PRE-MARITAL SEXTING AND SEXUALITY NORMS IN TURKEY: SEX(T)UAL SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY

By

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Vienna, 31.10.2024

Didem Şalgam Poyraz

Abstract

This dissertation explores how offline norms regulating sexual practices and sexing shape and are shaped by each other in contemporary Turkey by inquiring about the contrasting tensions of women's sex(t)ual subjectivities, Islamic religiosity, and the use of Turkish obscene language in sexting. At the same time, I analyze the subjectivities and agencies of the individuals I study. The discussion in this dissertation is empirically informed by (1) a set of in-depth interviews with 13 women and 11 men who are self-identified heterosexual, educated, urbanite young adults who have experience of sexting and who live in Ankara, Turkey, and (2) critical analysis of online discussions about sexting on online Turkish community, namely *Kızlar Soruyor* (Girls are Asking).

Building upon the international scholarship on sexting in particular, and cybersex in general, I argue that sexting is not disassociated from offline norms. On the contrary, I claim that offline norms such as religion, national politics, socio-cultural codes, and feminist movements have a significant impact on how my research participants practice sexting: what kind of language they use, what kind of images they share, with whom they sext, whether and how they speak up for their sex(t)ual desires, and how they feel about it. Following poststructuralist feminist theories, I argue that my women research participants present multiple, unfixed, and changing sex(t)ual subjectivities in their sexting practices. Depending on how they are impacted by national politics, cultural codes of sexuality, and their feminist values, they consciously or not make certain preferences in their sexting practices and manifest diverse forms of agencies. The desire of my pious Muslim informants to protect their Islamic faith and to remain a good Muslim subject while exploring their sexual desires and engaging in sexting leads them to play around with Islamic norms and develop strategies. Significantly, they do not leave their Islamic selves behind while engaging in sexting practices. On the contrary, I argue

that they maintain their pious subjectivities by utilizing the digitally mediated materiality of sexting. In this sense, they are often caught between their sexual desires and Islamic values. Lastly, contrary to the commonly accepted (feminist) idea that Turkish obscene language sexually objectifies women, the individuals I study – some of whom are self-identified feminists – sexually enjoy using this language in sexting, although they disapprove of its use in daily communication. I claim that their conscious use of this language, despite its negative and sexist connotations, highlights their socio-culturally and historically specific agencies. I also argue that through using this language, the women I study come into being as sexually desiring and desirable subjects instead of sexual objects.

This dissertation contributes to the international scholarship on sexuality and sexting by highlighting the significance of subjectivity and agency in analyzing and understanding my research participants' sexting practices in a non-western, religiously conservative, and authoritarian context. It highlights the various modalities of agencies that cannot be grasped and explained through the binary category of resistance and submission.

Acknowledgments

There were times when I thought I could not go any further. Once, I even came to the edge where I decided to leave my Ph.D. My supervisor, Hadley Renkin, was the one who always supported me, changing my mind and making me believe that my work was valuable and that I could finish my Ph.D. I am deeply grateful for his endless support and his belief in me and my research. I also thank him for his invaluable academic contributions to my dissertation. He has always read and provided critical comments on my chapter drafts numerous times.

I am truly indebted to my informants who kindly and bravely agreed to talk to me about their intimate lives, sharing their sex(t)ual practices. This dissertation would not have been completed without them. Thank you all so much for believing me and my research!

With the start of the Pandemic, I returned to Turkey and, like many other Ph.D. candidates, wrote most of my dissertation in isolation, away from my colleagues and friends. However, I was lucky enough to have good friends who read and commented on different chapters of my dissertation and supported me in different ways. I thank Neyir Zerey and Sibel Bekiroğlu for reading and sharing their thoughts on different draft chapters of the dissertation. I am very glad and privileged to have Alenka Mrakovcic as my close friend. They have always been there, supporting me, hearing me, listening to me, and being a safe space for me. I also thank my dearest friends, Cansu Okan, Göknil Torun, and Ogül Ünsal, for the endless support that they provided through our Skype sessions.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

> In my first sexting experience, I remember that I was a bit stoned. I felt somewhat disturbed but also sexually aroused by the things I read on the screen. Things like, "*seni nefesin kesilene kadar* ***sikiyorum*****"** (I **fuck** you so hard that you can't breathe; ***amını*** *yalıyorum* (I'm licking your **pussy**); and "***yarrağımı amında*** *hissetmeni istiyorum*" (I want you to feel my **dick** in your **pussy**). As a feminist woman, I find these obscene words very sexist, and I don't use them in my daily life. Besides, I had never thought that I would sexually enjoy hearing, reading, and typing them one day. But here I am: I enjoy using these words in *most* of my sexting practices but not in my daily mundane communications. (Interview with Ilkay, 2019)

> Because I'm veiled, people think I do not do such things. (Interview with Zuhal, 2021)

In the above quotes from Ilkay and Zuhal are embedded three central themes of my dissertation: the contrasting tensions of women's sex(t)ual subjectivities, the use of Turkish vulgar, obscene language, and Islamic religiosity in sexting. These quotes also show that although sexting is a part of individuals' "real" sexual lives, it differs from "real" sex as it generates different feelings. I met with Ilkay at a café near her university campus in Ankara on a warm spring day in 2019. The café was not that crowded. Nevertheless, while verbalizing the above words in bold, Ilkay, consciously or not, lowered her voice and leaned towards me over the table to prevent other people sitting in the café from hearing her utter these words.

Turkey has been going through a socio-cultural and political transformation in the direction of Islamic conservatism and authoritarianism, especially since 2011 (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Cindoglu & Unal, 2017). This transformation has brought along strictly traditional and conservative gender and sexuality norms that are informed mainly by Islamic values (Özkazanç, 2018). As discussed in Chapter 1, on several occasions, the current Turkish government, Justice

and Development Party (AKP) members, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current President of Turkey and the Chair of AKP, have uttered and spread anti-gender, anti-women statements and discourses. For instance, Erdoğan has discursively revitalized the distinction between virgin and non-virgin unmarried women and has tried to devalue non-virgin unmarried women in society. Further, he has rejected gender equality and equated womanhood with motherhood, disregarding women's other selves, such as sexuality. As elaborated in Chapter 1, gendered sexual debates and policies that AKP and Erdoğan have produced range from a ban on abortion, marriage, and reproductive decisions of women, motherhood, the ban on mixed-gender housing of university students, and so on so forth, all of which directly target women's bodies and sexualities.

As will become more apparent throughout the dissertation, considering the increasing Islamic conservatisation, authoritarianization, and surveillance in Turkey during the AKP and Erdoğan Regime, especially after 2011, the very act of women's involvement in sexting, a chat-based form of cybersex, in the context of Turkey pinpoints their sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies. The women I study actively take responsibility for being involved in sexting practices despite the predominant sociocultural, political, and religious norms regulating pre-marital sexual behaviors in Turkey. They are often caught between their sexual desires and the pressure of national, religious, cultural, and familial codes of sexuality. Further, the women I study make decisions and preferences in how to sex(t)ually present themselves in their sexting relationships: what kind of language they use, what type of language they allow their partners to use, how assertive they talk, what kind of self-images they share, and how they feel about it.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the ways in which they sex(t)ually position and present themselves in their sexting practices do not always challenge the broader structural gender and sexuality norms. There are also times when they, willingly or not, correspond to gender and sexuality norms for several reasons. In other words, they often negotiate with their sexual

desires and gender and sexuality norms, their religiosity, national politics, and their feminist identities. This is evident in what kind of language they use, what kind of language they allow their sexting partners to use, what kind of sexual self-images they send and receive, and how they feel about it. For instance, Hazal, a feminist woman, told me that although she was not against the use of vulgar, obscene language in daily life, she was disturbed by her partner's use of it in their sexting relationship. Nevertheless, she preferred not to warn him or end their sexting practice.

The terms in bold in the above quote from Ilkay are some of the Turkish vulgar, obscene phrases that are understood to humiliate and degrade women's bodies and sexualities. These words are also understood to violate Turkish sacred values. For these reasons, many people in Turkey do not find it appropriate to use them in daily respectful communication, especially while communicating with women. Besides, women's use of these words deeply obscures the gendered norms as it challenges the traditional figure of heteronormative femininity (Femihat, 2021). However, as the quote from Ilkay demonstrates, despite their sexist and degrading connotations, these words have the power to generate sexual and erotic feelings in sexting. For this reason, most of the people I study consciously and willingly prefer to use these vulgar, obscene words in their sexting practices. Their decision to use this language in their sexting practices is closely linked with what kind of agency they manifest through and in sexting.

The involvement of pious Muslims in sexting practices further complicates my research project in terms of the issues of subjectivity and agency because, in normative understanding, unmarried Muslims are religiously expected to stay away from sexual affairs. In *Materializing Piety: Gendered anxieties about faithful consumption in contemporary urban Indonesia,* Carla Jones (2010) notes that the Islamic way of clothing or veiling is not necessarily a sign of piety, as there might be other motivations behind it. From a similar perspective, I do not categorize my pious research participants because of their Islamic way of dressing. Instead, I consider

them as such because they represented themselves to me as being devoted pious Muslim individuals who try to pursue their lives in the light of Islamic values. In this sense, they differentiate from other (Muslim) citizens of Turkey who do not follow any religious rules but pass as Muslims in the society just for being born in Turkey. Significantly important, the category of religion on the Turkish identity cards used to be filled in as Muslim for all citizens, except religious minorities, until recently.

The quote from Zuhal, in line with my field research, indicates that a group of pious Muslim individuals engage in pre-marital sexting relationships. Their involvement in sexting practices, at first glance, seems a resistance to religious norms that prohibit any pre-marital sexual affair (Bouhdiba, 2008). However, as discussed in Chapter 5, through more profound and critical analysis, I show that these pious Muslims perform regular self-disciplining and regulation to maintain their religious faith and subjectivities while engaging in pre-marital sexting practices. I show that they develop several strategies and make negotiations to preserve their Islamic faith while also being a sex(t)ual subject and vice versa. For instance, the devoted Muslim women I study may prefer not to share their self-images during sexting to keep their bodies unknown and unseen by their sexting partner. As discussed in Chapter 5, by doing so, they think they conceal their bodies from the "stranger masculine gaze" while being involved in sexting and exploring their sexual desires (Göle, 2015, p. 47)

Disciplinary Power

In "Discipline and Punishment", Foucault (1995) differentiates disciplinary power from sovereign and judicial power. In sovereign power, the punishment was in the form of torture of the body as a public spectacle. Society used to witness torture, and they confessed their crimes and helped the judicial system. However, in sovereign power, punishment is replaced by other techniques such as surveillance, examination, and observation of the body. The body has become the "target that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes

skillful and increases its forces" (Foucault, 1995, p. 136). In disciplinary power, the idea is to produce obedient and useful bodies. In this regard, Foucault argues that "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (1995, p. 138).

Surveillance is an essential component of disciplinary power. Individuals are under constant surveillance within the disciplinary power mechanism. Foucault writes that

> The power in the hierarchized surveillance of the disciplines is not possessed a thing, or transferred as a property; it functions like a piece of machinery. … it is the apparatus as a whole that produces 'power' and distributes individuals in this permanent and continuous field. This enables the disciplinary power to be both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert, since by its very principle it leaves no zone of shade and constantly supervises the very individuals who are entrusted with the task of supervising; and absolutely "discreet", for it functions permanently and largely in silence (1995, p. 177)

I find the operation of surveillance in disciplinary power crucial in terms of how my research participants, whether willingly or not and consciously or not, regulate and shape their practices and bodies. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 4, some of my women informants have become more careful and hesitant in kissing or hooking a man at bars as an outcome of the increasing Islamic conservatisation in Turkey, especially since 2011. My devoted, pious research participants' constant negotiation between their sex(t)ual desire and religious faith can be another example at this point. As discussed in Chapter 5, since they want to be good and faithful Muslim subjects, my devoted Muslim informants constantly shape and regulate their desires and bodies while engaging in sexting practices. In this regard, Foucault states that individuals are incorporated with societal norms and expectations, leading to self-disciplining behaviors (Foucault, 1995). This incorporation occurs through various social control and surveillance mechanisms, leading individuals to monitor and modify their actions per

established norms. Foucault explores "techniques of the self," emphasizing practices through which individuals actively shape and govern their conduct (Foucault, 2005). These techniques include self-reflection, confession, and various rituals to achieve moral or ethical self-improvement.

Subjectivity

Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power is also vital for his understanding of subject/ivity. In his theorization, the subject is not an innate, pre-given, and fixed entity. On the contrary, Foucault (1978) argues that subjects are produced through power relations in socio-cultural and historical conditions. In other words, subjects come into being as they are subjected or enter into power relationships. From a similar perspective, Butler contends that subjectivity is not a natural essence or fixed entity but is socially constructed through performative processes. She (1999) argues that social norms are essential conditions for a subject to be formed. I utilize the subjectivity understanding of Foucault and Butler in analyzing my women research participants' sex(t)ual subjectivities that they present during sexting. I suggest that the kind of gender and sexuality discourses that AKP and Erdoğan Regime have been producing are influential in terms of my research participants' subjectivities, among other sociocultural and political factors.

Butler and Foucault agree that subjects do not always conform to social norms through which they come into being. On the contrary, they may challenge and resist these norms. Foucault discusses the possibilities of resistance through his concept of subjectivation and argues that resistance is integral to power relations and that it may take different forms. Butler also argues that subjects may challenge societal and structural norms. In this regard, she gives the example of drag queens who politically and ironically reiterate heteronormative gender norms in a theatrical way. By doing so, as Butler (1999) argues, drag queens not only subvert the heterosexual norms but also come into existence as certain subjects. As I discuss throughout

each analytical chapter, my research participants do not always conform to national, religious, and social norms that shape gender and sexuality dynamics, but they also often challenge these norms. For instance, Turkish vulgar, obscene language is understood to be taboo and found inappropriate in daily respectful communication in Turkey. The use of this language is generally associated with macho masculinity and is disproportionately used by men as a means of expressing anger or aggression (Çiçek & Yağbasan, 2019; Zengin, 2015). Further, it carries sexist connotations that imply a sexual attack on women and their bodies (Femihat, 2021). Therefore, it sexually passivizes women. In this sense, I suggest that vulgar, obscene language is in line with and serves the current national gender and sexuality politics as they impose a woman figure who is sexually passive, obedient, docile, and subordinated. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, most of my research participants find this language sex(t)ually arousing and pleasurable, and they enjoy using it in sexting. In this regard, women's use of this language challenges gender and sexuality norms as this language does not correspond with the ideal heterosexual feminine subjectivity. For this reason, by using this language, the women I study challenge the norms, and they become a particular subject.

Further, language plays a significant role in Butler's theorization of subject formation. She states that "language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject" (Butler, 1997, p. 28). In other words, through interpellations, subjects are performatively constituted. In this respect, her well-known example is very illustrative. When an infant is born, the doctor names the infant a girl. The infant becomes a girl subject through being called/named as a girl. Hence, in Butler's theorization, the subject comes into being through interpellation, being called and named.

Butler further states that

> "The 'I' only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated. … Indeed, I can only say 'I' to the extent that I have first been addressed, and

> that address has mobilized my place in speech; the discursive condition of social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of the subject" (1993, p. 225)

By using Butler's work on subjectivity, I show in Chapter 6 how my research participants are constituted as sex(t)ually desiring and desirable subjects through the use of vulgar, obscene language in their sexting practices. I also show that this sex(t)ually desiring and desirable subject comes into being in the temporal contextuality of sexting.

