby connective practices play alongside disconnective ones (Light, 2014).

In this endeavour, I explore practices of disconnectivity in their interplay with connective ones among Turkish women living in Rome. I use the lens of cosmopolitanism to explore how articulating a cosmopolitan identity leads to specific forms of (dis)connective behaviour through digital means. The concept of "cosmopolitanism" is a hotly debated one, as the exponential growth of scholarly interest in this concept has been the result of contemporary global processes and the unprecedented scale of interconnection between social actors beyond national borders (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Ponzanesi, 2020). This concept has often found fertile ground in migration and diaspora studies, which have challenged classic studies of diaspora that supported the idea of diasporic connections as merely defined by national belonging (Georgiou, 2010; Gilroy, 1997). Furthermore, digital migration research has produced in the past decade a significant number of studies that show the cosmopolitan and multiscale character of diasporic identity formation and connectivity through digital practices (see Diminescu, 2008; Nedelcu, 2012; Nessi & Guedes Bailey, 2014; Ponzanesi, 2020; Smets et al., 2020). Here, I expand this field of research, approaching "cosmopolitanism" and its articulation through digital practices in its "cultural" dimension, hence as a "lived and practiced empirical phenomenon" (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018, p. 131) that is appropriated as a personal and social identity. More specifically, I draw on Ong's (2009, p. 452) definition of cosmopolitanism as an identity and an everyday performative act that "lies in a continuum, whereby individuals weave in and out of different expressions of cosmopolitanism according to particular contexts." I am interested in "who performs this orientation and how this orientation is performed" (Ong, 2009, p. 453). From that perspective, a cosmopolitan identity implies, as a core value, a sense of openness to the world and universalistic orientation towards the Other and, more generally, towards differences in people, places, experiences, and cultures (see Beck, 2002).

One of the most interesting implications of cultural cosmopolitanism has been highlighted by Nava (2002), who notes how the rootedness of cosmopolitan aspirations is entrenched in a "political and intellectual critique of nationalism but also a sense of psychological dislocation and non-belonging" (p. 89). Indeed, openness towards otherness is coupled with opposition to any personal and social identification based on national or ethnic particularism so that "an imagined inclusivity…transcends the immediate symbolic family or nation" (Nava, 2002, p. 90). Nava sees cosmopolitanism as a form of non-belonging, no home and no country, and an active form of revolt and desire to escape from one's home or country. Nevertheless, openness and non-belonging do not leave a void. Instead, they create the basis for formulating a cosmopolitan identity with specific articulations of cultural and social belonging (Calhoun, 2003) that often involve multiple affiliations rather than none (Appiah, 1997). This aspect emerges also in Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt's (2018) work. In their study of cosmopolitanism as a cultural identity among transnational professionals in Amsterdam, they show how cultural identities and belonging are formulated "in relation to a

range of Others," and are "socially and relationally accomplished through acts of internal definition and external differentiation drawing on shared cultural resources' ' (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018, p. 135). The analysis of Turkish women's narratives of their digital practices explores these dynamics of internal differentiation, as articulated through segmented forms of social affiliations and divisions resulting from a sense of cosmopolitan openness to the world and ambiguous escapism from one's national identity. Section 4 frames the historical context and history of Turkish migration to Europe and Italy, representing the basis for understanding the emergence of such an identity articulation.

