"Show me your phone!": Affect, neoliberal rationality, and nationalism in Türkiye's street interviews

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Abstract

As a recent cultural phenomenon, street interviews (vox pops, *sokak röportajları*) in Türkiye have challenged the country's captured media ecology and its neoliberal authoritarian establishment. Produced by journalists and circulated through social media, these interviews invite citizens to reflect on pressing national problems but soon become sites of intense political debate. In their discussions with dissidents in these interviews, pro-government citizens frequently say "show me your phone" in the middle of the discussion to deflect political criticism. With this statement, pro-government citizens produce affective encounters, mobilize neoliberal rationality, and circulate a nationalist politics of thankfulness. Probing the political work of "show me your phone," we make a call for theorizing global neoliberal populisms beyond populist strongmen's official talks and through ordinary citizens' affective and networked performances around everyday objects.

Key words: smartphone, social media, Türkiye, neoliberalism, populism, authoritarianism, nationalism, affect, vox pops

Introduction

The possibilities for a free media environment in Türkiye have greatly diminished since the Gezi Uprising in 2013 and the coup attempt in 2016. To consolidate its political power in the aftermath of these key events, the government invested considerable effort in capturing the media and controlling the flow of information. On the one hand, it has regulated the media environment through coercive actions, including shutting down outlets, expropriating assets, arresting media workers, and levying fines. On the other hand, to support the existing pro-government media institutions and create new ones, it has used non-coercive measures, including discretionary tax breaks and privatization deals. (Bulut, 2023; Yanatma, 2021; Yesil, 2018). Given this institutional capture, citizens and cultural workers have turned to social media and digital platforms to get information, empower themselves, and produce work that mainstream media institutions are no longer able or willing to circulate. However, the relatively free environment created by platforms has attracted the government's attention. With a new law passed in 2019, the government has been regulating social media and streaming companies through the distribution of licenses and issuing fines for content that "violates" or "undermines" family and national values (Bulut, 2024).

The government's regulatory efforts targeting social media and digital platforms do not seem likely to end anytime soon. In August 2024, the Chairman of RTÜK (Supreme Council of Radio and Television) announced that they considered regulating a popular social media genre called "street interviews" (*sokak röportajları*). Conducted by journalists and ordinary citizens using smartphones or relatively inexpensive equipment, these interviews gauge the nation's pulse on economic and central political issues. With various edits and durations, the recorded interviews are then shared on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. If they go viral, even mainstream media sometimes feature these interviews.

Thus, by highlighting politically controversial issues outside the mainstream media coverage, street interviews can influence national political conversations. This political potential to ignite national debate makes street interviews a target for regulatory intervention. According to the RTÜK Chairman, these interviews appear "innocent" but reflect the "subjective perspectives" of those conducting them. For him, these interviews present the views of a minority "as if they constitute the voice of the majority," thereby causing "disinformation." Believing that street

interviews "push masses towards *sociological* (sic) *conflicts*," the RTÜK Chairman gave orders to prepare the groundwork for regulating this phenomenal media genre (Kalyoncuoğlu, 2024).

The framing of street interviews as sources of "sociological (sic) conflicts" deserves scholarly attention because while corporate news media featuring experts transform politics into a consensus-building public relations machinery, street interviews foreground ordinary people's everyday struggles and their uncensored opinions. And yet, there are political consequences of unrestrained political deliberation. For instance, commenting on the Instagram ban in the country, citizen Dilruba Kayserilioğlu was jailed for seventeen days in August 2024. Later put on trial for insulting the President, Kayserilioğlu was given a deferred jail sentence of 11 months and 20 days. In addition to dissident citizens, the producers of these interviews have also faced prosecution in the form of house arrest (Gazete Duvar, 2021; Medyascope, 2021). Thus, as noted in the BBC World Service, street interviews constitute "a phenomenon that's been challenging the established media order" and are therefore politically valuable for their potential concerning truth-seeking and truth-telling in an authoritarian setting (*Talking politics on Turkey's streets - The Global Jigsaw, BBC World Service*, 2023).

The political-affective work of "show me your phone"

We are, however, interested in street interviews not because of their potential for truth-seeking and truth-telling but because of their political-affective atmospheres. Especially when the debate in an interview concerns the economy, discussions become so intense that citizens cry, reveal intimate details of their personal lives, share the hardships of their livelihoods, and even engage in physical fights. What often triggers these affective encounters and visceral moments is the frequent use of the phrase "show me your phone!" (*çıkar telefonunu göster*) in street interviews. Here is how the phrase "show me your phone" comes up. Typically, when a citizen expresses his/her views about Türkiye's social problems, another person with different political views joins the discussion. The person critical of the political regime provides evidence from their lives, arguing that the government's economic performance is not good and millions suffer from poverty. The pro-government citizen then offers counter-evidence, often praising the ruling party's infrastructural investments or claiming that the Western powers are conspiring to undermine Türkiye's socio-economic development. When the debate gets stuck and intense, the pro-government citizen

mobilizes the phrase "show me your phone" almost as a weapon to surprise the political opponent and derail the conversation.