In a nutshell, Foucault and Butler's theorizations shape my understanding and analysis of subjectivity in my dissertation. Following their theoretical path, I consider the subjectivities of my research participants to be multiple, unfixed, socio-culturally, and historically constituted. My research participants' subjectivities are constituted by the structural norms that also subordinate them (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1978). In particular, I use Butler to discuss and argue how vulgar, obscene language can constitute certain sex(t)ual subjects who may not only resist but also subordinate to the broader gender and sexuality norms.

Agency

Western feminist thought has conceptualized agency as a synonym for resistance to oppressive gender norms. Agency has been associated with autonomy, choice, subversion, and free will. In this regard, Lois Mcnay (2016) suggests that Butler's account of gender performativity, particularly drag queens, is illustrative in terms of how agency is linked with resistance and subversion in Western feminist thought. Drag queens actively and politically resist heteronormative gender roles and subvert them through their performances (Butler, 1999).

However, scholars, especially from the Global South and non-secular contexts, have criticized the Western-based theorization of agency. Among them is Saba Mahmood, who significantly shaped my conceptual frame of agency in my dissertation. In "Politics of Piety:

The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject," Mahmood provides an extensive critique of Western-based theorizations of agency. She criticizes

> The belief that all human being have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them (Mahmood, 2005, p. 5)

Accordingly, Mahmood's theorization of agency challenges not only the formulation of agency as resistance to norms but also the idea of subjects always desiring to subvert the norms or to break the chains that hold them. Instead of resistance, Mahmood conceptualizes agency "as a modality of action" (2005, p. 157). Therefore, an action that seems to be a submission to subordinating norms can be a manifestation of agency. In this regard, Mahmood states that agency should be taken into account "as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (2009, p. 15).

Mahmood's theorization of agency is particularly significant in how I understand my women and pious research participants' agencies. As discussed in Chapter 4, my women research participants do not always resist gender and sexuality norms, but sometimes they conform to these norms while engaging in sexting practices. Particularly speaking, they do not always represent sex(t)ually assertive, empowered, and ready-for-sex heterosexual femininity, but sometimes they refrain from speaking up for their sex(t)ual desires and likes. Following Mahmood's theoretical path, I suggest that their refrainment from sex(t)ual actions and decisions cannot be analyzed as a submission to heteronormative gender and sexual norms. Instead, I suggest that they should be considered as "context-dependent and multifaceted sexual desire, wantedness, pleasure, interests, and behavior" (Bay-Cheng, 2019, p. 3).

Further, my pious research participants' engagement in sexting subverts Islamic norms, as Islam strictly prohibits any pre-marital sexual relationship (Bouhdiba, 2008). In this regard,

at first glance, their sex(t)ual actions seem to have agency in the form of resistance and subversion. However, I demonstrate in Chapter 5 how they practice sexting, and what they share and do not share during sexting, which complicates the kind of agency they manifest through involvement in sexting practices. To enunciate, while engaging in sexting, they actively shape, regulate, and govern their bodies and sex(t)ual desires according to the norms of Islam that regulate sexuality. I show that they constantly negotiate with Islamic norms and their sex(t)ual desires by developing different strategies. For this reason, I suggest that their agencies cannot and should not be read simply and only as resistance to Islamic norms. For they both resist and subordinate Islamic norms that regulate pre-marital sexual behaviors.

Sexting in Turkey

Sexting does not appear in Turkish scholarly discussions as much as it does in Turkish popular culture. There is a limited number of academic works on sexting, and they generally focus on its negative aspects. Dila Ergül (2021), in her master's thesis, explores the linkages between sexting, victimization, and cybercrimes. She argues that sexting may cause several unwanted consequences, such as the dissemination of sexting content and sexual images, that should be taken into consideration. She suggests that women, compared to men, are more likely to be the victim of such unwanted consequences. However, she states that the risks associated with sexting do not have an impact on their involvement in sexting practices. In another study with her colleague, they discuss the factors that impact the individuals' practicing sexting. They suggest that having previous sexting experience, having a positive attitude toward sexting, and the trust level between sexting partners significantly increase individuals' probability and frequency of practicing sexting. They also address the negative aspects of sexting and claim that individuals prefer to practice sexting with their romantic partners to reduce the risk factors (Ergül & Ziyalar, 2022). From a similar perspective, Hasan Durmuş and Yavuzalp Solak (2024) conducted quantitative research on the sexting behaviors of 5464 adults in Turkey. Some of

them did not have prior sexting experiences. The authors argue that there is a meaningful and positive correlation between sexting and risky sexual behaviors (Durmuş & Solak, 2024). In other words, they contend that people with risky sexual behaviors are more likely to practice sexting compared to those individuals who are not associated with risky sexual behaviors.

In their article, Elvan Yıldız Akyol and Kemal Öztemel (2021) reviewed international scholarly works on sexting; however, they did not provide empirical evidence or knowledge from Turkey. They address the lack of studies on sexting in Turkey. Based on their review, they state that sexting has become a widely known phenomenon and has gained academic attention abroad. They suggest that scholarly awareness about sexting is missing and it should be raised in Turkey as well.

Further, sexting is also widely discussed in popular culture in Turkey. These discussions range from the definition of sexting to tips for best sexting practices.[1] In one of the sites that give advice for the best sexting experiences, the importance of consent, sexual creativity and imagination, and speaking up for one's sexual desires are emphasized.[2] In these tips, the issue of sharing self-produced sexual images and videos is also discussed. Although there is an agreement that sharing such photographs and videos boosts sexual excitement, it is also highlighted that no one should feel pressure to send such images and videos under any circumstances.[3] Considering the content of these popular culture discourses on sexting, it seems that they are more liberal and sex-positive compared to Turkish scholarly works on sexting.

[1] https://www.ok.com.tr/cinselligi-kesfet/sexting-erotik-mesajlasma-nedir/ https://onedio.com/haber/uzak-mesafe-iliskilerinde-heyecani-diri-tutmak-icin-seksting-de-yapabileceginiz-10-sey-1181443

[2] https://www.ok.com.tr/cinselligi-kesfet/sexting-erotik-mesajlasma-nedir/

[3] https://gq.com.tr/iliskiler/bir-kadindan-sexting-onerileri

The members of the Turkish online communities such as *Kızlar Soruyor* (Girls are Asking)[4], my online field site, *Kadınlar Klubü*[5] (Women's Club), and *Ekşi Sözlük*[6] (Savor Dictionary) widely and commonly discuss sexting. It is impossible to make any generalization regarding the content of the discussions, as they range from advice seeking to ridiculing, humiliation, experience sharing, and sexting partner searching. It would be valuable and qualified research to critically analyze the content of these platforms in terms of the discussions on sexting. I must note that these online platforms significantly differ from Turkish scholarly works and popular culture discourses on sexting as they give voices to "hidden populations" such as Muslim individuals practicing sexting.

Dissertation Map

In addition to the Introduction and Conclusion Chapters, my dissertation is composed of methodological, theoretical, contextual, and three analytical chapters. In the methodological chapter (Chapter 1), I tell how I *re*present my research participants' narratives on their sexting practices. In order to explore how offline norms regulating sexual behaviors and practices and sexting shape and are shaped by each other, I study self-identified heterosexual, urbanite, educated young adults who had sexting experiences and who lived in Ankara at the time of my research. Additionally, I identified *Kızlar Soruyor* as my online field site, where I participated in online discussions on sexting and posted questions about sexting. I conducted in-depth interviews with 13 women and 11 men whom I reached out to through posting a research call on Facebook. Recruiting research participants through Facebook enabled me to access to "hidden population," such as devoted Muslim women who practice sexting. In this chapter, I also discuss my experiences and position as a woman researcher studying sex(t)uality in Turkey.

[4] https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/ara?q=sexting
[5] https://www.kadinlarkulubu.com/search/32314986/?q=seksting&o=relevance
[6] https://eksisozluk.com/sexting--2035208

In this research, I have both insider and outsider positions. Being a citizen of Turkey and having lived in Turkey for more than 25 years provided me with an insider position through which I was able to better grasp and understand complex dynamics of intimacy politics, gender roles, and norms regulating sexual behaviors, as well as how they influence individuals' daily lives. My outsider position as a PhD candidate at an international university in Europe has provided me with a critical lens and free space to develop my arguments. I contend that my subjective position in my research does not negatively affect the objectivity claim and quality of my research.

In Chapter 2, I discuss and explain the theories that shape my theoretical framework in this dissertation. I utilize the theories on sexuality, subjectivity, agency, religion, and language. Each theory speaks to one another in various ways throughout the analytical chapters. Poststructuralist theories inform my understanding of sexuality in a way that I consider it as not pre-given and natural essence but as socially constituted (Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1986). In line with sexuality, I consider (sexual) subjectivity as socio-culturally and historically constituted (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1978). From a similar perspective, I take sexting into account as a real-time, interactive, chat-based form of sexual behavior (Waskul, 2003). Further, I argue that Mahmood's theorization of agency befits understanding and explaining my research participants' actions and decisions for their sexting practices. For this reason, Mahmood's theoretical and conceptual work shaped my understanding of agency (2005, 2009). Lastly, I argue that sexting messages that often take the form of vulgar, obscene language should be considered speech acts instead of statements describing a set of sexual acts, desires, and feelings. In developing my argumentation, I benefit from the theoretical works of Austin (1975) and Butler (1997). I believe these theories, through their mediated relationship with each other, enable me to better understand the complexities of sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies in Turkey.

In Chapter 3, I introduce the socio-cultural, religious, historical, and political context of my research site, Turkey. I argue that a critical and insightful understanding of gender and sexuality dynamics in Turkey necessitates a contextualization through the division of laicism and Islamism. For this reason, I provide a discussion of gender and sexuality dynamics, politics, and discourses through the multifaceted division of laicism and Islamism. Further, I tell what kind of gender and sexuality rules and norms Islam and AKP and Erdogan Regime have imposed on individuals, particularly on unmarried young women in Turkey. Lastly, I explain what kind of feminist debates and politics regarding women's sexuality have taken place in Turkey since 2011. I suggest that a critical and insightful understanding of these broader structural power relations is crucial in my study of how offline norms regulating sexual behaviors and sexting shape and are shaped by each other and what kind of actions my research participants take within these power relations.

In Chapter 4, the first analytical chapter, I analyze my women research participants' sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies by discussing the ways in which they sex(t)ually present and position themselves in their sexting practices. I argue that they have multiple, unfixed, flexible sex(t)ual subjectivities that sometimes overlap and sometimes contradict each other. At the same time, by looking at the decisions and preferences they make in their sexting practices, I argue that they do not always and necessarily perform a sexually assertive and empowered agency. Notably, from time to time, depending on how they are impacted by gender and sexuality norms, national politics, and their feminist views, they may withdraw from speaking up for their sex(t)ual desires. However, I claim that this does not simply mean that they either resist or submit to broader gender and sexuality norms. On the contrary, following Mahmood (2005), I argue that their multiple forms of agency should not be read through either resistant or submissive categories. Instead, I suggest that they be more complex and multifaced and that they become meaningful within socio-culturally and historically specific power relations.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the reciprocal relationship between Islamic religiosity and sexting practices by analyzing my pious research participants' narratives on their sexting practices. I show that my pious research participants' sex(t)ual practices significantly differ from their offline (real) sexual practices in terms of inclusion and exclusion of sex(t)ual intercourse due to their religious values. I argue that by utilizing the digitally mediated feature of sexting, my devoted Muslim research participants negotiate with Islamic norms that regulate pre-marital sexual behaviors. Rather than simply resisting or subordinating these norms, they not only play around with these norms but also actively govern and shape their bodies, practices, and sexual desires through "techniques of the self" (Foucault, 2005). By doing so, I claim that they perform a socio-culturally nuanced and historically specific agency by engaging in sexting while maintaining their Islamic piety.

In the last analytical chapter, Chapter 6, I focus on my research participants' use of Turkish vulgar, obscene language in sexting as a means of arousing sexual feelings and receiving sexual pleasure. I show that Turkish vulgar, obscene language is two-sided. On the one hand, it is an immoral, rough, disrespectful, and unpolite language with sexist connotations which imply a sexual attack on and humiliation of women's bodies and sexualities (Çiçek & Yağbasan, 2019; Zengin, 2015). On the other hand, as most of my research participants expressed, it has an erotic power to arouse sexual feelings during sexting. I take the use of Turkish vulgar, obscene language in sexting into account as a speech act and argue that it reconfigures women as sex(t)ually desiring and desirable subjects rather than sexual objects. At the same time, I highlight the agencies of my women informants who actively and consciously prefer using this language in their sexting practices and who attach sexually pleasurable meanings to this language in the contextuality of sexting.

Chapter 1: Methodological Reflections on The Scholarly Exploration of Sex(t)uality in Turkey

At the heart of my dissertation research lies sex(t)uality, Islamic piety, and women's sexuality, which are among the most sensitive issues to conduct research on and talk about, at least in Turkey, the socio-political context of my research, and also where I partially speak from. As I will be reflecting on in this chapter, talking, thinking, and writing about these issues has been a challenging quest for me, especially while conducting my field research in Turkey. I am a citizen of Turkey, meaning I was born, went to school, received a university degree, and worked in Turkey. My insider position enabled me to grasp better the complex dynamics between gender, sexuality, Islam, sexting, and ongoing political turmoil in Turkey. For instance, I could understand the challenges and feelings that my women research participants, as unmarried young women, faced while exploring their sex(t)ual desires, especially considering the increasing Islamic authoritarianism under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, especially since 2011.

The theoretical aim of my research – to understand the linkages between sexting practices, women's sexuality, Islamic religiosity, and the use of vulgar, obscene language - guided me in identifying my methodological path. From the very beginning of my research, I have tried to make methodological choices in a way that would best fit my theoretical perspective and objectives. This chapter functions as the teller of how I *re-present* the sex(t)ual stories of my research participants through the theoretical lenses I benefit from.

1.1. The Research Design

My research philosophy is built on the interpretative analysis of the data collected through a qualitative research method based on fieldwork between 2019 and 2021 in Ankara, Turkey.

My field research had both offline and online components: i) conducting in-depth interviews with self-identified heterosexual urbanite-educated young unmarried adults practicing sexting, ii) participating in the discussion on *Kızlar Soruyor* (Girls are Asking), online Turkish discussion community, and iii) collecting the discussions on sexting on *Kızlar Soruyor*. Accordingly, I have gathered three sets of data: in-depth interviews, online discussions on sexting, and online chats with the members of *Kızlar Soruyor.*

Offline In-depth Interviews

I interviewed 13 women and 11 men who are unmarried young adults and who have the experience of practicing sexting. I limited my in-depth interviewee sampling to heterosexual unmarried university students who have the experience of sexting in Ankara, the capital of Turkey, for several reasons. First, the minimal literature on sexual behaviors in Turkey has shown that class, familial upbringing, age, urban/rural difference, education, ethnicity, religion, and regional variations produce significant differences in sexual practices and ideologies among individuals (Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011; Gursoy et al., 2014, 2014; Yavuz, 2015). Hence, conducting the interviews with university students enabled me to reach out to individuals with different socio-cultural, economic, political, and religious backgrounds because university campuses provide a rich social setting where people with diverse backgrounds and identities inhabit.[7] The studies conducted in university settings in Turkey have suggested that university education and campus life, as a multi-cultural social environment, change young adults' practices of and attitudes toward pre-marital sexual activities in a way that they become more likely to subvert the dominant norms of sexuality (Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011; Kandiyoti, 1981; Özyeğin, 2015; Sakallı et al., 2012; Ucar et al., 2016). Because universities, especially those in metropolitan cities, provide a liberal social environment where people meet alternative practices and

[7] Due to the Turkish higher education system regulations, the majority of young individuals move to another city to have their university education. This domestic migration for university education resonates with the fact that universities in Turkey host students from diverse socio-cultural, economic and political backgrounds.

thoughts. This, nevertheless, does not mean that those women university students who engage in pre-marital sex(t)ual activities are free from any social pressure either in favor or against the value given virginity. In fact, Özyeğin's (2015) work with university students in Istanbul, one of the most metropolitan cities in Turkey, showed that university life leads young adults, especially women, to develop various facades, such as *technical virginity,* to explore their sexualities while hiding their active sexual lives and selves from their parents and their prospective husbands. Özyeğin (2015) uses *technical virginity* to explain how young unmarried women experience their sexual experiences without engaging in penile-vaginal intercourse to keep their hymen intact. Another research with university students that was conducted in Diyarbakır, a conservative city with different religious and ethnic populations in southeastern Turkey, showed that although many young women do not give importance to virginity, they avoid engaging in pre-marital sexual relationships due to the sexually oppressive character of the city (Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011). Hence, the socio-cultural and political characteristics of the city in which a university is located significantly impact how young (heterosexual) women and men practice their sexualities.