4. Framing the Context: Turkish Politics and the History of Turkish Migration to Italy

Turkey's recent history and political developments are central to grasping the motivations for the emergence of specific digital disconnective practices among Turkish women in Rome. As the following sections will show, these developments strongly impacted women's sense of self, inside and outside the diaspora, pushing them to use digital media in particular ways. The rise of Erdogan to power is one turning point that has been recurrently mentioned in the interviews. Indeed, it was referred to as the beginning of a broader political and social change in Turkey that began in the early 2000s, when the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP—Justice and Development Party) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was established and came to power. The party developed a political agenda that went through two different phases. The first phase was between 2002 and 2007 and it was characterised by the AKP's willingness to gain the EU's membership, the desire to reduce the power of the national army over internal politics, and an interest in expanding minority civil rights (Rabasa & Larrabee, 2008). This phase can be considered its "liberal phase." The AKP's political agenda, based on a mixture of conservatism and liberalism, also impacted the sphere of gender relations: Coşar and Yeğenoğlu (2011) claim that the AKP's patriarchal ideology was characterised by a mixture of traditional gender norms and neoliberalism, that led the scholars to define it as a "neo-liberal conservative patriarchy." Indeed, while requiring "women's participation in the now flexible labour market," it also posed "a warning about the hardships in intertwining [women's] working life and familial responsibilities" (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011, p. 568).

From 2011 on, Erdogan's governance strengthened its authoritarian tendencies (Tansel, 2018), which were now manifested on many levels. The party assumed more marked Islamist and anti-Western positions, pushing for policies that responded to this change. Generally, the period between 2011 and 2013 showed a shift to more Islamist, patriarchal, and authoritarian terms. Erdogan's government played a crucial role in the implementation of the AKP's "neo-liberal conservative patriarchy" (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011) that led to the reinforcement of patriarchal social legitimacy through state politics and the promotion of discourses ruling over women's bodies and sexuality (Cindoglu & Unal, 2017). Another primary concern was the gradual Islamization of educational programmes and the judiciary system, which marked a clear break from the past. Alcohol was also subjected to stricter regulations. The situation worsened even more after the Constitutional Referendum in 2017, when Turkey's political regime changed from parliamentary to presidential, putting even more power in Erdogan's hands. Generally, religion became more visible within society, and so the AKP started being associated more with Islamists' conservative positions than liberal ones. In terms of cultural and social values, this phase in Turkish politics caused much opposition and a sense of bewilderment in the most progressive strata of society, whose values were more in line with the so-called "Kemalist" tradition, based instead on social liberalism and secularism. Most women interviewed in my research expressed these feelings, which included a shared sense of disappointment and detachment when not overt hostility towards the current Turkish government.

My participants moved to Italy during this profound political and social change phase. Their mobility was facilitated by agreements between the EU and Turkey favouring students' transnational mobility (Weibl, 2015) through EU volunteering, university or professional programs such as the European Voluntary Service, and the Erasmus and Leonardo programs. Generally, the beginning of Turkish migration to Europe dates back to the 1960s, when the so-called "guest worker agreements" between Turkey and northern European countries were in response to labour shortages during a tremendous economic expansion (Aydar, 2018). Nevertheless, Italy has never been a receiving country of Turkish labour migration, such as those directed to Germany, Denmark, the UK, or the Netherlands. Instead, it became a receiving country of Kurdish refugees fleeing Turkey only by the end of the 1990s (Armelloni, 2008; Costa & Alinejad, 2020; Puggioni, 2005), while witnessing the arrival of a different and more recent flow of Turkish citizens in the past decade. The Turkish women who participated in my research were part of this latest flow, as part of the "brain-drain" of the Turkish elite population (Aydar, 2018; Cesur et al., 2018; Duru et al., 2019). In Section 5, I unpack the impact of Turkey's recent political history on their migration experience, especially visible through the lens of intra-diasporic relationships that were connoted along the lines of oppositional values to Erdogan's conservatism.