This phrase has become so common and viral that news programs and comedy shows have featured "show me your phone" in various episodes. The elderly pro-government citizens who mobilize this statement in street interviews are now referred to as "Uncles of the ruling AKP" (*AKPli dayılar*) or "Uncles of show me your phone" (*Çıkar telefonunu gösterci dayılar*).[1] Even documentaries (1M views on YouTube) featuring street journalists facing house arrests (*Çıkar Telefonunu Göster*, 2022) and the value of smartphones for Generation Z (*Z Kuşağı için akıllı telefonlar lüks mü? | 'Eskileri ben görmedim abi'*, 2021) have been made. Then, given the frequent use of the phrase in street interviews and its leaking into the popular imagination, we ask two main research questions: What is the political-affective work and the discursive productivity of the statement "show me your phone" in the Turkish context shaped by neoliberalism? What could citizens' everyday encounters around this phrase tell us about the persistence of neoliberalism as a regime?

We argue that the phrase "show me your phone" first powerfully produces affective socialities among citizens with different political views. It creates anger, rage, humor, and sadness, moving people's bodies. Second, with this statement, pro-government citizens reproduce a neoliberal populist language to normalize poverty, where the economic responsibility belongs to the individual. If one complains about poverty and still possesses a smartphone, the implication is that poverty is deserved because one is not a sovereign and rational consumer. Third, this order-like statement produces a nationalist platform by labeling citizens critical of the government as ungrateful. Socio-economic problems may exist, but one should still be grateful for the strong Turkish state and its developmentalist projects (Türk, 2014). The smartphone thus enables pro-government citizens to make a nationalist call to express gratefulness for a prosperous and strong Türkiye. With the use of an everyday object, the government, without mobilizing a single official on the streets to convince citizens, gains the capacity to negotiate political demands and popular dissent with affective languages of thankfulness and neoliberal self-responsibility.

[1] Although women are also engaged in mobilizing "show me your phone," the emphasis is on "uncles" mainly because of the sentiment among anti-government youth that a significant support for the government comes from elderly men. These elderly men are more vocal and publicly visible than women of the same age group. Thus, the gendered emphasis relates to generation and public visibility.

But the question remains. So what? Since 2002, the AKP has implemented neoliberal economic policies while expanding its populist rule and political appeal through means-tested assistance programs, developmentalist projects (Türk, 2014), and the symbolic mobilization of religious and conservative symbols and narratives (Tokdoğan, 2020). This political blend of neoliberalism and populism has enabled the AKP's uninterrupted rule for the last twenty-two years (Adaman and Akbulut, 2021; Akca et al., 2014; Bozkurt, 2013; Bozkurt-Güngen, 2018). In this context, we argue that the smartphone emerges as a key device in everyday life through which pro-government citizens, as unofficial spokespersons of the government, respond to political criticism on the streets during an intense economic crisis. With the smartphone statement, we grasp the active endorsement and affective mobilization of populist sensibilities and neoliberal rationalities. That is, the affective mobilization of a mundane object in everyday encounters enabled by street interviews shows that neoliberal regimes have taken root in the veins of ordinary citizens, who embody and perform authoritarian leaders and their discourses in their daily lives. In sum, to understand the appeal and bottom-up production of neoliberal populisms, we may as well examine everyday life and ordinary objects as sites of affect, rather than constantly turning to populist leaders and official sites of ideology production.

To understand how "show me your phone" functions as a strategic discursive bridge between official politics and ordinary streets, we should briefly examine its genealogy so that we can grasp how the phone helps government politicians and their supporters to separately negotiate the contradictions of neoliberal populism in citizens' everyday lives. The first use of the phrase in a street interview (330K views) available online dates back to 2019. During this interview, which circulated on Yol TV's YouTube account (*'Açım' diyen vatandaşa 'Telefonunu çıkar' dedi; beklentisi pahalı telefondu ama yanıldı*, 2019), a middle-aged college instructor rejects claims of widespread unemployment and argues that the problem is more about entitlement. He contends that, as opposed to a scarcity of jobs, the problem is more about people turning their noses up at the jobs available. For him, it is just that people are selective about their employment and lean towards certain professions. At that moment, a 67-year-old farmer joins the discussion and reveals grim details from his life: "I swear, I am hungry. I am retired. My retirement wage is 1300 TL. I am hungry, hungry!" Right there, the first man says: "Can you please show me your phone? You say you are hungry, show me your phone." In his response, the farmer takes out his phone which is not a smartphone. "I tell you the truth. This is my address, here is my ID." Thus, in its first online

version, the “show me your phone” phrase targets an elderly farmer and forces him to share intimate details of his life.