I identified Ankara, the capital of Turkey, as the offline site of my research. It is one of the biggest cities in Turkey and is home to state and private (more than 15) universities. Furthermore, Ankara is relatively cheaper than other metropolitan cities in Turkey, so it stands as an excellent destination for many university candidates with diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Last but not least, I had lived and studied in Ankara for almost ten years, which provided me with an insider position. I have many friends who work as research/teaching assistants or lecturers at universities in Ankara. Therefore, I have a substantial network that I thought I could use to easily access university students to conduct some parts of the interviews. However, I could not make use of this network because my friends working at universities rightfully preferred not to spread my call to their students due to my research field, sexuality.

They had a point in their decision because following the state of emergency announced after the failed Coup d'etat in 2016, there was strict surveillance and mass exiles in universities when I was spreading the call for research participation. Considering the sensitivity of and taboo aspect of my research topic, sexuality practices, it was quite understandable for some people not to speak loudly about this topic. In fact, sexuality, as Pınar Ilkkaracan (2000) stated, is a burning subject in Muslim-majority countries like Turkey, especially considering the increasing Islamist authoritative conservatisation in Turkey. She further states that it is a burning subject because it is a source of threat for those who openly talk about it, research it, and are involved in activism. In other words, it makes those who openly speak and question sexuality the threatened target of the ruling powers.

Recruiting Interviewees for Offline Interviews

Both qualitative and quantitative studies suggest that online environments have become beneficial platforms for accessing research subjects (Curtis, 2014; Hammond, 2018; Kosinski et al., 2015; Lieberman, 2008; Mendelson, 2007; Ogolsky et al., 2009; Samuels & Zucco, 2013). Studies have also found that using online platforms for recruiting research participants provides researchers with several advantages. First, as I have also experienced in my field research, online platforms enable researchers to access "participants outside their local area" (Curtis, 2014, p. 63) and numerous people that cannot or would not be accessed through offline techniques (Hammond, 2018; Ogolsky et al., 2009). Second, it enables researchers to access "hidden populations", studies suggest (Lieberman, 2008; Mendelson, 2007; Ogolsky et al., 2009). This was particularly crucial and helpful for my research due to its sensitive research topic, sexuality and sexting in particular. Considering the increasing conservatisation in Turkey, not all individuals openly step forward to talk about their sexual behaviors. Some people, especially unmarried young women, and pious individuals, might prefer to remain hidden to keep their nonnormative, at least in the case of Turkey, sexual practices in secret.

Considering its advantages and opportunities, I decided to use online platforms to recruit research participants for my offline in-depth interviews. Among several options, I chose Facebook because as a person who had studied at a university in Ankara, I knew that there were numerous university student Facebook pages. Besides, I was a member of some of these Facebook pages. I first started by posting a call on the Facebook pages that I was a member of. Then, I searched for other university students' Facebook pages in Ankara and became a member of them. I posted my call on those pages as well. Kosinski and his colleagues (2015) suggest that the previous related research Facebook pages can be a good way to reach out to research participants. They advised the researchers to connect with the users who "liked" the related Facebook pages. Therefore, I searched on Facebook to see whether there were any research pages relevant to my research. However, there was not any page that I could use. Nevertheless, the authors' advice gave me the idea to use Facebook pages, which are used to share academic resources by master's and PhD students. Accordingly, I posted my call on these Facebook pages as well.

A short while after spreading the call, I received messages on Facebook and e-mails from individuals indicating their interest in my research. Initial messages were sent mainly by men, some of whom were primarily interested in knowing me and whether I was practicing sexting. They asked questions: "Are you sexting?"; "Do you like sexting?"; "Do you really conduct this research, or what?" Although I cannot know for sure, I think these men were trying to initiate an intimate or flirtatious conversation with me. Considering the conservative nature of Turkey, it is a courageous, if not assertive, behavior for a young unmarried woman researcher to step forward and ask people to talk about their sexual (sexting) practices. In their understanding, this request might have been read as a way of seeking a sexting partner.

As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, it was challenging for me to deal with those messages because there were times when I felt the content of the exchanged

messages was going toward sex-talking rather than talking about my research. To demonstrate, I provide an excerpt from one of the exchanged messages.

> I want to ask you a special question. You repeatedly listen to people talking about their sexting life. How does this affect your sex life? Do you sext more or less?
>
> I see that you are online. Are you a morning person? Do you also like sexting in the morning?
>
> I came home from drinking with my mates. I want you to ask me some questions about your special research (sent after midnight)

Every time I received a message questioning my sexual life, I felt violated, and sometimes I was scared. As a woman raised and lived in Turkey, I knew what the limits of respectable or non-sexual conversation were and how men sought sexual intimacy with women. I double-checked the previous messages that I sent to these men to see whether my tone/language was flirtatious and whether I left any door open for them to approach me in a sex(t)ual way. Now, thinking about those days, I see that questioning my behaviors for what those men had done was contradicting with feminist politics. However, blaming women for men's sexual transgressions was culturally embedded in me from my early childhood, and it revived in my traumatized moments. As I discussed in Chapter 4, my women research participants were concerned about the unauthorized dissemination of their sexting messages or their sexual images because they knew that they, as young unmarried women, would be blamed for their "nonnormative" sexual behaviors but not their men partners for disseminating the private messages.

Nevertheless, I had tried to navigate the conversations as politely as possible, not only because I was concerned about being seen as a potential sexting partner by those to whom my research call had reached. Maybe more importantly, I wanted to prevent them from thinking of

me as a potential judge moralizing about their preferences (Yow, 2005, pp. 94–95). I also needed to keep my communication with them as I wanted to conduct interviews with those men. Hence, I had to walk on a very tiny line between an "easy woman" looking for potential sexting partners and a judgmental researcher. As discussed in Chapter 6, although I encouraged my research participants to openly spell out vulgar, obscene words that they use in sexting, they rejected my request. One reason was they did not want to offend me. I think another reason was they were concerned that I would judge their use of inappropriate language.

Conducting In-Depth Interviews

As mentioned earlier, I interviewed 13 women and 11 men between 2019 and 2021. I conducted most of the interviews face-to-face at coffee shops in different parts of Ankara, depending on the preferences of my interviewees. Some of the interviews, especially the ones conducted when I revisited my field in 2021, were carried out through Skype because the interviewee and I were in different locations due to the pandemic restrictions. During this period, pandemic restrictions prevented me from traveling to Ankara and conducting interviews face to face. All of the interviews were made in Turkish.

Interviewing provides the ability to "access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words", instead of the researcher's words and sentences (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). Having access to the participants' narratives in their words has a vital significance in the analysis and knowledge production process because individuals decide what and how to tell during interviews; therefore, what and how they share with the researcher construct their lives as presented to the researcher in a given time and place (Riessman, 1993).

I used open-ended and semi-structured interview questions for several reasons. One thing open-ended interview questions provide is the opportunity for the researcher to ask supplementary questions when needed and to grasp the differences among the participants'

narratives (Reinharz, 1992). It is crucial to enrich the interviewing through additional questions as the interview proceeds. It allows researchers to dig in further and gather detailed information about the meanings of the participants' behaviors, feelings, and perceptions. By doing so, I was able to grasp the differences among my research participants. Using semi-structured interview questions also allowed me to change the trajectory of questions in light of the issues that came up during the interview. Nevertheless, I asked each research participant all of the questions I had prepared in advance. Further, it also provides the interviewees with a flexible time and space to talk about the issues raised and reflect on their thoughts (Horton et al., 2004)

I used a digital recorder during the interviews with the consent of my interviewees. Using a digital recorder helped me a lot in having access to the exact language my interviewees used while expressing their ideas, feelings, and experiences. Millett (1971) emphasizes the importance of recording the interviews to capture the meanings embedded in the spoken language, such as pauses, unfinished sentences, and changing volume of the voice (as cited in Riessman, 1993, pp. 12–13). I also took notes right after each interview because some details, such as facial expressions and body language, cannot be grasped in digital recordings, but they might have significance for better analysis of interviews (Erson et al., 2011). After I completed the field research, I transcribed the interviews and compiled them with the notes. Therefore, I produced a written text ready for coding and analyzing.

Further, initially, I thought that specific well-structured research techniques did not work in my fieldwork. For instance, to reach further research participants, I asked each of my interviewees whether they could kindly introduce me to their friends or acquaintances who practice sexting. However, all of them declined my request saying that they did not want to disclose their sexting practices with their friends and also their involvement in such research. Therefore, the snowballing technique (Parker et al., 2019) did not work for my research because of the research topic that investigates the intimate lives of my research participants. Notably,

most of my research participants told me that although they felt comfortable with talking with their friends about their offline sexual relationships, they were hiding their sexting experiences from their friends because they thought that their friends would be biased and judgmental regarding their sexting practices. However, Kosinski and his colleagues (2015) suggest that Facebook provides researchers with an online snowballing technique to reach out to further research participants. They consider online networking and interaction that lead the call to be seen by more people on Facebook as a form of snowballing. Accordingly, there were two ways I benefitted from the online snowballing technique on Facebook. First, I think when some of my friends reposted my call on their Facebook profiles, I reached out to more people. Second, some people "liked" and commented on my post. Therefore, they made my post more visible, keeping it up on the page. Nevertheless, I think online snowballing is not as beneficial as the traditional snowballing technique.

Since I could not benefit from the offline/traditional snowballing technique, most of the time, I had to wait for my potential research participants to reach out to me. Studies suggest that the snowballing recruiting technique may fail for several reasons, such as insufficient recommendations, the researcher's outsider position, and the sensitivity of the research topic (Parker et al., 2019). Waters (2015) tried to use snowballing techniques in their research on illegal drug use; however, the technique failed as the illegal drug users were not interested in talking about their illegal drug use. On the contrary, they wanted to keep their behavior unknown. For similar reasons, I could not make use of traditional snowballing techniques. Consequently, my interviewee sampling is small; nevertheless, my data is rich because I reached out to people from different social circles. My in-depth interviews allowed me to gather detailed information about my interviewees. The interviews lasted around one and a half hours: some were longer, and some others were shorter.

1.2. Doing Online Research

As mentioned earlier, I conducted online research on *Kızlar Soruyor* (Girls are Asking), an online Turkish text and visual-based platform.[8] A vast amount of research has been conducted about and on the Internet, and the Internet has become both a research site and a tool (Ardévol & Gómez-Cruz, 2013). Researchers have long conducted both quantitative and qualitative research by employing various online research techniques: web surveys, online recruitment of participants, online interviews, content analysis of the online platforms of various forms, participant observations in chatrooms, discussion forums, virtual worlds, and so on.

When talking about Internet-mediated platforms and socialities, several terms such as cyber, digital, virtual, and online are used. Although they are mostly used interchangeably, each term refers to a different form of internet-mediated realities and socialities. A leading virtual ethnographer, Tom Boellstorf (2015), in "Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human", differentiates the virtual world from other online platforms. According to Boellstorf, virtual worlds are "the places of human culture" (2015, p. 17), and "provide the opportunity for many forms of social interaction" (2015, p. 16). He states that virtual worlds are "(1) places (2) inhabited by persons, and (3) enabled by online technologies" (2015, p. 17).

In "Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method", Boellstorf and his colleagues (2012) provide a more detailed definition of virtual worlds.

> First, they are *places* and have a sense of *worldness*. They are not just spatial representations but offer an object-rich environment that participants can traverse and with which they can interact. Second, virtual worlds are multi-user in nature; they exist as shared social environments

[8] https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/

> with synchronous communication and interaction. While participants may engage in solitary activities within them, virtual worlds thrive through co-inhabitation with others. Third, they are *persistent*: they continue to exist in some form even as participants log off. They can thus change while any one participant is absent, based on the platform itself or the activities of other participants. Fourth, virtual worlds allow participants to *embody* themselves, usually as avatars (even if "textual avatars," as in text-only virtual worlds such as MUDs), such that they can explore and participate in the virtual world. (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p.7)

I found this characterization of virtual worlds beneficial in discussing whether *Kızlar Soruyor,* my online research site, was a virtual world or not; therefore, in identifying the suitable method for my research. First, although its members can interact with each other, *Kızlar Soruyor,* as an online community platform, does not offer a "sense of worldness" because it does not allow any mobility in the sense of *traversing*. Instead, the premise of the members' presence and interaction is built on the boundaries of sub-topics, such as fashion, beauty, and sexual life. Second, I think the members do not inhabit *Kızlar Soruyor* because it does not offer a space of living and embodiment but information sharing and friendship development. The members exist in *Kızlar Soruyor* through their textual-based profiles -not even avatars- and are sometimes accompanied by their pictures. In this regard, Boellstorf and his colleagues (2012) warn that online communities such as Facebook and MySpace are not qualified as virtual worlds. Nevertheless, in my opinion, *Kızlar Soruyor* somehow and to some extent qualifies the third characteristic of virtual worlds that Boellstorf and his colleagues set (2012, p. 7). On *Kızlar Soruyor,* the members' presence continues through their previous interactions -comments, posts, likes, etc.- even when they are logged off. Besides, the members can interact with offline members at any given time. Having considered Boellstorf and his colleagues' definition of the virtual world, I decided that *Kızlar Soruyor* should not count as a virtual world despite the social interactions and the rules developed within the community. Since my online research site,

Kızlar Soruyor, is not a virtual world, employing virtual ethnography as a research method was not (still is not) suitable because online ethnographic research requires a sense of virtuality (Boellstorff, 2015; Boellstorff et al., 2012).

Methodologically speaking, my field research on *Kızlar Soruyor* does not include online participant observation, which requires an ethnographer to engage in daily activities, events, rituals, and performances (Boellstorff et al., 2012). For instance, Beollstorf (2015) explains that he had to learn how to build things and that he attended several events as part of his virtual ethnography in Second Life. I did not need to learn, understand, or familiarize myself with such activities because my field site does not encompass such peculiarities. Further, conducting interviews with the inhabitants of the context is a crucial component of both traditional and virtual ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012). However, I did not conduct interviews with the members of *Kızlar Soruyor.* As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, I only sent direct messages to some of the members to clarify their comments or posts.