5. Beyond the Nation: Diasporic Identity as Cosmopolitan

According to the UN, an international migrant is "any person who has changed his or her country of residence," and "this includes all migrants, regardless of their legal status, or the nature, or motive of their movement" (United Nations, n.d.). Interestingly, the Turkish women who participated in this research never used the term migrant to describe themselves, often preferring the term "expat." The term "expat" or "expatriate" is long-debated in migration studies. As von Koppenfels (2014) highlights, the term often comes with "implications and assumptions of wealth, privilege and self-segregation" (p. 23), mainly used to refer to people from the Global North moving to another country temporarily and for professional reasons. Even if this was not the case for my respondents, who were mostly long-term residents with stable jobs in Rome, their widespread use of the term was to signal their privileged socio-economic status within the diaspora. The term "expat," indeed, was usually mentioned to differentiate themselves from Turkish migrants who moved to Italy and Europe, according to them, out of a "need" rather than a "choice." By saying that, they were referring to Turkish citizens who migrated because of the "guest worker agreements" or to ask for political asylum such as in the case of Kurdish people with Turkish nationality. As Dilara, a 42-year-old architect, highlighted:

> An "expat" is a person…a *citizen of the world* who lives abroad for work, for reasons….The migrant is a person who left a country because they had to, inevitably, because of their ideas, or because of a war, or because of an intolerable situation [experienced] where they were….I mean, they had to. This is the minimum difference. So, here in Rome there are not so many among those…but there are more people who are here for reasons…let's say, because they married or for work, or other reasons, [but] they were fine in their own country.

Dilara's words stress several interesting elements about Turkish women's diasporic identification that will recurrently emerge in the interviews. First, her words signal a class dynamic within Turkish transnational mobility that sees a contraposition between people with higher socio-economic status—who "were doing fine in their own country"—and a supposed second group composed of people of lower socio-economic status, fleeing from war or political persecution. The second important aspect emerging from this excerpt is

the use of the term "citizen of the world" as descriptive of being an "expat" (Nessi & Guedes Bailey, 2014). Here, the correlation between being expat and cosmopolitan converges in articulating her diasporic identification. The experience of living abroad as privileged subjects was, indeed, not defined by national belonging but instead by the experience of being "vanguards of a new cosmopolitan lifestyle" possessing "a particular set of skills that precociously fostered them to develop transnational mindsets and attitudes" (Nedelcu, 2012, p. 1349).

The convergence between being "cosmopolitan" and being an "expat" must be further explained through the lens of the previously described political and social tensions in the homeland, mirrored by the Turkish diaspora in Italy. The AKP's rise to power and the socio-cultural and political changes it caused had implications that touched upon Turkish cultural identity and social relations in the Turkish diasporic community. This caused a polarisation among migrants, who recognised themselves as belonging to different cultural, social, and political value systems. Being "cosmopolitan," then, emerged as a form of identification that overtly contested the ruling socio-political system in the homeland. As it will be shown, "expat" signified a privileged economic status that intersected with a specific socio-political positioning, representing the most progressive part of the Turkish diasporic social fabric in Italy.

Turkish women's cosmopolitan identification was formulated in two different ways: as the product of a "habit" to "openness" (Beck, 2002) through early exposure to an international environment, or the result of a "revolt" against the family and the homeland (Nava, 2002). Interestingly, a common aspect emerged in all their accounts: Their cosmopolitan identification implied a general process of differentiation and distancing from the nation as representative of what was considered "right-wing," "conservative," "nationalist," and "religious." My participants discursively expressed this dynamic through the use of binary oppositions to define themselves and what they were opposing: open/close, modern/traditional, democratic/fascist, secular/religious, and feminist/sexist.

The first example of this articulation comes from Tilbe, a 23-year-old student at the Academy of Fine Arts of Rome. When trying to describe her identity, she first claimed that "I don't use Turkish identity that much to exist here," highlighting, later on, the impact of her family background in the process:

> I have always felt more international….I haven't been….I haven't had a "closed" family. Let's say that I have always had the idea of something outside of Turkey. I mean, I have always watched many movies…I had the internet, I had a lot of….I mean, I always looked at art books and, in the end, I haven't had "right-wing" stories, typical, before…yes, my mum used to speak in German, she had her kindergarten, she also had German, Chinese students. I mean, it's always been very international.