Politicians also endorse this phrase. Back in 2018, Mahir Ünal, former vice-chairman of the ruling AKP, used it to respond to political criticism during a political meeting in the city of Kahramanmaraş. In this meeting, Ünal recalls during a TV interview in 2021, a young man criticizes the government by saying that their policies “have killed and devastated” the farmers. Seeing an iPhone 6 in this man’s shirt pocket, Ünal asks for the phone’s price, the number of monthly installments, and the phone’s monthly fee. Getting all the answers from the young farmer, Mr. Ünal underlines that he was a farmer until the age of 14, further claiming that “this suggests a capacity to use our resources, finance, and productive ability” (Independent Türkçe, 2021). That is, not all is bad. Ultimately, Ünal acknowledges Turkish farmers’ economic struggles but underlines that the entire world experiences economic problems. Thus, these farmers should appreciate the full picture. For Ünal, the young farmer’s critique of the government was not fair because, at the end of the day, he owned an iPhone 6 with a data plan.

Overall, our analysis of pro-government citizens’ use of “show me your phone” provides critical insights into the persistence and reproduction of neoliberal populism in and beyond Türkiye. The powerful production of affect, the vernacularizing of neoliberal rationality, and the promotion of nationalism in these street interviews reveal that neoliberal populism persists not simply through strongman politics, top-down policies, or brutal force. Street interviews and their affective atmospheres triggered and produced by the “show me your phone” statement, we argue, call for researching neoliberal populism not simply in mainstream media and political leaders’ official talks and performances but also in the networked discourses and performances of citizens around ordinary objects.

Methods

In making these arguments, we draw on our research on YouTube as the main archive of street interviews. We conducted two different searches on this platform. One was #çıkartelefonunu (#showmeyourphone) and the other brought together “z kuşağı” and “telefon” (generation Z and phone). While the first hashtag is the full phrase used in street interviews, we wanted to expand our findings by including “Generation Z” because, especially in the news media and comedy skits, the “show me your phone” phenomenon is predominantly framed as a generational conflict

between the elderly pro-government citizens and Türkiye's youth. Following these two separate searches, we excluded the YouTube shorts and only included videos in our analysis. We sorted the videos based on view counts. For each search, we chose to focus on the top 30 videos. In summary, our sample consisted of 60 videos; however, after excluding eleven irrelevant videos, we ultimately analyzed 49 relevant videos.

In the first search with the hashtag (#showmeyourphone), the top three results were related to a comedy show, attesting to the popularity and virality of the phrase. Other results included not only street interviews but also skits produced by citizens. There was a gameplay commentary where a young woman played Sims and made a commentary on youth lives in Türkiye. The second search centered on "generation Z" and "phone" also gave a diverse set of results, including "sad edit" versions of street interviews. These "sad edits" primarily centered on affective generational conflicts between the youth and elderly citizens. There were also interviews where journalists asked citizens about their phones, their wages, and the phone they dreamt of. The abundance and view counts (as high as 6.7 million) of these videos reveal the political-affective significance of the street interviews and the "phone" phenomenon.

After detecting the relevant 49 videos, we approached them through thematic analysis, "a method for systematically describing and interpreting the meaning of qualitative data by assigning codes to data and reducing the codes into themes, followed by an analysis and presentation of these themes" (Wæraas, 2022: 154). When dealing with smaller sets of data, thematic analysis is an interpretive approach that focuses on discursive patterns rather than generalizability (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We first familiarized ourselves with data and then generated codes. The inductive vivo codes that kept emerging in the analyzed videos included "phone," "wages," "live," "generation," "elderly," "economy," "textbooks," "highways," "dollar," "Euro," "prices," "state," "rent," "parents," "fight," "expect," "luxury," "hungry," "afford," "your problem," "Europe/European," "government." The descriptive codes we mobilized included "cost of living," "economic hardships," "poverty," "tension", "affect," "responsibility," "thankful," "nationalism," and "dichotomy." We could detect the latent meanings behind the literal transcriptions with these descriptive codes. We then grouped codes with similar meanings and generated them into themes, defined as "patterns of shared meaning cohering around a central concept" (Braun and Clarke, 2021: 331). The themes are the findings we report around affect, neoliberal self-responsibility, and thankfulness, but to make sense of

these findings, a political-economic contextualization of Türkiye, the meanings of mobile phone at a global scale, and a theoretical clarification around neoliberalism is essential.