Instead of virtual ethnography, I have benefitted from Robert Kozinets' works on online research for conducting my online fieldwork. Kozinets (1998) suggests that the researcher should identify the online communities that have discussions more relevant to their research questions and that the researcher should be more familiar with the identified online communities in advance before collecting data. Therefore, I searched for various types of online communities as much as possible because online researchers suggest that identifying multiple types of online communities helps reach different discussions (Kozinets, 2002). Initially, I found four online sites, *Kızlar Soruyor* (Girls are Asking), *Ekşi Sözlük* (Sour Dictionary), *Cinsel Sözlük* (Sexual Dictionary)*, and Kadınlar Klübü* (Women's Club), where sexting and sexual practices have been discussed. Among them, I chose *Kızlar Soruyor* as the primary online site for my research because, in three of them, sexting was less discussed, and hence, they offered fewer amounts of data. Besides, being a member and posting a comment on these two sites

required a couple of months, much longer than I spent for *Kızlar Soruyor.* Notably, only *Kızlar Soruyor* allowed me to personally interact with the members by sending direct messages on the condition that I would not search for and disclose any personal information in my research. In this sense, *Kızlar Soruyor* partially provided me with a sense of "*worldness"* through which I could interact with the other members (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 7), as I was able to send direct messages to other members of the community, chat with them, develop further conversation with them which was not the case in other online platforms.

Attending in Kızlar Soruyor

Kızlar Soruyor, founded in 2011 by two Turkish brothers, is a question-answer-based online platform on which both women and men post questions, and both women and men comment under the posts as a follow-up. Members can also comment under other members' comments and develop further conversations. It contains several topics ranging from fashion to cooking, traveling to familial relationships and parenting, shopping to cleaning tips, and so on. Accordingly, this website is not limited to sexuality-related topics; on the contrary, the issue of sexual relations is only one among many others. Members frequently discussed the issue of sexting, some of whom disclosed their sexting practices through posts and openly sought sexting partners. Further, there are levels of membership that gradually increase as a member interacts through commenting and posting on different sub-topics. However, new members are not allowed to post questions on sexuality-related topics, for which a higher level of membership is required. Although I am not sure, I think there is an algorithm or code that regulates who can post and comment on which topics.

I signed up *Kızlar Soruyor* with a woman-identified profile with a Turkish username, *"araştırmacı"* (researcher) nickname. I did not upload any photographs to my profile. Instead, I managed my profile based on my "gut feelings," and I gave "visibility labor" in front of the screen because how my research observants saw me was essential for me to gain some level of

credibility (Abidin, 2020). As a new member, I was not allowed to post sexuality-related questions; instead, I could only follow up on the discussions under the main posts and observe the textual discussions. To be able to post sexting-related questions, I sent an e-mail to admins. I introduced myself and informed them about my research, explaining my intention to use *Kızlar Soruyor.* I asked them to increase my membership level so I could post questions about sexuality and sexting content that are related to my research aim. The admins requested further details about my education and research project. Upon providing these details, they increased my membership level and asked me not to inquire and use any personal information that the members did not share on their profiles.

For a couple of weeks, I only read the posts and follow-ups and took notes to understand better the site and the active members on sexuality-related topics. I tried to read as many discussions on sexting as possible to avoid asking questions that had already been posted and discussed in the community. My initial questions were intended to understand the reasons for the members to practice sexting.

Collecting and Storing Data from Kızlar Soruyor

I searched for "seksting" (the Turkish name for sexting) and "sexting" on *Kızlar Soruyor* and read all the discussion threads that showed up. I downloaded them as PDF files on my computer. Since I was also interested in the connections between pre-marital sex, sexting, and Islam, I searched for "zina" as well. I read the discussions and downloaded the related discussion threads on my computer. I stored 130 discussion threads in total. Later, I asked my first question, introducing myself and explaining my research: "What are the reasons for you to sext?" My post did not attract the attention of the members as not so many members commented on it. A man-identified profile, *Karaboyy,* wrote: "Because I am a virgin" (*bakirim*, in Turkish). I sent him a direct private message to ask him to elaborate further on his understanding of virginity.

I had tried to build bridges between my online and offline field sites, making them speak to one another. The information I gathered through my inquiries on *Kızlar Soruyor* led me to modify my interview questions and include different ones. Similarly, as I conducted the interviews, my mind was occupied with different issues related to sexting, and I had the opportunity to further question these issues on *Kızlar Soruyor.*

1.3. Research Participants

I interviewed 13 women and 11 men who had experience practicing sexting and who were urbanite-educated, unmarried, self-identified heterosexual young adults living in Ankara. They were between 20 and 30 years old. All of them were university students of different degrees, such as undergraduate and graduate levels. Few of them did not have offline sex, but they had experience of practicing sexting at the time of our interview. For some of my research participants, sexting was a daily practice that they enjoyed with their partners. Some of them had steady, regular romantic relationships, including different forms of sexual affairs.

Among my research participants, there were devoted Muslim believers: 2 women and 4 men. These 2 women were veiled but were not regularly conducting daily praying rituals as required by Islam. They all agree that *zina,* pre-marital sexual relationships, including sexting, is a sinful act and strictly forbidden by Allah. They were coming from different sects of Islam. Three of them were Sunni, two were Alewi, and one was Shaffi. As discussed in detail in Chapter 3, sectarian differences are highly significant in shaping gender and sexual practices. For instance, non-sexual physical contact between a woman and a man, such as shaking hands, is understood to break the *ablution (abdest),* one of the primary pre-requests of daily praying in Shafism. This understanding varies among Sunni communities. However, Alewi people do not have these understandings. Similarly, while Sunnism and Shafism are in favor of sex-segregation, there are no sex-segregated practices in Alewi communities. Besides, unlike Sunni and Shaffi communities, Alewi women and men pray together. Further, as I discuss in Chapter

5, both visual and physical preservation of the Muslim (woman) body, especially among devoted Sunni and Shaffi circles, is vital. In this respect, the meanings and values that my pious research participants attach to sexting vary.

My interviewees have diverse socio-economic and familial backgrounds. Some of them were born and grew up in working-class families with conservative values. For them, talking about sexuality-related topics, including bodily and hormonal changes during puberty within the family, was not possible. Although there was no talk on sex and sexuality, they were silently taught to abstain from sexual relationships until marriage. For Zuhal, a veiled, pious woman interviewee from a Shafii working-class family with very conservative values, even having a romantic relationship was forbidden. As I further discuss in Chapter 4, she was subject to a violent reaction from her mother after she shortly walked with a boy classmate after school. For this reason, those research participants coming from conservative families kept their romantic and sexual relationships hidden from their families. Their intimate lives were a secret that they could only be shared with their close friends.

I also interviewed individuals who were raised in more liberal and educated families. Compared to the devoted Muslim and conservative informants, they were not more free from gendered norms regulating sexual behaviors. Only one of them, Gözde, was able to openly talk to her parents about her romantic and sexual relationships. She had never felt the necessity of hiding her sexual life from her parents. In fact, different from all other research participants, her mother gave her a talk on safe sex and the use of contraception when she was in high school. No doubt, Gözde's case is an exception because none of my other research participants were comfortable talking to their parents or siblings about their sexual experiences. For instance, Esra, raised in a liberal, well-educated, higher-class family, was subject to severe scrutiny and violence from the side of her father because he was suspicious of her "state of virginity".

My research participants were similar in terms of their position regarding the current Turkish government, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. AKP is a pro-Islamic and very conservative government in terms of alternative lifestyles, gender, and sexuality. It was first elected in 2002 and has continued to be the ruling party since then. Erdoğan was among the founders of the party, and he served as a Prime Minister for several years. In 2014, he was elected as the President of Turkey and has continued to be the President of Turkey. AKP and Erdoğan Regime have intervened in individual lifestyles, women's clothing, intimate relations, women's reproductive preferences and rights, and alcohol consumption. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, they wish to locate women in private spheres, promote sex-segregated socialization, and constantly remind women how they should appear in public by favoring Muslim and moderate ways of dressing. They promote the Islamic way of living.

None of my research participants were pro-AKP/Erdoğan at the time of our interview. Three men interviewees mentioned that they had supported AKP during its early years, but they gradually distanced from it over the years and became more critical about AKP's political agenda. These men expressed that their parents were influential in shaping their political views, especially in supporting AKP. In line with the existing literature, their political opinions changed when they moved to Ankara for their university education, where they met with diverse and more critical political views. Although they were all against Erdoğan and AKP in terms of differing reasons, their political opinions were divergent. For instance, Ahmet was Marxist and pro-feminist. İlkay and Yasemin positioned themselves as socialist feminists. Zeynep, Esra, Hazal, Gözde, Sezen, and Dilara were feminist women; however, their understanding of feminism was quite different from each other. For instance, as I elaborate in Chapter 6, Esra and Zeynep were annoyed by the use of obscene language due to their feminism, while Sezen

considered using this kind of language a feminist action as she thought she claimed authority over this language.

1.4. My Experiences and Position as a Sex(t)uality Researcher

What does using a feminist methodology mean for a woman researcher who identifies herself as a feminist? What does adopting feminist methods entail? Is it simply being aware of and deconstructing the unequal power relation between the researcher and the researched and getting researched individuals involved in the knowledge production process? As many feminist scholars and researchers have stated, it is more than the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). The feminist methodology involves the whole picture from the beginning of formulating the research question: What does one want to study? How does one design research? What kind of choices does the researcher make?

I acknowledge that my Ph.D. research is part of or an extension of my political stand and aim (Margaret Fonow & Cook, 2005). I conduct this research as a critical fight against the oppressive regime, which tries to minimize, if possible, eliminate, sexual life outside the heterosexual family between spouses in Turkey, and to show that there are alternative lifestyles as against the image that the Turkish government tries to impose in terms of gender and sexual practices. Sexuality, especially unmarried women's sexual practices, has always been under the surveillance of several institutions such as government, religion, and family. As I discuss throughout the dissertation, from the early childhood years, women are implicitly taught that their virginity is a valuable treasure that they must protect until marriage. Many women in Turkey have been subject to several forms of violence; in fact, they have been killed by their family members because they transgressed the sexual norms (Kogacioglu, 2004; Sev'er & Yurdakul, 2001). AKP and Erdoğan Regime have reproduced the normative discourses that oppress women's sexual behaviors and limit sexual practices between husband and wife.

Through this dissertation, I wish to demonstrate that there are several ways in which people in Turkey live their sexualities, among which sexting is, and that it does not correspond with the AKP's political standpoint and interests.

When I chose sexting practices as a topic of my dissertation research, I received varying comments from friends in academic circles both in Turkey and Hungary.[9] My sexual self became a subject of inquiry. I was even told by a Canadian man friend that *"I must be a very sexual person with kinks"* just because I study sexting in particular and sexual behaviors in general. I wondered if I had been a straight man, would I have been subject to the same criticisms? I think, and many critical feminist researchers would agree, the answer is "No!". In this regard, Esther Newton states that the sexual subjectivities of the heterosexual man ethnographers were not problematized and were "unmarked categories" (1993, p. 4)

Similar to many woman researchers, I was concerned about being seen only as a sexual subject and as a potential sex(ting) partner rather than as a serious researcher in the field (Grenz, 2005; Morton, 1995). The initial reactions to my research topic had an enormous impact on how I conducted my field research. I had thought that I should not be "too" friendly and loose, nor should I be "too" unfriendly. I was born, grew up, studied, and worked in Turkey, my field site; therefore, I knew well the cultural codes of neutral, respectable communication, flirting, and courting. On the one hand, if I had been "too" friendly toward my man informants, it might have caused a misunderstanding on their side as if I was initiating a flirting or sexual encounter. On the other hand, if I had behaved "too" unfriendly, it would have distanced them from me, and I would not have been able to interview them. It had to be somewhere in between; therefore, it had been difficult for me to keep this balance.

[9] I started my PhD. in 2017 at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. Later the university moved to Vienna, Austria with the LexCEU law.

As mentioned earlier, when I first spread a call on Facebook for my research, I received several messages from men. They questioned why I studied sexting, whether I sext, whether I like sexting, what I think about sexting, and whether I would sext with them. As a young woman researcher who "claimed" to conduct research on sexting practices, who was willing to talk about sexting, and who had been living in a European city, I was seen as a sexual subject who was looking for sexual "fun". Sex without commitment, one-night stands, casual sex, and so on are understood to be Western values in Turkey. European women are imagined as always sexually available, free from sexual restrictions that apply to women in Turkey. Therefore, some of my informants thought that as a woman who had lived in a European city for some years, I must have adopted these values to some extent. For this reason, they did not hesitate to send me such messages. I answered these messages as politely as possible and did not give any information about my (sex(t)ual) preferences. Although some researchers prefer to engage in sexual relationships in the field and suggest that sexual encounters with the informants open various insights in the field (Kulick & Willson, 2003), I was determined to stay away from any sexual relationship in my field. These messages sometimes made me approach with suspicion to my potential research participants because I was not sure why they wrote to me and whether they were really interested in participating in my research. In this regard, Kulick noted that "sexual desire in the field can … be extremely difficult and anxiety-provoking" (1995, p. 12). I was anxious about my interviews with man informants.

I had thought that I must have some remarkable and visible precautions in the field to protect myself, especially while interviewing men, to prevent talking about sex from turning into sex talk. I remembered the fieldwork tips given by one of my woman sociology professors at the graduate level at Middle East Technical University in Ankara. She had told us, "Woman friends, you may benefit from wearing a wedding ring in the field". The wedding ring had a symbolic meaning in Turkey. Married women are considered to be sexually unavailable to other

men. In other words, men know that they should not sexually approach a married woman. Morton (1995) benefitted her pregnancy in her field research. She decided to get pregnant just before her fieldwork to remind herself of her bond to her partner at home and to give a message that she was sexually unavailable in the field (1995, p. 177). I wore a wedding ring, especially for my interviews with man research participants. I cannot know whether wearing a wedding ring protected me, preventing my research participants from initiating unethical closeness with me. For me, the issue with wearing a wedding ring was and continues to be the question of whether and why I needed to utilize a heterosexual marriage, being a man's wife to protect myself as a woman researcher talking about sex with women and men. For now, I leave this provocative question open for further discussions beyond and after my dissertation.

My first interviewee was a young man, Musa. I was very nervous but also excited before my first interview. However, the interview went very smoothly. I did not feel violated or harassed by any means. I gained a certain level of esteem and trust for my following interviews. I felt more comfortable with talking and asking questions about sex(t)ual behaviors in the following interviews. However, one night after midnight, I received a message from a woman on Facebook.[10] She expressed her interest in my research and asked several questions regarding my research. Then disturbing questions happened to come again: whether I enjoy sexting, what I would think about a woman caressing another woman's breasts, and whether I would enjoy it. I felt deeply violated and threatened. I wrote to her that I would not interview her and wanted to cease the chatting right there. She continued to send me messages, especially after midnight, for a couple of days. I could not name her messages as "sexual(ized) harassment" and confront her back then (Kloß, 2017). Instead, I questioned my research method, feeling insecure about the techniques I was using. I was also afraid because I was living outside the city center and decided to pause my interviews for a while until I gained my trust and esteem back. Besides,

[10] I perceived the sender of the message as woman because of the name and the profile picture.

the negative feelings that surrounded me would have an impact on how I approach my research participants: what kind of questions and how I could and could not ask. Therefore, I did not interview anyone for a couple of weeks. Then, I continued my fieldwork, and the rest of the interviews went well. Especially my interviews with woman research participants were like a session in which my interviewees expressed their deep feelings and emotions. Only once, a man interviewee asked me to have a drink after the interview. I declined his request, explaining my ethical concerns.