A very similar reflection was formulated by Ajda, a 34-year-old computer engineer, who described herself as coming from a family that did not have a definite national or religious identity. Tilbe and Ajda formulated their identity as the product of openness to diversity and a weaker identification with their Turkish nationality. In both cases, their family background was positively described, implying a difference from the average Turkish family, while subtly positioning themselves on the opposite side of the spectrum as secular, leftist, international women. Instead, Ece, a 35-year-old project manager, had difficulty identifying as Turkish because of her complex relationship with her homeland and family. Interestingly, in her interview, whenever Ece mentioned her family and more specifically her parents, she used different adjectives from the ones used by Ajda and Tilbe:

> We are quite a typical family, like that. I don't know….I have always had a problem with my father and my mother….I didn't have a very good relationship with my father, since when I was a teenager…my father, coming maybe from [a town on the Syrian border], even if he has made much progress and he is a university professor and has many experiences abroad…he is, anyway, a Turkish man. Typical. And….I mean, in the home the power is all his. The economic power, even if my mother also works….Decisions are always made by my father, not in an explicit violent way, but he is very despotic.

There is a clear correlation in her account between her difficult relationship with her father—described as a "typical Turkish man," a formula that was negatively connoting him—and her rejection of identifying as Turkish, expressed through various prejudices that Ece acknowledged she had about Turkish people. The process of disidentification from the homeland seems related to her rejection of patriarchal gender dynamics, which pushed her not only to leave Turkey but also to make the conscious choice not to have many social relationships with Turkish people, especially men, in Rome. Ece, as much as most of the respondents, privileged relationships with partners, friends, and acquaintances who were Italians or internationals, consciously avoiding the Turkish community.

As shown, cosmopolitan identification in a diasporic context emerges among my participants from a space that is not free of cultural and social references to the homeland. On the contrary, it seems the result of specific socio-cultural backgrounds—or resistance to them—that deeply influenced their process of diasporic identification after migration. As Cesur et al. (2018) highlight in their study of highly skilled Turkish migrants and their identification with Europe, identification is influenced not simply by socio-economic background and transnational diasporic practices but by "larger narratives of citizenship and of cultural identity" (p. 129). As shown in the following sections, Turkish women's performance of a cosmopolitan identity influenced the quality of their offline and online diasporic sociality. Non-belonging and disconnection to part of the Turkish diaspora were also performed in their digital practices, mirroring previously identified social and political tensions.

6. Ambiguous Diasporic (Dis)Connectivity on Facebook

Existing research has shown how disconnective practices or content filtration are usually the product of political disagreement, which motivates the unfriending, silencing, and blocking of people, groups, and accounts from social media. More specifically, research shows how opposing political ideologies predict this behaviour on digital media (Zhu, 2023; Zhu & Skoric, 2023). In line with the literature, the socio-political polarisation between two different "Turkeys" strongly emerged from the interviews and was expressed through local offline and online (dis)connective practices. This section focuses on the intertwinement that political polarisation and disconnective practices have with diasporic identity construction. This will be done through the respondents' experience of two Facebook groups of Turkish people living in Italy that were active during my fieldwork and represent that polarization. The first group is İtalya'daki Türkler | Turchi in Italia | Turchia & Italia ("Turks in Italy"), and the second one is Italyada Yasayan Turkler ("Turks living in Italy"). Most respondents mentioned these two Facebook groups in their interviews, describing their differences regarding the kind of users joining and posting on them.

Selda was one of the first respondents to highlight more explicitly how Turkish social and political polarisation was visible on social media platforms such as Facebook. She first highlighted how disengaged she was from

other Turkish people in Rome while being, paradoxically, one of the few who benefited from social media platforms for building a network of professional relationships. Indeed, she worked for many years as a tour operator for Turkish tourists and found her first job thanks to a post that she wrote on the page of one of the two groups previously mentioned, Italyada Yasayan Turkler. Soon after, she was contacted by a Turkish woman who offered her a job as a tour guide. Selda added:

> I think that at the beginning I wrote on…"Turks in Italy," but then there is another group [and] someone told me to join "Turks who live in Italy"…and the difference between these two groups is that in the first one there are philo-Islamist fascists….I mean discussions [with] Arians, racists. Instead, in the second [group] there are artists, professionals, I don't know…medical doctors…not necessarily anti-fascists or anti-sexists, but, anyway.