The uses and meanings of a smartphone in neoliberal Türkiye

Commenting on financialization and the IT boom in the 1970s, David Harvey writes that "information technology is the privileged technology of neoliberalism" (Harvey, 2005: 159). Over the past two decades, neoliberalism has become increasingly integrated into our everyday lives, with smartphones playing a pivotal role. As the mundane but indispensable devices of contemporary neoliberal life, smartphones and their app economy have enabled the convergence of marketing, the market, and payment techniques, ultimately intensifying consumption and financialization of everyday life (McGuigan and Murdock, 2015).

But smartphones are more than zones of consumption. They serve as tools for connectivity, identity-building, belonging, work, and education, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. With smartphones, citizens manage their payments, taxes, debts, health records, and fulfill other civic responsibilities as they seek employment, sustainable lives, sensuality, and relationships in flexible labor markets and precarious social contexts (Archambault, 2013; Donner, 2009; Hall, 2022; Porter, 2012). Given its functional and affective qualities, not owning a smartphone even in the direst economic circumstances damages citizens' capacities to live a good enough life. When living a precarious life shaped by unemployment and poverty, a smartphone becomes a basic necessity.

However, Türkiye's pro-government citizens think differently. They claim that owning a smartphone while suffering from poverty points to a moral failure precisely because of Türkiye's dire economic conditions, which starkly manifest itself through the value of the national currency. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the national currency, the Turkish Lira, has experienced a significant decline in value. At the time of writing, one dollar is 40.74 TL, and a pound is 55.32 TL. Given the country's reliance on gas and many other export products, the devaluation of the Turkish Lira significantly undermines people's livelihoods.

Aside from devaluation, citizens suffer from high inflation, unemployment, high cost of living, and suppressed wages. According to official figures by TUİK (Turkish Statistics Institute), the annual inflation rate in July 2025 was 33.5 %, whereas independent institutions such as ENAG (Inflation Research Group) present a rate of 65 % for that same period (BBC, 2025). Socio-

economic problems are not restricted to inflation. Employment is another site that requires improvement. The broadly defined unemployment rate rose to 27.6 % in October 2024, whereas the youth unemployment rate was 16.6 % (Evrensel, 2024). When employed, workers are still on the losing side of the economic game because, between 2019 and 2022, the government's economic policies made workers lose 1 lira out of every 4 liras they received from GDP (Euronews, 2023). In an economic environment shaped by high unemployment and inflation, 43 % of the workers outside the farming sector have had to consent to working with a monthly minimum wage (22,104 TL/ 627 USD), whereas an iPhone 16 Pro starts from 83,000 TL (Habertürk, 2024).

High inflation and low wages make life in metropolitan areas such as İstanbul – the main site of street interviews – financially unbearable. The cost of living in this city jumped from 30,563 TL in February 2023 to 55,321 TL in March 2024, whereas rents increased by 301 % during the same period. Prices of basic goods such as meat (114 %), chicken (107 %), lentil (107 %), diapers (94 %), and tea (70 %) significantly increased, as well. Overall, 20 % of people living in İstanbul had to get loans to be able to make some of their payments, whereas 44 % state that they barely get by (*İstanbul'da yaşamanın bedeli: 'Survivor gibi'*, 2024).

For pro-government citizens, owning a smartphone while also complaining about these dire circumstances is problematic because if one complains about poverty, then investing in a smartphone suggests a personal failure, implying that one has not acted as a sovereign and rational consumer. This framing of poverty as a personal failure informs our approach to neoliberalism as a mode of governmental rationality through which new subjectivities and socialities emerge (Brown, 2015; Dardot and Laval, 2013). Approaches that grasp neoliberalism through ideology (faith in the naturalness of the market) or a set of economic policies (deregulation and the state's withdrawal from social services) are valuable (Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2007). Yet, our findings prompt us towards a particular rationality, as the smartphone emerges as an affective object through which a specific consumption ethic is produced and circulated. The smartphone becomes a tool for propagating the ethic of the sovereign consumer, who is to be held accountable for one's own economic behavior and poverty.

However, there is another layer to this neoliberal rationality, as it blends and works in conjunction with nationalism as an ideology. Some pro-government citizens do accept that the country is in an economic crisis but then invite others to be "thankful" for the government's achievements and developmental projects over the last two decades. One should be thankful

because, despite the dire conditions, citizens can at least find anything they look for on the shop shelves. Thus, the right thing to do is to be thankful and support the state, because according to some pro-government citizens, Western nations exploit every opportunity to target and undermine Türkiye's progress. In fact, the discourse can be as extreme as targeting the critical citizen as an ungrateful traitor. In that regard, blending a particular ethic of rational consumption with nationalism and its invitation for thankfulness, "show me your phone" reveals a messy political site of everyday life, where neoliberalism emerges not as a mono-causal process but a set of heterogeneous articulations to which the smartphone is key.