To international readers, the messages that I received throughout my fieldwork may not seem sexually harassing because what counts as sexual and sexual harassment might vary across cultures (Kloß, 2017; Kulick, 1995). However, in Turkey, in my home country, and my field site, these messages were sexually harassing. They were violating the boundaries of my privacy and my understanding of self. Besides, they were insistent.

Apart from my uncomfortable experiences, I also experienced encouraging cases during my fieldwork. Two of my research participants -one woman and one man – have expressed their appreciation to me as we – my research participants and I – managed to talk about sex and sexuality for non-sexual purposes and ways. Serhan, a man interviewee coming from a religiously conservative family, sent a message to me on Facebook after our interview. Below is an excerpt from the exchange messages between Serhan and me after our interview:

> Serhan: I want to thank you. Because you enabled me to normalize certain issues 😊 I apologize for bothering you at a late hour.
>
> Didem: No problem. I'm glad to hear that our interview had a positive impact on you. I would be very happy if you could share with me the things you could normalize.
>
> Serhan: To be honest, it is not normal to talk about sex and sexuality for us. And I'm a shy person. But thanks to you, I have realized that it is

very normal and humane. It has been a normalizing process for me. Besides, it was very nice to see that a woman and a man could civilly talk about these issues and break the societal perceptions on this matter.

Didem: I'm very happy to hear this. Thank you for sharing this with me. Participants' feedback and comments are precious to me.

Serhan: Thank you again. It was a milestone for me.

Serhan's words were very encouraging and gladsome for me. It reminded me why I was investigating this research topic in the very first place. One thing I wanted to achieve through this research is to show my research participants that sexuality should be talkable outside sexual contexts. Related to this, it has a more critical meaning beyond the feelings it generated in me. It has explicitly supported my pre-field assumption that sexuality has an unspeakable nature in the context of Turkey. As most of my research participants expressed, talking about sex and sexuality is discouraged and not welcomed in the context of Turkey.

1.5. My Subjective Position and Standpoint

I, like many other social researchers, am not free from my social and political position (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). The knowledge that I produce through this research is from my subjective political position. My political and intellectual engagement with feminism has led my way to conduct this research. The way I understand sex, sexuality, and sexting has an impact on the knowledge I produce. For instance, if I had considered sexting a risky behavior, as it is suggested in some scholarly discussions (Bianchi et al., 2021; Dir & Cyders, 2015), the knowledge that I produced in this dissertation would have been very different. In this regard, as Harding argues, "values and interests clearly shape the directions, conceptual frameworks, research methods, and content of research" (2004, p. 11). However, I contend that this does not make my research a "bad science" (Harding, 1986).

My subjective position entails the discussion of the subjectivity and objectivity that has been debated among feminist researchers. Feminist scholars have addressed and provided several critiques of this discussion. I will mention the ones that are most relevant to my research. First, they criticized the dichotomy of the Subject, the knower, and the object, the known, arguing that we, as researchers, are part of the society we study. It is significantly essential for my research as I conducted my research in my home country, and therefore, I am partially part of the research group that I studied. My insider position enabled me to have an "epistemic advantage" (Narayan, 2004, p. 221); therefore, I was able to more clearly see and understand in what ways structural dominant sexual norms shape my informants' sexting behaviors. However, as Narayan states, this does not mean that "those who are differently located socially can never attain some understanding of our experience or some sympathy with our cause" (2004, p. 219). The subjective position of the knower does not bring disrepute to the objectivity claim of the research. In this regard, Haraway argues that the knower's subjective position is not a position of identity but objectivity (1988, p. 586). Rather than subjective identity, critical positioning produces scholarly knowledge, and this critical positioning is not stable or fixed.

Second, feminists criticized the modern idealization of knowledge from nowhere by arguing that all knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986). According to Haraway, the partial knowledge produced from a limited location through partial visions and perspectives should be away from any totalization (1988, p. 586). I find Haraway's methodological arguments helpful in developing my arguments and theorization. In my Ph.D. dissertation, I study a particular group of people sharing similar experiences with divergences. Accordingly, the knowledge produced in this dissertation does not have any representative claims, nor could it be generalized to totalitarian knowledge. On the contrary, it is a knowledge of a particular group from my subjective perspective for which I am accountable.

Last but not least, modern science has idealized value neutrality and has considered it among the foundational stones of scientific objectivity. However, feminists criticize this view and argue that we, researchers, can never be value-free (Harding, 1986). Harding argues that "objectivity never has been and could not be increased by value-neutrality" (1986, p. 27). I do not claim that I was free from my values; on the contrary, my ethical and political values were at stake in the process of my knowledge production process. I was and am still committed to my values of giving no harm to anybody during my research, making changes, if possible, and demonstrating that there are alternative ways of living sexual lives. In this regard, Harding states that objectivity can be achieved through engagement with "antiauthoritarian, antielitist, participatory, and emancipatory values" (1986, p. 27).

1.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained how I have produced the knowledge of how offline norms regulating sexual behaviors and sexting shape and are reshaped by each other by analyzing a group of self-identified heterosexual urbanite-educated young adults' sexting narratives and online discussions on sexting in *Kızlar Soruyor*. During the fieldwork, I encountered several difficulties and challenges, such as recruiting informants and facing sexual harassment, which I believe came along with being a woman researcher studying sexuality and sexting practices. Traditional offline ways of recruiting informants did not work in my fieldwork because I was calling people to tell me about their experiences of sexting. In another socio-cultural and political context, a researcher who conducts the same or similar research may not face this problem; however, disclosing one's pre-marital sexual experiences in the context of Turkey can be challenging, especially for women. Therefore, following a growing literature, I benefitted from Facebook in recruiting research participants for my study. I think Facebook has enabled me to access "hidden populations", such as pious Muslim women, whom I would not be able to access through traditional recruiting techniques. Therefore, I suggest that

researchers who study topics that are understood to be sensitive in their research sites can make use of online recruitment techniques.

I made an enormous effort to avoid being seen as a sexual subject looking for a sexting partner because I wanted to be present in the field through my researcher identity but not my sexual self. Nevertheless, I faced sexual harassment, which back then I could not name so and could not encounter with the harassers. At some points, I questioned my methodology and my attitude as a researcher. However, reflecting on these inconvenient experiences in the field, I think that I, or any other researcher in the field, could not prevent sexual harassment from happening. I do not think it is in our hands. What is in our hands and control, however, is how we decide to proceed afterward: whether we prefer to cut off the contact with the harasser or keep in touch, whether we encounter the behavior, and whether we give a pause in the field. I also suggest that we, women Ph.D. candidates who are to conduct sex research in the field, should demand more scholarly discussion on sexual subjectivity in the field in academic circles and communities and ask experienced scholars to share their insights with us.

I had a pre-field assumption that sexuality has an unspeakable aspect in Turkey. My field research proved it to be true not only because all – except one – of my research participants expressed that they had never talked to their parents about their sexual relationships and feelings. But more importantly, they had difficulties in using certain sex-related Turkish vocabulary while talking to me during our interviews. In this respect, Serhan, one of my man research participants coming from a religiously conservative family, thanked me after our interview as our interview showed him that a woman and man could talk about sex in non-sexual and non-erotic ways despite its unspeakable nature. Accordingly, some of my interviews had a feminist activist impact even though I did not aim for it from the beginning of my field research. Reflecting back on my field research, I could have made feminist activist methodology part of my field research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

In my dissertation, by analyzing women's sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies, Islamic religiosity, and the use of vulgar, obscene language in sexting practices, I study how and to what extent offline norms regulating sexuality shape and are shaped by sexting practices. Theories of sexuality, subjectivity, agency, religion, and language compose my dissertation's theoretical and conceptual scaffold. Accordingly, my task in this chapter is to bring these theories together to explain how they shed light on my understanding and analysis of the issues mentioned above. Using the critical theories of sexuality, I understand and analyze sexual and erotic practices, including sexting and sex(t)ual subjectivities, from a non-essentialist perspective. I argue that women research participants have flexible, changing, multiple, and sometimes contradictory sex(t)ual subjectivities in their sexting practices. Importantly, these women have socio-culturally and historically specific and nuanced agencies, which are manifested in their actions and decisions that do not necessarily always correspond with the structural gender and sexuality norms in the context of Turkey. Theories on religiosity, especially Islamic religiosity, enable me to discuss the reciprocal relationship between my pious research participants' Islamic piety and sexting practices. I argue that by benefitting from the digitally mediated aspect of sexting, my pious research participants can play around with the Islamic norms that regulate pre-marital sexual behaviors. Theories on language and sexuality allow me to consider sexting, the exchange of sexually explicit messages, as performative utterances and speech acts that create specific effects on the author and audience. Taking sexting messages into account as speech acts, I argue that the sexually explicit Turkish vulgar, obscene language, which is socio-culturally and politically outlawed in daily communication, may become sexually pleasurable in sexting practices. At the same time, I argue that, through the use of this language, sexters are constituted as desiring and desirable subjects. Lastly, Saba Mahmood's theorization of agency

enables me to understand and argue how my research participants take different actions and make decisions under different circumstances. While doing so, I show that their actions and decisions do not necessarily and always challenge structural norms, but sometimes they may correspond with these norms. Therefore, their agencies do not always appear as resistant to norms subordinating them but as a "modality of action" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 157).

2.1. Theories on Sexuality and Sexting

Although sexuality typically refers to sexual orientation and identity, it encompasses more than just these two aspects (Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Jackson & Scott, 2010). In this dissertation, sexuality encompasses sexual and erotic desires, feelings, fantasies, and their expression through sexual acts. Sexological and psychiatric perspectives dominated early works on sexuality. However, these perspectives mainly focused on discovering the "nature" of human sexuality, neglecting societal and cultural aspects (Weeks, 1986, 2002). I adopt a social constructionist understanding of sexuality, informed by social and historical forces, which view sexuality as a product of everyday social life (Jackson & Scott, 2010; Weeks, 1986).

Gagnon and Simon are the first figures who locate sexuality within the realm of social, challenging biological determinism (Simon & Gagnon, 1973). They argued for the socially constructedness of sexuality and stated that

> The very experience of sexual excitement that seems to originate from hidden internal sources is in fact a learned process and it is only our insistence on the myth of naturalness that hides these social components from us. (Simon & Gagnon, 1973, p. 6)

Their view on sexuality, encompassing what sexually pleasurable and exciting are, is revolutionary as it highlights the socio-cultural aspect of sexual behaviors and feelings. They indicate that what an individual finds sexually exciting is socio-culturally learned in a given historical context. In other words, what is sexual and erotic in one situation and one social

context may not be sexually arousing in different contexts. As mentioned above, this particular theoretical path that Simon and Gagnon opened, and many theoretical figures developed informs my understanding of sexuality: sexuality as a social construction. Among many, I most benefit from Jeffrey Weeks, Gayle Rubin, and Michel Foucault in understanding, analyzing, and interpreting my research participants' sexting practices in Turkey.

Saying sexuality is a social and historical construction necessitates a critical explanation. As implied above, the social constructionist theorization of sexuality rejects sexual essentialism, which, as Gayle Rubin states, sees sex as "eternally unchanging, asocial and transhistorical" (2006, p. 156). This essentialist view considers biological forces such as hormones as the determinant of sex and sexual behaviors. In this regard, Stevi Jackson notes that biological essentialism is blind to the "complexities of human sexual desires and practices" and renders sexuality to procreative sex for the reproduction of human beings (1998, p. 139). This is to mean that sexual behaviors, practices, and desires form a wide range of spectrum beyond the limits of heterosexual procreative sex. In this regard, Weeks argues that sexuality is a product of socio-cultural and political negotiations, meanings, and human agency (2016, p. 34). In other words, Weeks highlights the importance of the meaning-making process, social and political forces, and agency in the constitution of sexuality as we understand it. In a similar vein, Michel Foucault (1990) criticizes the traditional understanding of sexual desires and argues that desires are constituted within a historical discursive framework. Therefore, acts, images, and representations considered to be erotic and sexually pleasing are not fixed but changing.

Constructionist theorization of sexuality acknowledges the diversities of sexual acts and desires (Rubin, 2006; Weeks, 1986). It critically highlights the presence of sexual hierarchies, which causes stigmatization, pathologization, and criminalization of specific sexual acts and desires. For instance, Rubin discusses the division of "good" and "bad" sex in length (2006, pp.

161–162). As she maps out, good sex, which is seen as "normal," "natural," "healthy," and holy, is heterosexual sex between married couples, husband and wife, at home (Rubin, 2006, p. 161). All the other sexual acts and desires, such as same-sex sex, transsexuality, non-productive sex, and commercial sex, fall within the spectrum of "bad sex": some of them are less bad than others. For instance, as Rubin (2006) suggests, sex between unmarried heterosexual couples, masturbation, and some forms of same-sex coupling are more tolerable than others.

However, this hierarchal categorization of sexuality is neither fixed nor stable. On the contrary, it may vary across different societies and over history. In other words, what is considered normal, appropriate, and healthy in one culture may not be so in another one. Foucault (1978) discusses the unstable feature of sexuality through the meanings, names, and values attained to homosexuality in Western societies over history. Through a genealogical method, he shows that what was once a forbidden act, and a subject of legal, religious, and medical examinations, has gained a name -homosexuality- and become a comparatively acceptable identity. Behind the changing meaning of homosexuality in particular and sexuality in general, as Weeks suggests, there is a wide range of political forces and collective and individual struggles (2016, p. 8).

Further, the objects and mediums of sexual and erotic desires are also socially constructed; therefore, not fixed. In other words, what is considered erotic and sexual are not stable (Jackson & Scott, 2010, p. 17). Various social and cultural factors and institutions have shaped the spectrum of sexual and erotic desires. In this regard, Weeks argues that

> The meanings we give to 'sexuality' are socially organized, sustained by a variety of languages, which seek to tell us what sex is, what it ought to be—and what it could be. Existing languages of sex, embedded in moral treatises, laws, educational practices, psychological theories, medical definitions, social rituals, pornographic or romantic fictions, popular music, and commonsense assumptions (most of which disagree) set the horizon of the

> possible. They all present themselves up as true representations of our intimate needs and desires. (1986, p. 6)

Different and multiple institutions together define what is considered sex and erotic. In other words, our understanding of what sex is and what kind of acts and images are erotic are reconfigured through the existing and available discourses and institutions. But, as Weeks notes, these discourses and institutions do not necessarily have to agree with each other. Different discourses, sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory, may give different meanings to specific sexual acts and images. Additionally, erotic possibilities – what is considered erotic – vary across societies, among individuals, and over history. That is to mean that each culture might have different codes for determining the erotic possibilities (Weeks, 1986).

Digitally Mediated Sexuality

Different forms of digitally mediated sexual practices, including sexting, are among the erotic possibilities and sexual behaviors that various discourses attach different, sometimes contradictory, meanings. For instance, due to its virtual aspect, several discourses clearly differentiate digitally mediated sexual behaviors from "real" sex. In this sense, Tom Boellstorf, in "Coming of Age in Second Life," makes an analytical distinction between "virtual" and "actual" worlds and argues that they cannot be reduced to each other nor can they be separated from one another through rigid boundaries (2015, p. 18). In other words, he criticized the dichotomous and binary understanding of online and offline spheres. He emphasized that the boundaries between online and offline spheres are blurred, especially in terms of how bodies, genders, and sexualities are socially constructed and interacted. In his understanding, these two spheres mutually impact and constitute each other. Through his ethnographic research in Second Life, a virtual world, he argues that individuals engage in socially meaningful interactions in online worlds (Boellstorff, 2015). I find his theorization critically crucial as it provides me with a critical perspective to develop my argumentation of the reciprocal

relationship between my research participants' sexting practices and the offline norms regulating sexual behaviors.