This excerpt shows how the online space mirrors the cultural, social, and political polarisation within the Turkish diaspora that has been previously described. Meanwhile, it also shows how social class belonging intertwines with the political one in paradoxical and contradictory ways. Indeed, Selda, on the one hand, describes the users on İtalya'daki Türkler | Turchi in Italia | Turchia & Italia as Arians and racists. In contrast, on the other hand, she moves away from connoting politically those who were, instead, active in the group Italyada Yasayan Turkler, describing them as "professionals," even if not necessarily "anti-fascists or anti-sexist." In other words, the implication of joining the group Italyada Yasayan Turkler is mainly defined by the users' social class that, for Selda, signifies, per se, moderate political positionings. For Selda, her sense of belonging to the digital community of Italyada Yasayan Turkler was not simply based on co-ethnic ties, as co-ethnic ties were not sufficient to indicate like-minded people; in that case, an easier predictor was represented, instead, by class, that guided her choice of diasporic social capital that she wanted to have access to.

As much as for Selda, most respondents disengaged from discussions on the group İtalya'daki Türkler | Turchi in Italia | Turchia & Italia, which Ece described as "very nationalist" and sharing "hateful content." Tilbe, instead, stressed a gendered online dynamic among Turks, which pushed her to disengage. First, she described the group as "annoying," adding that she started ignoring it after strangers, especially men, had contacted her, asking privately for information as if she was an "international office." Most of them never left the group even if they overtly disliked it; instead, they silenced it, rarely participated in discussions, simply using it to access "neutral" information about Italian bureaucracy. This dynamic shows how digital diasporic sociality is not merely the product of connections based on national belonging; connectivity and disconnection are motivated by several elements that describe and signify diasporic identifications at the base of the emergence of specific diasporic digital environments (Dhoest, 2016). In Section 7, I explore this dynamic even more. I will show how Turkish women's "diasporic cosmopolitanism" and online disconnection from the diasporic community were momentarily disrupted by the common political interest in opposing Erdogan's government through online and offline activism.

7. (Dis)Connection as a Site of Resistance: Turkish Mums' Activism on WhatsApp

Suna and I were sipping coffee in the yard of her apartment, surrounded by gigantic maritime pines with a gorgeous view of Gianicolense's hills. She started the conversation by saying: "I am very sorry; I don't know if I can be of help as I don't make great use of the internet, and I'm not on social media. I'm not on Facebook;

I don't write my stuff on a platform." I reassured her, joking that we had organised our meeting using WhatsApp, so we had something to talk about. I could not anticipate, at that moment, how prophetic those words were as Suna's use of WhatsApp was undoubtedly unprecedented compared to my other participants. Her use of social media was pretty much reduced to that. Indeed, she deleted her Facebook account in 2016, after a long time during which it was inactive. She considered Facebook a platform used by people mainly as a performative "tool" to show off, and she had no interest in it. Suna also expressed some anxiety related to X (formerly Twitter), which she was not using as a social media platform because it was most subjected to the dangers of state control and repression. It became clear that her disconnective practices were linked to the need to keep her life private and safe.

As Light (2014) points out, disconnective practices work in interplay with connective practices and act as a device to form different types of connections. Indeed, the necessity to feel safe brought Suna to discard specific digital media platforms while preferring others. She profusely used WhatsApp to maintain different relationships: from one-on-one, intimate ties with family and close friends, to those with fellow Turkish political activists. Like most Turkish women who participated in the study, Suna was performing a cosmopolitan identity as a diasporic subject whose social life in Rome was composed of an international and Italian circle of friends she knew at university. She displayed no interest in connecting with other Turkish migrants in her everyday life, neither online nor offline. She admitted that she began to connect with other Turkish people from the diaspora in Italy only many years after she arrived in Rome, and only for political reasons.