The affective atmospheres of the smartphone

The order-like statement "show me your phone" gets under the political opponents' skin, first by derailing an ongoing interview through a random reference to the smartphone, even though the device is not directly linked with the conversation. Despite the lack of a connection, a stranger gets closer to the interviewee and asks them to show their phone while they express discontent about the economy. The initial outcome is a momentary freeze where one loses his/her chain of thoughts. For instance, when talking to YouTube channel *Sari Mikrofon* (4.2K views for the YouTube video, 2.5 million views on Shorts), a young man states that the economy is "too bad." An older man stops and randomly asks, almost in the form of trolling, to see his phone. Surprised, the young man probes if the phone has anything to do with the economy, but still shows his old device, which is not even a smartphone. The old man pushes back by saying how the young man possesses the best phone in the market (*Çıkar Bakayım telefonu - sarı mikrofon (göt olan dayı) ekonomiyi telefona bağlayan salak dayı*, 2021).

> Young man: I haven't seen anything like this. I really don't have the money to eat.
> Old man: You say the economy is bad, but you have the best phone. Sell your phone so that you can eat.

In this peaceful encounter, "Show me your phone" does the job, because the young man cannot finish his thoughts. Other encounters can get more visceral because the demand to show one's smartphone touches people's nerves in an increasingly depressed economy. For instance, in one case (741K views), a citizen returning from the farmers' market tells the journalist that she'll vote

for the ruling AKP because "Tayyip Erdoğan is so good. May God bless him" (*AKP'li Dayının Ağzına Telefon Soktular! 2.BÖLÜM*, 2021). When the journalist points to high prices, she shows her arms with bags full of goods. She does acknowledge that many others cannot afford the rising prices but then says "that's probably how things must be. I am content," as she leaves the interview scene. The journalist then turns to a younger woman, who says: "Do not even ask me, I get so worked up. Whatever…" Right at that moment, another woman (the daughter of the first woman, who is happy with the ruling party) walking nearby intervenes and asks to see her phone: "What is your phone? Take it out and tell its model!" The first woman cannot help but laugh and then gives an explosive answer: "What, will you put my phone in your ass? You mindless! Why do you care about my phone's brand?" (*G** mi sokacan telefonumu kafasız, sanane benim felefonumdan dedi olanlar oldu #türkiye #ekonomi*, 2022). In another video that went viral (2.6 million views), an enraged citizen puts his phone in the mouth of a pro-government citizen. These demonstrate the visceral dimensions of the phone in the street interviews, where people's bodies literally move.

Some encounters reveal that the smartphone almost affectively haunts citizens' imaginaries. The video (39K views) titled "Generation Z Sad Edit," presents a collage of Türkiye's youth suffering from and complaining about their precarious present and future (*Z KUŞAĞI HÜZÜNLÜ EDİT #4 - ÖLÜYORUZ ÖLÜYORUZ*, 2022). They socially compare themselves with Bulgarians coming to Türkiye for their weekend shopping because of the low value of the Turkish lira. While a young man narrates how his father cried when he couldn't afford to buy a computer for him, another gets into a fierce debate with pro-government citizens and yells:

> You finished us. We are dying! There is no money. As long as you keep voting, we'll die. This country owes me, all of us, a youth!

Empowered by his companion, another young man says:

> You know, I am literally waiting for an old uncle to come here and I'll put the phone in his butt. You finished us. You killed our youth—nothing more to say. I am not giving my blessing to those in power. May they choke to death on my dues (*haram zıkkım olsun*).

Wishing others "to choke death on one's dues" is a powerful curse with religious connotations because politicians and ordinary citizens, in their official speeches and everyday lives, preach the value of living an honest and fair life (*helal lokma yemek*). As these young people release their anger and resentment through this curse, another middle-aged man becomes empowered to speak up and joins the conversation to share intimate details of his personal life:

> For the last one and a half years, I have been going to the marketplace on my own, fearing that my wife and my kid may fancy something that I may not be able to buy.

Therefore, even when it is not mentioned, the phone still affectively captivates social imaginaries and moves people's bodies. In this final example (742K views), a 35-year-old tells others that Turkish people living in Europe live much better lives because of lower inflation rates and valuable currency. As he starts talking about how elderly pro-government citizens seem to be happy with what they have, he gets louder and tells how the street interviews drive him crazy, precisely because of the weaponization of the phone against those critical of the government (*Meydanda küfürler savurdu. AKP kalesinde büyük kargaşa.*, 2022):

> He defends the worst possible life. He doesn't even have underwear but then will tell you a pair of trousers will suffice. God damn you, man. I am watching these videos and I get enraged. Take out your phone! Motherfucking phone. See. Here it is. The screen is broken. It rings but there is no sound. It is dysfunctional. The dude says, "Show me your phone." Man, I am telling you. I cannot buy it.