The division between online and offline spheres is closely linked with the idea of bodylessness or im/materiality in cybersex because cyberspace was initially conceptualized as immaterial and intangible (Shep, 2015). Scholars working in the field of cybersex have argued that the bodylessness of cybersex means that the practitioners transcend their physical bodies and move to an imaginary and animative sphere. Many scholars, such as Denis Waskul (2003), theorized cybersex as immaterial, beyond material life, because it lacks the flesh of the sex partners, and it is imaginary because the material is normatively and traditionally associated with artifacts (Miller, 2005).

However, the theoretical perspective I adopt in this dissertation is not in line with such a binary understanding of cybersex in general, and sexting in particular, as bodylessness and immaterial, which Boellstorf criticizes and questions, as I mentioned above. Instead, I am indebted to poststructuralist and posthumanist feminist theories in understanding the im/materiality of cyberspace, cybersex, and sexting in particular. Let me first explain how I consider mater/iality.

In "Bodies That Matter," Butler questions the links between materiality and gender performativity. She argues that materiality occurs in and through discourse and power relations. In her understanding, there is no matter prior to discourse and regulatory power relations. On the contrary, she argues that bodies become materialized through regulatory norms of sex. For this reason, she states that "materialization is never quite complete," but it is a process. (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Through reiteration and citation within the regime of heterosexuality, "materiality is formed and sustained" (Butler, 1993, p. 15).

Building upon Butler, Karen Barad criticizes the conceptualization of materials as "immutable" and "passive" (2003, p. 821). In her understanding, matter is not "a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming" (Barad, 2003, p. 822). She also states that "all bodies, not merely 'human' bodies', come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity-its performativity" (Barad, 2003, p. 823). Barad's theorization of matter and materiality allows me to consider sexting messages and the feelings they create as materials with the capacity to impact sexting partners through their performativities in circulation.

Further, Donna Haraway, in "*A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s"* (1987), critically discusses and challenges the traditional way of understanding the relationship between humans and non-human beings, let it be animals or machines. She argues that the boundaries between machines and organisms are blurring. To put it in her words, "There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organisms, of technological and organic" (Haraway, 1987, p. 33). That means that humans and machines are intertwined and collide, and the boundaries between them are fluid. In my understanding, her point resonates with Braidotti's definition of "virtual reality" as "not an abstraction, but as a technologically mediated social reality that engenders material relations and engages embedded and embodied subjects" (2003, p. 81). It is also linked to Boellstorf's understanding of the virtual world as not clearly separated from the offline world but a place where individuals socially and "materially" interact with each other.

Further, Haraway's provocative question, "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" has been an excellent resource for me in opening my way of understanding the digitally mediated impacts of sexting messages on sexting partners (1987, p. 33). Particularly speaking, her question enlightened and extended the limits of my understanding of what counts as sex in discussing sexting. In this regard, Adam-Thies's work is a standing example. He claims that researchers have focused on the

bodylessness of cybersex and disregarded "the role of the body, its pleasures and the subjective experience of the act of cybersex" (Adams-Thies, 2012, p. 180). In discussing the "potentialities of anus" in gay cybersex, he argues for the fluidity of the boundaries between cyber and real and text and body (Adams-Thies, 2012, p. 184). In his understanding, the discursive cyber body is constituted by referencing the cultural meanings linked to bodies and power relations in offline life. Accordingly, the body and pleasure that are discursively materialized in text-based cybersex are not free from the limitations of offline bodies and their meanings.

Im/material experiences also significantly impact how individuals feel, think, perceive, present themselves, and interact with others; therefore, they affect the formation of their subjectivities. In the next sub-section, I will discuss (sexual) subjectivity and agency.

2.2. Theories on (Sexual) Subjectivity and Agency

> Subjectivity, …, is the experience of the lived multiplicity of positionings. It is historically contingent and is produced through the plays of power/knowledge and is sometimes held together by desire. (Blackman et al., 2008, p. 6)

Defining subjectivity in this way highlights subjectivity's multiplicity, unfixed, and changing features. Similar to sexuality, as I understand it, subjectivity is also socio-culturally, historically, and politically constituted, and it is open to change. It is not a pre-given entity that individuals are born with; instead, it is re/configured through experiences, interactions, and political forces (Mansfield, 2000). This is partially why subjectivity is not singular and consistent. Depending on the changing circumstances and social relations with others, individuals may have sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory subjectivities. In this respect, Biehl, Good, and Kleinman (2007) argue that subjectivity is fractured because it is constituted through and by multiple and changing social experiences with other people and institutions. In other words, there are numerous subjectivities and ways of being subject.

In line with the above-cited definition of subjectivity, I find the anthropological accounts of subjectivity that Biehl and his colleagues provide very insightful. They emphasize the importance of individual experience and self-presentation. Biehl and his colleagues' work (2007) helps me to illuminate the multiple ways in which individuals "present themselves to themselves and one another," as well as the complex social relations that shape and are shaped by these presentations. In this respect, Erving Goffman's (1959) work is an example of how these anthropological accounts of subjectivity can be applied to everyday social interactions. In "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," Goffman (1959) discusses how individuals may present themselves differently in different social relations. Goffman states that when an individual enters a social situation and relation, s/he "makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind," and by doing so, s/he defines the characteristics of the relationality in a given context (1959, p. 6). In presenting oneself as a particular kind of person, one may have diverse motives, which do not have to be consistent in themselves. Goffman uses the concept of "performance" in elaborating on how individuals present themselves and act in specific ways when they encounter others (1959, p. 13). He highlights the importance of the setting in which the performances take place. The setting impacts the reconfiguration of the performance: How one presents oneself to others.

The performative aspect of subjectivity, how one presents oneself, resonates with the temporality of subjectivities. In this regard, Goffman gives the example of a lawyer who may have manners and signs in a meeting with highly-ranked customs very different than those s/he presents to their spouse (1959, p. 19). The period of these social encounters with the customer or spouse shapes the temporality of subjectivity at present. To enunciate, when the lawyer leaves the meeting, s/he will not talk, act, walk, or drink in the same manner. A particular kind of person presented to the customer is temporary because it will be left in the meeting setting once their social encounter is finalized. In a similar vein, Kleinman and Fitz-Henry (2007) mention

that the changes in the macro level in a society – the societal changes – reconfigure how individuals experience things and their subjectivities. They indicate that how individuals experience themselves and the world around them, their subjectivities, are "not static, abstract, biologically fixed, or divorced from political, social, and economic processes, but fluid, contingent, and open to transformation" (Kleinman & Fitz-Henry, 2007, p. 55). However, they stress that it would not be enough to examine only macro-level changes; nevertheless, it is still necessary to pay attention to how these changes are registered at the local level, individually and collectively (Kleinman & Fitz-Henry, 2007).

Thinking through sexuality and subjectivity together, sexual subjectivity is also not a biological and natural thing that is given at birth. On the contrary, it is socio-culturally, politically, and historically developed and constituted. It is not static; instead, it is open to change and reconstituted based on individual experiences through social relations (Jackson & Scott, 2010). Muriel Dimen, in "The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexual Studies," writes that

> Sexual subjectivity refers to how people think about themselves as sexual beings. It includes their experiences of sex and erotism, as well as their conception and assessment of their own erotic and sexual desires, acts, and fantasies. It encompasses their sexual pleasures and displeasures; their appetites, revulsions and apathies; and the way they speak of or otherwise represent their sexual experience(s) and their sexual dreams (2016, p. 1).

Sexual subjectivity refers to individuals' state of being sexual: how they perceive and present themselves sexually. It covers erotic preferences, sexual desires, and dislikes. Accordingly, sexual subjectivity can be explained as various ways in which one sexually feels, acts, and interacts with others in their intimate encounters. It also means how individuals sexually attach to (their intimate) others. In this respect, Dimen (2016) states that each individual may develop

and have different sexual subjectivities through the meanings attached to sexuality in a socio-cultural context.

Foucault posited that sexuality is not an innate or fixed part of human existence but rather a product of social constructs shaped and controlled by various power dynamics. In other words, according to Foucault (1978), the subject does not exist before or outside the power relations. Instead, he argues that the subject is produced through power relations. Specifically, he stressed the significance of sexual discourses and practices in influencing individuals' comprehension of sexuality (Foucault, 1978). Power structures and ideologies like patriarchy and heteronormativity form these constructs. What he calls the paradox of subjectivation is critical in understanding his formulation: the power relations that subordinate subjects are also the conditions for subjects to be formed. In this regard, Butler (1997) argues that social norms are the necessary conditions for a subject to be formed. She expands on this point by underscoring the importance of power dynamics in shaping gendered sexual subjectivity. She (1999) contends that the constitution of feminine and masculine subjects is intertwined with each other and with these power relations. What kind of sexual subjectivity one develops or has depends mainly on the power relations that one encounters. Gender is a cornerstone of this power relationship that impacts the constitution of sexual subjectivity. Feminine and masculine subjects are constituted in a mediated relation to each other within and through these power relations.

However, this does not mean that subjects always and necessarily conform to the social norms and power relations through which they are realized. Butler states that it is also through power relations that subversion of subjects occurs. In "Gender Trouble*,"* she writes that power relations

> mobilize possibilities of "subjects" that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility, but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible (1999, p. 39).

In Butler's account, no sexuality and sexual subjectivity can occur before or after, meaning outside the power relations. As Mahmood writes, "Norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted, …, but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" (2005, p. 22).

Further, Mahmood's conceptualization of agency primarily contributes to my theoretical framework in this dissertation, particularly in understanding my women research participants' agencies in Turkey, a non-Western context. Western liberal feminist theories associate agency with freedom, free will, free choice, autonomy, and resistance to norms. Mahmood (2005) criticizes Western liberal thinking of agency, arguing that it fails to grasp the realities and experiences of women in non-Western and non-secular contexts. For this reason, by studying a group of Muslim women attending a Mosque in Egypt, Mahmood developed a more nuanced and complex concept of agency that moved beyond the binary categorization of submission versus resistance. She further argues that agency can be exercised differently in different socio-cultural and historical circumstances. The women she studied engage in Islamic doctrines, read the Quran, wear hijab, discuss the verses from the Quran, and cultivate an Islamic way of living in themselves. Through their active engagement in Islam and an Islamic way of living, these women develop particular pious moral subjectivities. Mahmood argues that it would be a failure to see these women as passive, submissive objects who comply with the rules of what subordinates them, Islam. On the contrary, Mahmood states that these women actively engage in Islamic norms and values, embodying them and becoming pious moral subjects. In her study, Mahmood shows that these women make conscious preferences and decisions in following the Islamic way of living.

There is a strong emphasis on political action in the Western liberal feminist theorization of agency. However, Mahmood argues that subjects' agencies do not necessarily always have to be political, as the Western-based theories have argued. On the contrary, she claims that ethical actions might also inform the subject's agency. In Mahmood's understanding, ethical action is not informed by structural and external rules and authorities but by how individuals cultivate ethical and moral norms and values through self-disciplining. In her study, the Mosque women cultivate Islamic norms and values through praying and wearing hijab, and they embody these norms, which gradually shape their ethical subjectivities. From a Western liberal feminist approach, these women's conduct might have been seen as a lack of political action. However, Mahmood (2005) argues that these women's active engagement with Islam and cultivation of their faith, through which they manifest a different modality of agency, are informed by their ethical and moral values. While engaging in the Islamic way of life and the Islamic movement, as Mahmood explains, some of these women had to negotiate with their immediate relatives, such as husbands and parents, as they did not approve of their engagement in the Islamic movement.

These women's actions are not political but ethical, as moral and religious values inform their intentions. In this regard, Mahmood further argues that for a better and socio-culturally nuanced understanding of agency, political and ethical agencies must be taken into account together (2005, p. 35). Otherwise, as she states, the analyst might fail to see what is specific to a given culture. Furthermore, by comparing the secular-Muslim women and pious Muslim women's reactions to the socio-cultural pressure put on women, especially single women, regarding the age of marriage, Mahmood (2005) contends that women from different groups give different reactions. Therefore, they manifest different modalities of agency.

Digitally Mediated Sexual Subjectivity

Instead of theoretical concepts such as digital sexual subjectivity, I have preferred to develop my own concept for methodological reasons. The data I have is not based on my observations in digital platforms; therefore, I have not observed how my research participants constitute their sexual and religious subjectivities in online spheres. Instead, my analysis is informed by their narratives of how they sexually present themselves to their sexting partners, and how they position themselves in these online spheres.

While discussing (sexual) subjectivity, which refers to how individuals present themselves to others, I have stressed that it is not fixed or pre-given but changeable, multiple, and fluid. Digitally mediated sexual subjectivity, or sex(t)ual subjectivity as I call it in my dissertation, refers to the ways in which individuals sexually feel, act, interact, and present themselves in their digitally mediated sexual relationships, sexting in my case. Setzer, in their Master's thesis, argues that cyber sexual subjectivities are also "fluid", "ever-changing," and "intangible" (2000, p. 89). Turkle (1997) agrees with the fluidity of (sexual) selves in digitally mediated platforms; however, she also claims that these subjectivities do not have to take place in different settings and at different times. In other words, she highlights the diversity of (sexual) subjectivities in digitally mediated platforms (Turkle, 1997, p. 74).

Recent empirical and theoretical studies suggest that digital sexual subjectivities are not free from the norms and power relations that regulate gender and sexuality in the offline sphere. On the contrary, Adams-Santos indicates that individuals' sexual selfhoods are constituted through the "myriad social forces stemming from online and offline contexts" (2020, p. 11). Concerning the subversion of sexual norms in online spheres, Setzer argues that non-conforming sexual behaviors and desires appear in the temporality of cybersex (2000, p. 91). In other words, its presence and potential ethical and political effects are erased when technologically mediated sexual communication ends. Regarding the constitution of digitally mediated sexual subjectivities, Turkle highlights the significance of "machinelike connectivity"

and the use of language (1997, p. 75). That is to mean that digitally mediated sexual subjectivities are constituted through technological devices such as mobile phones, the Internet, and words. The use of language - "vocabulary, spelling mistakes, use of idiom" - is a crucial element of the constitution and subversion of digitally mediated sexual subjectivities (Gies, 2008, p. 320). For, individuals sexually present themselves through the use of language and via "machinelike connectivity" (Turkle, 1997, p. 75)

Moreover, theoretical discussions on the historical and social forces, negotiations, and human agency in terms of the complex and multi-dimensional constitution of sexuality, the good and bad ones, provide me with a critical lens to identify a fruitful theoretical and conceptual framework to approach sexting in particular and cybersex in general. Denis Waskul defines cybersex as

> erotic forms of real-time computer mediated *communication*. Rather than a passive consumption of relatively static pornography, cybersex entails active, interactive, and creative communication with others through typed text, live digital video, sometimes spoken voice (by use of computer microphones), or some combination thereof. (2006, p. 281)

The defining features of cybersex that differentiate it from other technologically mediated sexual practices, i.e., pornography, lie in its capacity to provide real-time interactive erotic online communication. As Waskul indicates, cybersex may take various forms: audio-visual, spoken, or text-based. Following this logic, sexting stands as a text/chat-based form of cybersex. In other words, sexting is a real-time, interactive, text-based, technologically mediated (online) sexual intimacy.