Suna started being politically active in one of the leading Turkish leftist parties of the opposition a few years before our meeting when the situation in Turkey was worsening under Erdogan's government. Indeed, she claimed that the republican values of laicism and democracy had been put under threat, with severe consequences, especially for women. Moreover, the changes to public education were among the reasons for her to stay in Italy, as she was worried for her children, claiming that this was also why most Turkish mothers who moved to Italy decided not to return. Paradoxically, her first contacts in Rome with Turkish people were internationally "mediated" through the party:

> I called *them* [people working in the party]…those from Turkey! The headquarters….I said: "I want to work [for you], can you help me? How should I prepare? Is there anyone [here in Rome] that I can contact?"—[they answered]: "No, there's nobody, so, as you are the one calling us, then it will be you. You need to create a group, to look for volunteers"—"Good!" I said. I mean, I had just finished my PhD, I didn't have a social life with them….I mean, I didn't even know a few Turkish people, not even. I had a friend from the PhD but she went back to Turkey, so, zero acquaintances. Then, after half an hour, they gave me the name of a person from Bari, she also called them like me, asking if there was someone who [was volunteering for the party] and so…they put us in contact. She knew one of the "mums" here in Rome. So, she gave me her number, and that mum put me in the group. I joined the mums' group not so much because I was interested in diapers or things like that….I was looking for volunteers!….By the end of the day, I completed the list, that is: them [the mums], their acquaintances, friends….Someone else knew a student, another one here and there…we made a group by the afternoon. So, a little network, but it worked! Yes. So that was [the story], and then I stayed [in the mums' group].

The "mums" group that Suna mentions is a WhatsApp group composed, at the time of my fieldwork, of about 30 Turkish mothers living in Rome. This group had a long genealogy: Initially it was created on Yahoo, then

it migrated to Facebook, finally landing on WhatsApp in more recent times. Initially, I knew about this group thanks to Dilara, who was the first one to mention it among the Turkish participants who had children. It is noteworthy that, for many of them, this group has been the only way to get in touch with other Turkish "expat" women who were living in Rome, so motherhood represented the first and often only common ground that pushed them to build diasporic relationships.

For some of them, the second common ground became political activism. Suna managed to involve many "mums" in the Roman branch of the party where she was volunteering, opening another WhatsApp group intended for conversations whose content was more specifically related to their political activities. In terms of connectivity, the creation of these two groups responded to different needs that these women had on a local level, as not all of the "mums" seemed interested in being politically involved in Suna's activities for one reason or another. The segmentation of their connective behaviour was also due to another motivation, which was their fear of being controlled, as the mums' WhatsApp group was more internally diverse from a political perspective, and sharing certain thoughts and opinions was felt by Suna to be potentially dangerous. As Suna highlighted:

> There are certain things that perhaps we want to say among ourselves…that I don't want *that person* [she refers to a particular woman in the mums' group] to know. So certain issues are discussed on the other side. The fear is about what is happening in Turkey at this moment. There are people who are pre-arrested, put under interrogation, for nothing. Because of two lines that they wrote to someone. *This person* might be a very good one, etcetera, but I don't know that.