Upon this declaration, he shares economic difficulties such as his low wage, the high rent, the gas bill, and the increasing prices for the worst quality diapers he can afford for his baby. The more he speaks, the louder he gets, and the more people he attracts into the debate. All of these affective statements are enabled by an ordinary discussion on the economy but then get further heated by the haunting image of the smartphone.

Thus, there is a strong affective power of the smartphone as a real and imagined object in street interviews. It derails the conversation and *moves* people's bodies. Taken on its own, the statement may sound illogical and nonsensical, but in context, "Show me your phone" acts almost

like a weapon, moving under the skin of political opponents, creating initial smiles but then eliciting swear words and physical interventions (Martin, 2019). When the smartphone is evoked, citizens critical of the government almost explode and reveal the details of their precarious lives, and the more they reveal, the more affective the atmosphere becomes.

Vernacularizing neoliberal rationality: normalizing inequality, promoting human capital, critiquing irrational consumption

At the official beginning of the academic year in 2019-2020, the Turkish President highlighted his government's efforts to open a university in every city across the country and increase nationwide college enrollment rates. But he also felt pressured to respond to criticism about how growing enrollment rates did not necessarily mean quality education. For him, unemployment was to be "expected" because there was "no guarantee for a college graduate to find employment" "anywhere in the world." Thus, in a precarious labor market, the responsibility was on the college students, who, according to Erdoğan, "need to produce further" (*Erdoğan; "Her üniversiteyi bitiren iş sahibi olacak diye bir şey yok."*, 2019).

As key pillars of neoliberal rationality, individual self-responsibility and the state's disinvestment in citizens' well-being are not limited to the President's speech. Ordinary supporters of the government endorse this rationality and vernacularize it through the smartphone. For instance, in one case (17K views), as two elderly citizens share their opinions regarding Türkiye's assistance to Greece in its fight against wildfires, two young men enter the conversation by jokingly saying "show me your phone," appropriating the phrase from the pro-government circles. While the elderly men praise the government, young citizens criticize the political elite for its extravagant spending practices during a time of economic crisis. At that point, one of the elderly men first critiques the teenagers for being too young to understand how a government works, and then asks what grade he is in. When the teenager says, "high school," the elderly man says, "of no avail." The teenager then wittily responds: "Precisely! It's futile because education is too poorly designed" (*Dayılar ve Z Kuşağı Kapışıyor! • Cepteki Telefon, Eğitim Sistemi, Ekonomi...*, 2021).

Continuing the conversation, one of the men praises the highways constructed by the government. "One could even lick them," he says, highlighting their smoothness. The teenager in high school reminds the debate topic: educational problems. When he draws attention to

underemployment by saying that college graduates work as maids and janitors, the elderly man's response echoes the President's neoliberal logic: "Yes of course, so what, you'd expect him to become a doctor?" Thus, the smartphone, now first appropriated by the youth, initiates a debate through which pro-government citizens normalize socio-economic inequalities because in their logic, education should not necessarily mean mobility. Underemployment and unemployment are normalized and to be expected.

In another case, pro-government citizens use the smartphone to give advice for human capital investment and shame others for their inability to attain social mobility. This time, the conversation is between two young women.[2] One is about to graduate from high school, expressing resentment at her bleak future. "What can I do? Study? Work?" she asks. Then, the second young woman intervenes and tells her that she should find "a purpose in life," "study medicine or law," and "work" as opposed to "blaming the government." As the first woman expresses resentment at textbook prices, the second one responds: "Go, work and buy it!" Perplexed at this advice to seek employment as a high school student, the first woman asks whether she should continue studying or drop out of school and enter the workforce. The second woman says: "If you want something, don't expect it to be delivered." In fact, the first woman already works part-time as a student and when she tells others that her earnings are not enough, she is scolded for dreaming of a celebrity life. Then, the unsolicited advice comes:

> Second woman: You will make investments, like in bitcoin. If the country is not providing, then you will provide for yourself. Rather than complaining, you provide for yourself. Learn to earn money. I made video edits on social media and asked for 100 TL per video, selling 10-20 per month.
> First woman: I need a proper computer to make those edits.
> Second woman: I do the edits on my *phone*.

The second woman happens to own an iPhone. Upon showing the phone, she emphasizes how she didn't have the talent to do video edits but simply persisted with hard work, improvement of human capital, and mobilization of entrepreneurialism, features that are all constitutive of neoliberalism as global rationality (Brown, 2015; Dardot and Laval, 2013; Littler, 2018). The first woman

[2] The URL for this video, currently unavailable, is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUwyGkQhTEc

accused of not making smart investments, on the other hand, is categorized as a morally failing citizen (Ķešāne, 2021).