The initial scholarly works on sexting have theorized sexting as a risky, addictive, and illegal practice by mainly concentrating on sexting behaviors among teenagers. For instance, sexting is associated with substance use (Dake et al., 2012), risky sexual behavior such as

unprotected sex (Mattey & Diliberto, 2013), attachment problems in romantic relations (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012), and even suicide as a result of the unauthorized dissemination of self-images (Diliberto & Mattey, 2009). Sexting has created great anxiety and fear among educators, parents, and prosecutors as they think that girls will engage in inappropriate sexual activities, such as sharing nude pictures, and eventually become a subject of legal and medical processes. As Hasinoff (2015) critically discussed in length, these studies mostly blame the over-sexualization of culture, which, in their account, causes the early sexualization of teenage girls. In their understanding, girls tend to imitate (hyper) sexual and attractive women figures that appear on diverse media channels.

As against and critique the wide range of scholarly arguments on sexting as criminalizing, objectifying, and liberating, Hasinoff theorizes sexting as a "media production" and argues that

> Media production (like media viewing) is neither inherently liberatory nor inherently oppressive—but thinking about sexting in this way highlights that it can be a choice, however complicated and situated in a political and social context that choice may be. If sexting is a media production, then it is not sufficient to assume that people create and share images of themselves because they are simply imitating sexualization in mass culture. (2015, p. 116)

In theorizing sexting as a "media production," Hasinoff brings out the significance of choice in terms of involvement in sexting. That means that individuals practice consensual sexting because they want and choose to do so. Notably, in her view, the practice of sexting in itself cannot be either liberatory or objectifying. For, in her understanding, sexting can be both liberatory and objectifying depending on the ways in which one sexts.

Hasinoff (2015) also argues that seeing sexting as a "media production" enables researchers to consider the possibilities of self-sexual expression, pleasure, and interactive participation in sexting. Thinking in this way obscures the discussion of whether sexting is

liberatory or objectifying because it brings out sexual agency and sexual subjectivities. It also complicates the activeness and passiveness of women in sexting.

In a nutshell, I consider digitally mediated sex(t)ual subjectivity as socio-culturally and historically constructed (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1978), "constituted by machinelike connectivity" and "language" (Turkle, 1997, p. 75), and meaningful in a given socio-cultural historical context. It is not static or fixed; on the contrary, it is "fluid", and "multiple" (Setzer, 2000, p. 89; Turkle, 1997, p. 75), and it is open to reconstitutions and changes (Jackson & Scott, 2010). Conceptualizing sexual subjectivity in this way provides me a theoretical tool to better analyze my research participants' sex(t)ual subjectivities in different ways. Firstly, it enables me to argue that my women research participants have fluid, multiple, and sometimes contradictory, sex(t)ual subjectivities. Secondly, the unstable and socio-culturally constructedness of sexual subjectivity (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1978) sheds light on my understanding of how my pious research participants develop, negotiate with, and present their sex(t)ual subjectivities in their sexting encounters. Lastly, such conceptualization of sexual subjectivity enlightened my understanding of the discursive construction of sex(t)ual subjectivities through the use of vulgar, obscene language in sexting in its temporality and contextuality.

2.3. Theories on Religion and Islamic Religiosity

Feminist scholars have long contested the relationship between religion, gender, and sexuality. The mainstream Western-based feminist scholarship has understood religion as an institutionalized instrument used mainly by men to subordinate women. In other words, they consider religion and religious institutions among the power relations, if not the cause, that enchain and subordinate women. There is a view that, among other monotheistic religions, Islam and Islamic doctrines have great power over women and their lives (Mikaelsson, 2016). Islamic feminists' critical engagements and readings of Islamic texts regarding the fields of

gender, sexuality, and power have provided a critique against these views (Ali, 2006; Barlas, 2002)

Kecia Ali (2006) critically notes that Muslim women have been constructed as the "Other" of Western so-called liberated women. Muslim women have been understood and represented as subordinated and oppressed by Islamic doctrines. However, Saba Mahmood (2005), among many others, criticizes this Western-based perception of Islam as the ultimate source of women's subordination and oppression in Muslim societies. From a similar perspective, Asma Barlas (2002) argues that it is not the Qur'an, the Islamic holy book, but societal and cultural patriarchal norms that lead and legitimate the oppression and subordination of women. Besides, Boudiba (2008) argues that each Muslim community has its own way of living Islam. For instance, he suggests that African Islam is different from Malaysian Islam.

Further, Barlas (2002) states that there are multiple, even contradictory, ways of reading and interpreting the Qur'an and that reading the Qur'an as a misogynistic and patriarchal text is one among others. Barlas further argues that the Qur'an does not make an unequal and asymmetrical distinction between women and men that would cause unequal social and sexual power relations between women and men (2002, p. 130). Based on her readings of the Qur'an, she claims that sexuality is not among the issues which the Qur'an has different treatments toward women and men. She writes

> [T]he Qur'an establishes that both men and women have sexual desires and needs and the right to fulfill them. Second, by defining sex in terms that suggest mutual pleasure and fulfillment, the Qur'an also affirms that sex is not only or primarily for procreative purposes; it is a joyful and purposive activity in itself which is conducive to sukūn. (Barlas, 2002, p. 153).

In other words, she argues that the Qur'an gives equal rights (to pleasure) and responsibility to women and men in terms of sexuality. It acknowledges women's sexual desires and pleasures.

Significantly, the Qur'an does not limit sex with its procreative function. From a similar perspective, Ali states that Islamic texts and the Qur'an emphasize the importance of women's sexual satisfaction (2006, p. 7). However, as Ali notes, different sects of Islam have different views on this subject. While some sects and a group of Islamic figures acknowledge and highlight the importance of women's sexual pleasure, giving a husband a responsibility to sexually satisfy their wife, some others, on the other hand, emphasize the sexual needs of men and consider women responsible for being always sexually available to their husbands (Ali, 2006). These two different, even contradictory, Islamic views complicate the issue of sexuality in Islam and make it impossible to have any generalized and homogenous argument.

My pious research participants are affiliated with different Islamic sects and have varying degrees of religiosity. This means that what the institutional religion, such as the Quran and the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), says about Islamic prohibitions and sanctions does not have the same effect on them. Therefore, looking at the institutional Islamic sources would fail me to understand the meanings, values, and feelings that my research participants attach to their practices, including their sexting practices. In this regard, Mahmood (2005) argues that instead of institutional doctrines, it is necessary to look at how Muslim women use Islamic values in their daily lives to better understand the relationship between Islam, gender, and sexuality. For this reason, in my dissertation, instead of concentrating on what Islam prohibits or sanctions regarding intimate relationships, I focus on religiosity and daily religious practices because religiosity, as a lived religion, provides a more insightful perspective to understand and analyze everyday religious practices and their impact on daily life. In this regard, Schielke and Debevec state that religions

> have a strongly normative character, offering compelling ways to act, to live, to be and to perceive the world _ and yet how people actually live

> religious lives appears to be a very different business (J. S. Schielke & Debevec, 2012, pp. 1–2)

From a similar perspective, McGuire defines religiosity as "how individuals attend to matters of the religious or the spiritual, as they understand those matters at a particular time and context, in their own lives" (2008, p. 6). Furthermore, Ammerman (2007) states that paying attention to religiosity enables researchers to see individual choices concerning religious practices. In this regard, researching a group of Christians in the context of the USA, McGuire (2008) argues that daily religious practices and views do not always correspond to official/institutional religious doctrines because individuals may have different views and choices in implementing religious rules in their daily lives.

However, as I discussed above, lived religion or daily practices of religiosity do not always correspond to textual Islamic norms. Individual religiosity may stray from what the Qur'an approves and forbids. Non-Islamic ways of experiencing sexual desire, pre-marital sex, and sexting practices, in my case, are among the practices that challenge Islamic norms. My devoted Muslim interlocutors engage in sex(t)ual practices, to certain extents, while pursuing the ways of being a good Muslim subject. My pious research participants' involvement in pre-marital sex(ting) relationships complements and contradicts Mahmood's theoretical analysis of agency. On the one hand, my pious informants cultivate their faith, following an Islamic way of living through praying and wearing a hijab. On the other hand, they challenge, in fact, go against the Islamic rules by pursuing their sexual desires and engaging in pre-marital sex(ting) relationships. However, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, their actions cannot be read as a pure form of resistance to or submission to Islamic norms as they constantly negotiate with their religious faith and sex(t)ual desires.

2.4. Theories on Language: speech acts

The use of language is the basis of sexting as it is the medium of sexual communication in sexting. It is through the use of (sexually explicit) language that individuals present themselves to their sexting partners and, therefore, perform their subjectivities and manifest their agencies. For this reason, theories of language form one of the main theoretical axes of my dissertation.

In analyzing the use of sexually explicit Turkish vulgar, obscene language in sexting, I suggest that it challenges the offline gender norms that pertain in Turkey. The use of sexually explicit, vulgar, obscene language in mundane communication is socio-culturally and normatively outlawed as it sexually humiliates women and their bodies and attacks sacred values. However, despite its sexist connotations, as most of my research participants expressed, it is this language that creates and spreads sexual arousal and pleasure during sexting. For this reason, I take sexually explicit, vulgar, obscene language into account as performative utterance and speech acts (Austin, 1975; Butler, 1997) to develop my argument that sexting has a particular temporal contextuality in which what is socio-culturally understood to be inappropriate in daily life becomes sexually pleasurable and desirable in sexting, at least for my research participants.

John Austin, in "How To Do Things With Words", introduces "performative utterances" which, as he defines, "do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false'" (1975, p. 5). He adds, "The uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, *the doing of an action*, which again would not normally be described as saying something" (Austin, 1975, p. 5, italic as my emphasis). Accordingly, performative utterances are doing things instead of reporting, explaining, or saying things (Austin, 1975, p. 25). Austin explains the conditions for an utterance to be a performative utterance, speech acts. First, he emphasizes the appropriateness of the circumstances in which performative sentences are uttered. They should

be uttered in appropriate circumstances to be performative utterances. For instance, the statement "I do take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife" (Austin, 1975, p. 5) can be a performative utterance when it is uttered in a marriage ceremony, and the utterer should be eligible for a marriage because only in this circumstance the statement works as doing something. Second, these utterances should be heard by the other person(s) and followed by further actions either on the speaker's side or the other person(s). These actions, as Austin argues, can be "physical" or "mental," or they may be "even acts of uttering further words" (1975, p. 8). Briefly speaking, for performative utterances, as Austing writes, "There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances" (1975, p. 26).

Butler further develops speech act theory and links it to gender performativity and the constitution of bodies, and subjects. In "Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative," she argues that language is more than a tool of communication or describing a reality. By analyzing the ways in which hate speech works as a performative language and speech act, she states, "We do things with language, produce effects with language" (Butler, 1997, p. 8). While doing so, she highlights the importance of the contextuality of speech acts in terms of the power of speech acts to produce effect. She states that

> … certain kinds of words will wound under such circumstances. But the circumstances alone do not make the words wound. Or we may be compelled to claim that any word can be a word that wounds, that it depends on its deployment, and that the deployment of words is not reducible to the circumstances of their utterances (Butler, 1997, p. 13)

Context significantly matters in terms of the power of speech act to wound and injure the addressee, an individual, or a group. Nevertheless, some words have the capacity to injure regardless of the context because of the unruptured citationality and its resignification of the "original" context. Citationality is central to Butler's theorization of gender performativity. She

explains it as the reiteration of stylized acts, manners, and words (Butler, 1999). Butler argues that breaking the chain of citationality allows "the possibility of decontextualizing and recontextualizing such terms" (1997, p. 100). In her understanding, the more these words are radically misappropriated and used with different intentions, the less likely these words are to injure and wound. In this regard, the use of sexually explicit, vulgar, obscene language in sexting is a telling case as it breaks the chain of citationality because my research participants expressed that they use this language in sexting not to humiliate or offend their sexting partners but to generate sexual desires and pleasure.

Lastly, Butler argues that language constitutes bodies and subjects. In fact, in her understanding, the condition of the speaking subject is language (Butler, 1997, p. 28). In "Bodies That Matter", she discusses the construction and materialization of bodies. She states that the subject, "the 'I' only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated" (Butler, 1993, p. 225). Her argumentation enables me to claim that the use of sexually explicit, vulgar, obscene language in sexting constitutes sexting partners as desiring and desirable subjects. Notably, Butler contends that "Construction not only takes place in time but also is itself a temporal process" (1993, p. 10). Benefitting from Butler's argument, I suggest that the construction of sexting partners as sexually desiring and desirable subjects is a contextual and temporal thing.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the theories on sexuality, subjectivity, agency, religion, and language that inform my understanding and analysis of my research participants' sexting practices. In concluding this chapter, I will explain in what ways these theories shape my perspective. In my dissertation, I understand and use sexuality as diverse sexual/erotic desires, feelings, and expressions through sexual acts. In line with the social constructionist theories of sexuality, I agree that sexuality is not pre-given and natural; instead, it is a product of socio-

cultural and historical forces and negotiations (Weeks, 1986). I acknowledge the diversity of sexual acts and desires (Rubin, 2006; Weeks, 1986), which enables me to consider sexting among diverse sexual practices. Further, socio-culturally and historically changing features of sexuality help me grasp the various, sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory, attitudes toward meaning attached to sexting.

Walkul's and Hasinoff's theories of sexting significantly inform my understanding of sexting (Hasinoff, 2015; Waskul, 2003, 2006). Following Waskul, I consider sexting a real-time interactive erotic online communication (2006, p. 281), a chat/text-based form of cybersex. This enables me to differentiate sexting from other forms of online sexual consumption, i.e., pornography. Further, Hasinof's argument of sexting as a "media production" provides me with a critical lens to consider sexters as creators of sexual content rather than passive consumers and to move beyond the discursive limits of sexting as liberating versus objectifying (2015, p. 116). Accordingly, compiling Walkul's and Hasinoff's theories on sexting, I understand sexting as interactive, real-time text-based cybersex in which the participants themselves are the doer and creator.

Similar to my understanding of sexuality, I employ a social-constructionist theorization of subjectivity. Following Blackman, Cromby, Derek, Papadopoulos, and Walkerdine (2008), I perceive subjectivity as multiple, changing, unfixed, and socio-culturally constituted positionings. Just like sexuality, subjectivity is also not a pre-given natural entity with which individuals are born; on the contrary, it is in becoming, changing, and reconfiguring (Mansfield, 2000). For this reason, I believe there are multiple, even inconsistent, subjectivities. In a similar vein, I consider sexual subjectivity as sexual positionings, which include sexual feelings, desires, and dislikes, as well as the ways in which one sexually presents oneself to others (Dimen, 2016). Accordingly, sexual subjectivity is not static or fixed; instead, it is continuously reconstituted (Jackson & Scott, 2010). I also adopt the view that digitally mediated sexual

subjectivities as “fluid,” “everchanging,” and “multiple” (Setzer, 2000, p. 89; Turkle, 1997, p. 75).

Further, I adopt Butler’s argument that sexual subjectivities operate – positionings of sexual subjectivities – within the boundaries of power relations (1999). This particular way of theoretical exploration of sexual subjectivity enables me to understand and analyze how my research participants have developed multiple and inconsistent sex(t)ual subjectivities during their sexting practices.

Although Islam strictly forbids any other sexual relationship outside the heterosexual (religious) marriage, not all Muslim believers follow these rules. In line with the respective literature, my field research shows that many unmarried Muslims engage in pre-marital sexual relationships to some extent, even though they are aware that they are committing *zina* and sin. The only way of explaining this phenomenon is to turn to “lived religion.” For, as Ammerman (2007) argues, lived religion provides researchers with analytical tools to understand individual choices concerning religious rules. I had difficulties in understanding and explaining why and how my devoted Muslim research participants, especially women, explored their sexual desires and engaged in sexting practices until I utilized theories of lived religion. Paying attention to lived religious practices, daily religiosity, along what institutional religion commands enables me to explain the existence of multiple ways of being a faithful Muslim subject.