Creating a different group was essential for Suna to ensure they had a safe space for political discussion, not exposing their ideas in the mum's group, which provided them with a less secure environment (Zhu & Skoric, 2023). Moreover, fear of control by the Turkish government and possible repercussions for them and their families back in Turkey pushed them to choose WhatsApp over Facebook for political activities, as it was perceived that the platform could guarantee greater protection from external control. In this sense, digital (dis)connection from specific platforms represents a form of political resistance based on acknowledging one platform's vulnerability, which diverts to others (Kaun & Treré, 2018; Lim, 2020). Indeed, the digital practices of Suna and the other women show how "social media activism takes shape in the context of the evolving state efforts to control internet communication" (Poell, 2015, p. 192). In this respect, my participant's accounts are reminiscent of Elisabetta Costa's (2016) research on the digital practices of Kurds living in Mardin, south of Turkey. Costa shows how repression and violence experienced at the hands of the Turkish state, state surveillance, and fear of retaliation led to the emergence of "public secrecy" and silence about political matters on social media platforms, especially on Facebook. Indeed, even if "the State continues to be their main object of fear, both offline and online…on social media, this sense of fear reaches even further because control is more widespread and diffuse than offline" (Costa, 2016, p. 136). The same dynamic seems to be happening to anti-Erdogan Turkish women activists in Rome, allowing the emergence of political (dis)connective practices, where different digital media affordances and platforms were strategically used to protect oneself and other activists from possible retaliation and to resist state control. Fear of control is undoubtedly one of the unfortunate products of Erdogan's authoritarian turn in Turkey, and its consequences for activists' digital practices highlight the scalability of private-public spheres for local and transnational diasporic sociality through digital media.

8. Conclusion

This study contributes to digital migration studies and studies on disconnective behaviour, offering an original approach that aims to unpack the interrelationships between diasporic identity formation and specific forms of (dis)connective practices in the diaspora. Indeed, while digital migration studies have mainly investigated diasporic forms of *connectivity* through digital media, little research has focused on diasporic identity formation in their interrelation with (dis)connective practices. Consequently, this study fills this gap, showing how connective and disconnective practices are two sides of the same coin (Light, 2014), equally important to a process of self-differentiation, which is functional in articulating migrants' identity and sense of belonging. The case of Turkish "expat" women in Rome showcases this dynamic. Indeed, their disconnective behaviour or connectivity with other Turkish migrants seems functional to articulating their own diasporic identity, mirroring the homeland's socio-political tensions transposed to the diaspora in complex and sometimes ambiguous ways. The study shows how their pre-migration socio-political positioning ruled out the quality and kind of sociality that they were willing to have within a diasporic context. Hence, they developed a "diasporic cosmopolitan" identity that they performed through specific forms of digitally mediated diasporic networking or lack thereof.

Moreover, this research intervenes in the field of studies about disconnective behaviour, highlighting its embeddedness in specific socio-political and cultural contexts and subjects' positioning within those contexts along the lines of gender, class, education, and ethnicity. In this respect, I show how disconnective behaviour needs to be understood beyond the mere lens of political polarization and its consequences for the quality of democratic debate. Indeed, disconnection practices among Turkish "expat" women living in Rome prove a more nuanced portrait of this dynamic in its intertwinement with identity formation and its consequences on the quality of diasporic sociality.

First, online political polarization within the diaspora seems to result from a broader dynamic initiated in the homeland and linked to Turkey's recent social and political history. Their experience of diasporic sociality can only be understood by grasping the impact of profound cultural and social changes experienced in the past two decades in Turkey. This means that the quality and motivations behind (dis)connective practices cannot be grasped if not through careful contextualisation, considering the complex intertwining of offline social and political dynamics with online ones. Second, considering this complex panorama, disconnective practices seem to be important strategies that women employ to protect themselves from state control and as a form of resistance (Lim, 2020), opening "safer" (Zhu & Skoric, 2023) spaces for political debate instead of curtailing it.

Meanwhile, this study presents some limitations, such as the small sample size and its focus on skilled professionals from affluent backgrounds, which limited its scope to one segment of the Turkish diaspora in Italy. For future research, it would be important to expand the sample to include a wider range of diasporic groups such as Turkish migrant women having lower income and lower educational backgrounds, who might experience different dynamics of digital (dis)connectivity and identity construction. In this sense, more in-depth inquiries about the agential value of these practices are needed in future research.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declare no conflict of interests.

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