Our final example (8.2K views) starts with a pro-government man, who claims that nobody is starving. He says: "If the issue is to take bread back home, everyone does" (*konu evine ekmek götürmekse herkes götürüyor*). For this man, the rising prices is a global problem. He believes that because the government would not intentionally increase the prices to hurt citizens, the problem is more about "luxury consumption," where people "want to acquire everything." Thus, citizens are "*also* flawed." "We are not careful with our spending. Everyone, including the kids, have phones," he says (*Telefon kavgası çıktı ortalık birbirine girdi*, 2022). Here, possessing or desiring a smart phone points to "a problematic kind of wanting – wanting the wrong kinds of things, in a manner and degree that was constructed as illegitimate and vulgar in a time of austerity" (Jensen, 2013). When an objection is raised with this man's rationale, he responds:

> If you buy a 7,000 TL phone with the minimum wage, then you are not worried about bread. As simple as that. You spend money on your individual pleasures every day and then regret not being able to buy bread. Well, how did you buy that phone worth 6,000 TL, 7,000 TL?

Hearing these comments, the journalist is surprised about why they are "still stuck talking about phones" and suggests that one needs to question why phones in Türkiye are expensive in the first place. Then, other young people enter the discussion and tell how they could not even afford to buy a soft drink and ice cream with the 7 TL in their pockets. They struggle to buy the textbooks essential for their exams. The pro-government man's response: "So, do the prices have to match what you have in mind?" The teenagers say "precisely" and underline once again that they "cannot live because of persistent inflation." As the discussion continues, another old man comes and asks to see the complaining teenager's phone. At that point, the journalist intervenes to say that a smartphone is "a basic need" with which young people study, get bureaucratic things done on the highly essential e-government website, or simply call their parents if a problem emerges. Teenagers start justifying their smartphone ownership by emphasizing that they bought their phones through loans or thanks to monthly installments. In response, the pro-government man says:

> Well, if a phone is a basic need, then it means that it is more important than bread. I mean, is the expectation in Türkiye one where everyone will be rich?

One of the female teenagers confirms: "Precisely, we are all impoverished under this government." As the discussion moves toward youth expectations, a male teenager tries to convince the pro-government citizen by reminding him how workers earning minimum wages back in his time were able to buy a house, a car, and educate their kids. And then he resents the pro-government man for "begrudging phone ownership" for him and others. The debate ends with young people's bitterness about having to work to support their families at the age of fourteen.

Therefore, aside from producing affect, the smartphone vernacularizes neoliberal rationality because pro-government citizens mobilize an ordinary technological device to normalize the diminishing prospects for social mobility, give advice for human capital investment, and critique others for their own poverty. The next section will show how a nationalist politics of thankfulness is articulated with the neoliberal rationality described here.

Nationalist politics of thankfulness

With the smartphone, pro-government citizens also promote a nationalist politics of thankfulness. Accordingly, if one is complaining about the economy, pro-government citizens resort to the smartphone to deflate criticism, arguing that one should be grateful for the current government's developmental projects (e.g. highways, bridges, airports, dams etc.) realized over the past two decades. Pro-government citizens regard critical citizens, especially teenagers, to be too young and even entitled to remember how the country used to be in a much worse economic position prior to the AKP regime. Thus, the smartphone is strategically used as a weapon to both praise the government and question, even gaslight, the embodied experience of poverty, because, as the argument goes, critical citizens are not aware of or truly appreciate successful government projects.

In one interview (17K views), young people complain about the state of education, which, they argue, does not prepare them well for precarious labor markets (*Dayılar ve Z Kuşağı Kapışıyor! • Cepteki Telefon, Eğitim Sistemi, Ekonomi...*, 2021). The journalist asks a disagreeing

pro-government man what he would advise the youth were he the Minister of Education. The pro-government man says, “educate yourself.” “There are teachers and schools,” he adds. Another man adds that the youth should be “respectful.” The journalist then intervenes to restore the conversation to “the failing education system.” The second pro-government man claims that this is “a big lie.” A third adult – again a man – comes to defend the young citizens, underlining how the government has already accepted that the education system is dysfunctional by lowering the scoring threshold to enter college. The second pro-government man responds:

> How is that a bad thing? Everyone then enters college. This government knows it better than everyone else. You don’t remember the previous years, before the 2000s. If you had seen the pre-2000s, then you would have acknowledged this current government. Hospitals, roads…

Arguing that Türkiye exports “planes” to European countries, this man invites the youth to be “optimist.” “Things will improve,” he says. Just like the government, its supporters also construct the pre-AKP years as a period full of political failures.

In another interview (11K views) featuring a middle-aged pro-government man and a young woman, the journalist starts by asking the man’s preference in the upcoming Presidential Elections in 2023 (*Z kuşağı tartışması! İlla telefonu ağzınıza sokmak mı lazım?*, 2023). The oppositional candidate, this man argues, represents the interests of terrorist groups and foreign powers. “The oppositional figures are all traitors,” he adds. When a young woman raises her objections, the pro-government man refers to the failures of former governments and asks about the woman’s age to imply that she “doesn’t really know.” Claiming that “there is a lot of money for those willing to work,” the man evokes the WW2 years when people “had to wait for 8 hours in line to be able to buy 5 kilograms of olive oil.” As a response, the young woman underlines how oil as a basic ingredient is currently too expensive. And yet, the man states that even if it is expensive, it is “abundantly available.” He argues that before the AKP, one could not even get the dead bodies of their relatives from the hospital without paying a lot of money. The debate gets heated when four men start questioning the young woman’s rationale for criticizing the government. At that moment, a man asks the woman the price of her phone. Feeling stuck, the young woman tells the man that he is “brainwashed” and somewhat angrily says: “Sir, how is the

smartphone relevant here? Should I really put the phone in your mouth?" Thus, discussions featuring the smartphone become a vehicle for the pro-government citizens to invite others to be thankful, while both gaslighting their embodied experience of poverty and even implicitly accusing them of being ungrateful traitors.

Our final example (1.7K views) features two women and an elderly pro-government man (*Z KUŞAĞINA TELEFON SORDU ORTALIK KARIŞTI !! z kuşağı sokak röportajı*, 2022). The journalist asks a woman: "How do you find the economy?" For this woman, "there is not even an economy" because the country is in "terrible shape." Lamenting the fact that she must discuss the economy as a sixteen-year-old teenager, she complains about the high prices of textbooks. "Gen Z is either aiming to rescue the country or just leave the country to rescue themselves," she says. For her, the word "party" means political parties, whereas it means "fun" for her peers in the West. And then, the woman compares her life with the political elite:

> The political elite tells us that we should eat sun-dried avocado and celery. I mean, can people even find them? Students cannot even find residence halls for accommodation. They (the political elite) build palaces for themselves. We cannot even leave since we need a visa. They've got seven private jets. And when you tell this to the elderly citizens, they will take this as a good sign of the economy.

As she lists what she considers to be the high prices of certain consumer goods, a man passing by asks: "How much is the phone in your pocket?" As a response, the woman takes out a phone she bought five years ago. "Whatever," the man says in his response. As the woman passionately emphasizes that the phone is a basic need for information and education, the man responds: "You don't have the right to denigrate this country."

> Woman: So, what is your rationale?
> Man: The government is distributing money to everyone.
> Woman: You will tell us that you waited in long queues to get oil or bread. Well, that means you were able to buy oil at least. This phone, do the research, is J7 Prime, model 2015. Where will I do my teaching?
> Man: Don't denigrate the state.

As the man leaves the scene, he yells, “They are ungrateful people!” and questions their patriotism.

The smartphone thus enables ordinary citizens to embody government officials and invite those critical of the government to be thankful for what they have. But this ideology of nationalism works in a distinct manner through storytelling, where a miserable past is constructed vis-à-vis the current level of progress enabled by the government. Thus, as opposed to other populist contexts where the appeal is to a nostalgic past, here, the appealing stories are about the present (Hochschild, 2016; Polletta and Callahan, 2019). With the smartphone and ensuing age argument, pro-government citizens aim to cancel the political opponent’s ability to know. One could even argue that the smartphone and people’s age are used to gaslight citizens suffering from poverty because their lived experience, reflexive capacity, and mental integrity are undermined through the mobilization of a nationalist politics of thankfulness (Hewer, 2024).

Conclusion

Aside from being a platform for truth-seeking and truth-telling, Türkiye’s street interviews are affective spaces where citizens of a polarized nation freely discuss politics outside the captured media environment. In these interviews, pro-government citizens use the statement “show me your phone” to mobilize a neoliberal logic and a nationalist politics of thankfulness to deflect political criticism. With the “show me your phone,” pro-government citizens find the language to both show their political loyalty to the government and extend official arguments as to why the government is successful despite the ongoing economic crisis. The related languages of thankfulness and neoliberal self-responsibility construct a discursive bridge between government politicians and their followers, enabling ordinary citizens to affectively embody the conservative government in daily life and tell stories on their behalf.

In conclusion, we highlight how neoliberal populism in Türkiye and beyond should be understood not simply through strongman politics or top-down policies but through ordinary objects and everyday encounters. With “show me your phone” as a statement and the smartphone as a mundane object, we grasp how contemporary regimes take hold because citizens actively endorse and affectively mobilize populist sensibilities and neoliberal rationalities. Thus, in making sense of the persistence of neoliberal populist regimes, researchers should consider not

only authoritarian leaders' official talks and performances but also ordinary citizens' networked discourses and affective performances around ordinary objects. This could rescue analyses of neoliberal populism from leader-oriented scholarship and locate its investigation within the affective formation of the everyday.

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