Lastly, I benefit from the theories of Austin (1975) and Butler (1997) in taking the use of sexually explicit vulgar, obscene language in sexting into account as a performative utterance and speech act. In light of their theories, I argue that sexually explicit, vulgar, obscene language has the power and capacity to produce specific effects on the parties of sexting within the particular contextuality and temporality of sexting. What is linguistically censored and understood to be inappropriate in daily life becomes sexually desirable and preferable in the context of sexting, at least for my research participants. Butler’s argumentation enables me to

claim that a particular contextuality of sexting, in which words are *doing* things, reconfigures the meanings produced by the sex-related Turkish vulgar, obscene words. Benefitting from Butler's work on the subject construction through language, I argue that through the use of sexually explicit, vulgar, obscene language in sexting, sexting partners are constituted as sexually desiring and desirable subjects within the contextuality and temporality of sexting.

Chapter 3: Socio-Cultural Political and Historical Context of the Research

This chapter introduces gender and sexuality dynamics in Turkey in its socio-cultural, political, and historical context, with a particular focus on contemporary Turkey, especially since 2011. Many critical feminist scholars working on Turkey consider 2011 a vital historical date when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current President, former Prime Minister, and the chair of AKP, started to adopt increasingly conservative and authoritarian politics and discourses (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Cindoglu & Unal, 2017). I intend to explain how AKP and Erdoğan have reconfigured gender and sexuality relations since their first term in 2002. As will be discussed in more detail in the following pages, AKP is an Islamic, religious, and conservative party that embraces very conservative traditional gender and sexuality norms, locating women within the heterosexual family and private sphere. However, there are also secular and progressive voices demanding gender equality in all aspects of life in Turkey. Therefore, the normative gender and sexuality order that the AKP and Erdoğan Regime want to constitute does not really correspond with the fragmented reality of Turkey.

3.1. In-Between Laicism and Islamism

Understanding the complex dynamics of undemocratic, religiously conservative, and Islamist gender and sexuality politics in contemporary Turkey necessitates a deep dive into the roles of the ruling power, AKP, and Erdoğan Regime, and the advocates for democratic, progressive, equal gender rights. This exploration also involves a retrospective analysis of gender and sexuality politics in the formative years of Turkey in 1923, a period marked by the conflict between *laiklik*, derived from the French *laïcité*, and Sharia law.

Kemalist elites, the founding fathers of the Turkish Republic, announced and protected *laiklik* despite the tremendous efforts of traditional Islamists who wanted Turkey to be an Islamic state during the very early founding years of the Republic in the early 1920s. The leading figure of these Kemalist elites was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. They were secular, nationalist, highly educated, and high-level soldiers of the Ottoman Empire. There is a common understanding that the French Revolution and Jacobinism had influenced these Kemalist elites. For their goal of laicization, the Kemalist elites introduced several significant and radical changes in almost all aspects of life: societal, educational, jurisdictional, governmental, and so on. Among these changes are the abolishment of the Sultanate (individual sovereign power) and the Caliphate (the ruler of the whole Muslims in the world) (in 1924), the adoption of civil secular law (in 1926), the abolishment of the Ministry of Sharia, the elimination of the religious courts, the elimination of the *medreses* (Islamic schools), the replacement of the Arabic alphabet with the Latin alphabet, the delegitimization of the religious education, and so on. The decisions and actions of the Kemalist elites significantly disidentified the Turkish Republic from the traditional (Ottoman) socio-political order in which religion was not only imputed but also regulated all spheres of the socio-political and legal order (Berkes, 2023). Notably, the Kemalist revolution resulted in a single-party state; therefore, many voices, especially Islamist groups, were not represented in the parliament.

Reforms regarding the women question were central to the Kemalist elitists' modernization, westernization, and *laiklik* projects. These reforms were meant to improve women's status in society and the family while also preserving patriarchal relations. The new reforms outlawed polygamy and religious weddings that were not accompanied by state weddings. Women were also given equal rights in divorce, child custody, marriage, and inheritance. Further, they encouraged women to be visible in the public spheres by attending heterosocial events, which implies a disidentification from a Muslim way of life, which is

traditionally homosocial and highly sex-segregated (Göle, 1997). Notably, these women had to be "non-Islamic (but not non-Muslim), urban and professional" women (Cagatay, 2017, p. 75), which indicates how Islamic women were invisiblized in public spheres. Also, women working in state or governmental offices were not allowed to veil while working at the workplace (Toprak, 2005). Veiling in everyday life was not forbidden for women, but it was discouraged. During his visits to several cities, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and father of the Republic, told women how they should wear and appear in public. For instance, in one of his speeches in a rural area, he asked women not to cover their faces with their hijabs. In his speeches, Islamic wearing was othered and discriminated (Özçetin, 2024).

One can rightfully expect or think that the social and political reforms made by Kemalist founders in the early Republican years to improve women's status in society and family have also brought along "sexual rights," if not "sexual liberation." However, these reforms did not touch on sexuality-related issues (Sirman, 2011). In fact, the Kemalist Republican woman figure, closely tied to motherhood in a heterosexual nuclear family, was stripped of her femininity and sexuality (Müftüler-Bac, 1999). Oral history studies conducted with the early Republican women show that these women were allowed and encouraged to socialize in heterosocial environments; however, they, as young urbanite women, were responsible for putting distance between themselves and their male friends to protect their virtue and chastity and of being careful of not being seductive (Durakbasa & Ilyasoglu, 2001, p. 200). Accordingly, the Kemalist reforms did not challenge the existing conservative sexual regulatory norms in the early Republican period (White, 2003). It was only in the 1980s that feminist women claimed control and authority over their bodies and sexualities by raising their voices on this matter, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Significantly, those who could not adapt themselves to the development and changes that had been brought along with Westernization and secularization were disempowered and

gradually lost their social status in the new social order (Göle, 1997). What was even more striking is that the socio-cultural change that came along with westernization, modernization, and *laiklik* was only accessible to those living in the urban sites. The periphery and rural of Turkey were not modernized or westernized, and their ties to Islam and traditional way of living mostly remain intact. The impacts of this uneven process manifest themselves in strict patriarchal gender roles in rural areas in contemporary Turkey. This sufficiently explains the differences between my research participants who come from rural areas and urban cities in terms of their gender and sexual experiences.

The single-party system in Turkey, which continued until 1946, did not allow alternative political views, including Islamist views, to present themselves in the Parliament. Later, Islamic parties and views found seats for themselves in the parliament. Openly speaking, the Islamist groups who were previously oppressed by the Kemalist elites and through the single-party system had an opportunity to represent their views in the parliament. They gained power in the parliament and society, which gradually led to the Islamization of society. Islamization is a gradual process through which societal and cultural changes occur according to Islamic values. Islamization gained increasing momentum in the 1980s and became very powerful in the parliament of Turkey. In fact, Keyman argues that it changed the nature of Turkish modernity during and after the 1980s (Keyman, 2007). During these years, many controversial discussions took place in the parliament: sex segregation in public transportation, prohibition of the alcohol service in restaurants, implementation of compulsory religious education in primary and secondary education, lifting of the headscarf ban on university campuses, and so on. There was sensible polarization in society, affecting people's everyday life (Toprak, 2005, p. 36). For instance, a person publicly eating during the Ramadan was fined. Another rather too violent occasion took place in a small town in Anatolia in 1993, which still is commemorated every year in Turkey. Radical Islamist groups set fire to a hotel in which a group of progressive,

critical atheist intellectuals and writers were staying. They were fired to death. The Municipality, the Mayor and the police officer did not intervene in and prevent the incident.

The historically rooted division between laicism and Islamism has been on the front in Turkish politics and the everyday lives of people for so long. Laicism and Islamism have operated together hand in hand in Turkey, not in harmony, but in the form of chaos, polarization, and segregation. Despite its secularist character, Islam has been firmly embedded in Turkish culture, or vice versa.

3.1.1. The Rise of Justice and Development Party

The founder cadres of the AKP were the followers and members of a former Islamist party, which was banned from politics by the Constitutional Court on the grounds of violating the rule of separation of religion and state in 1998. A group of members of this Islamist party founded AKP in 2001 and won the general elections in 2002. During its first years, AKP carefully disidentified itself from its predecessor, by labeling itself as a "conservative democratic party," defending rights and liberties for all people. Disidentifying itself from its predecessor was crucial to gain the trust of the Constitutional Court and to seem inclusive in Turkish society. By doing so, they represented themselves as a party not only for Muslims but also for all citizens living in Turkey to become the major ruling party of Turkey.

In the first two terms, AKP worked on Turkey's accession to the EU, worked on and lifted the women's headscarf ban in workplaces, defended democratic rights for Kurdish people, declared on several occasions that they would work for gender equality, and mobilized the Turkish economy. Also, AKP declared that they support and would work for religious diversity, religious freedom, human rights, the rule of law, and liberal democracy. They realized some of their promises during these years. However, AKP has gradually gained a conservative, Islamist, and authoritarian character, especially after 2011 (Altunok, 2016; Cindoglu & Unal, 2017).

3.2. The Current Religio-Political Atmosphere and Its Impacts on Everyday Life in Turkey

When I arrived in Ankara, Turkey, in February 2019 to conduct my field research, the state of emergency, which was prolonged for two years after the failed coup on July 15th, 2016, had just lifted, but its atmosphere was still influential in the city. The fully armored riot police and tanks were all around the corners of the streets and the main boulevard in Ankara. The random police questioning on the streets was a part of daily routine. Police officers were allowed for bag and body searches anywhere and anytime. Walking together more than three or more people on the streets was a matter of suspicion for police officers for a potential protest. These days were marked by colossal surveillance. Religiously informed discourses, statements, and policies were and still are growing these days and they are impacting individuals' daily lives. No doubt they had reflections, echoes, and impacts on people's everyday lives. This atmosphere created and spread feelings of insecurity and fear among people. As some of my research participants expressed, many people felt a necessity to correspond to the official norms and discourses that the AKP and Erdoğan Regime were spreading because they were afraid of becoming a target of the AKP and Erdoğan Regime. In this regard, Özkazanç (2018) argues that many people, especially unmarried women and youth, pretend to conform to the norms to pass through society without facing trouble.

In what follows, I give a vivid picture of the religio-political atmosphere of Turkey, especially after the 2011 period, which was marked by AKP's turn to Islamic conservatism and authoritarianism, as argued by many Turkish scholars (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Altunok, 2016; Cindoglu & Unal, 2017). I will start by discussing how these have shaped and impacted women's lives and then continue with the debate on AKP's intervention in individual lifestyles.

3.2.1. Public In/visibility of Women

> "Pregnancy should not be that explicit and public. Pregnant women are not aesthetic. They should not go out and wander on the streets and in parks, especially after 7 or 8 months. They can go out to get fresh air in their husband's car in the evenings" (Ömer Tuğrul İnançer, on Turkish Radio and Television Channel, TRT, 2013)[11]

İnançer, a famous lawyer and theologian who is well-known with his close association with AKP, uttered the above statement on a TV program during Ramadan on the state-based Turkish channel TRT in 2013. Of course, his statements caused significant controversies, and he became a target of criticism from several oppositional points of view, especially from women. However, his statement is neither trivial nor insignificant as it indirectly mirrors the political opinions of AKP on the matter of women, women's bodies, and their sexualities, as well as their public in/visibilities. İnançer's emphasis on "after 7 or 8 months" of pregnancy is explicitly linked with the impossibility of hiding the growing belly of women – a pure signifier of pregnancy. In other words, "after 7 or 8 months", in most cases, to avoid generalization, it is not possible to physically hide the pregnancy, therefore, the sexuality of women: the fact that the pregnant woman had sex (Şentürk, 2013). Accordingly, what İnançer wants women to keep hidden as secret, behind closed doors, within the private spheres is not their growing belly or the baby inside this belly but what this growing belly signifies: the presence of women's sexual life. The fact that women are *also* having sex should not be publicized and should not be a spectacle to the public eye. Further, his statement that pregnant women *"can go out to get fresh air in their husband's car in the evenings"* implies that no one would see their bodies as they stay in the car. In this sense, Inançer's statement reinforces the gendered binary separation between private

[11] https://www.haberturk.com/polemik/haber/863521-hamile-kadinin-sokakta-gezmesi-uygun-degildir

and public spheres and attempts to locate and almost imprison women within the domain of the private sphere (Gavison, 1992; Pateman, 1990).

AKP and its members continued to intervene in how women should appear in public by making various statements in diverse gatherings. For instance, in 2014, while complaining about the decline in moral values in Turkey, Bülent Arınç, one of the most significant, the most visible figures of and among the founder cadres of AKP, said

> "Chastity is so important. … A woman must be modest. She must know what *mahrem* (private) is or is not. She must not laugh out loudly in front of everyone."[12]

Arınç's religiously informed, highly conservative explanation depicts a woman figure who is "modest," chaste and she knows well the gendered division between the private and public spheres. For instance, laughing, for women, must take place within a *mahrem,* a private sphere, so that the outsiders, the strangers, could not see the un-modest conduct of a woman. Arınç's explanation gathered intense critiques from several oppositional parties and non-governmental organizations, especially (feminist) women's organizations. Apparently, Arınç's explanations or imagined woman figures did not really correspond with the multiple women figures in Turkish society as it was vigorously mocked, ridiculed, and criticized by many women on Turkish social media. Nevertheless, I do not intend to mean that the modest Islamic women figure that AKP discursively constructs does not have any correspondence in Turkish society; on the contrary, there are those pious Islamic women who live side by side with secular women.[13]

As seen in the above-cited quotes, AKP wishes to situate women within the domain of *mahrem*, which is an "interior, sacred, gendered space, forbidden to exterior and stranger to

[12] https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/bulent-arinc-kadin-herkesin-icinde-kahkaha-atmayacak

[13] I have also observed such tendencies among my pious research participants even though they were not supporters of AKP. For instance, Gamze, a pious veiled young woman interlocutor expressed her dislike of couples kissing in public arguing that this should occur in private sphere as it is "our *mahrem"*

masculine gaze, which is both spatial and corporeal" (Göle, 2015, p. 47). AKP and its members also discursively construct the boundaries of how and to what extent women can and should appear in public. Most notably, there is a solid reference to women's sexualities, which AKP utilizes to consolidate its conservative moral values (Cindoglu & Unal, 2017).

3.2.2. Attacks on Women's Bodies and Sexualities

In one of AKP's mass gatherings in 2011, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current President, former Prime Minister, and Chair of AKP, said, "*This woman, I don't know whether she is a woman or a girl..."* while addressing a young woman protestor.[14] Girl (*kız* in Turkish) refers to a girl child and to an unmarried woman who is socio-culturally and politically expected and considered not to have sexual self and life. She is an asexual subject. A woman (*kadın* in Turkish) refers to a married woman who has a sexual life with her husband that is legitimated by her marriage with him. Accordingly, Erdoğan directly and publicly questioned the woman protestor's virginity by utilizing the discursive gendered and sexist difference between the terms woman (kadın) and girl (kız). Erdoğan's use of woman (kadın) in the first place and then questioning *"whether she is a woman or a girl"* socio-culturally breaches polite ways of communication because many people in Turkey find it difficult and shameful to use the term *kadın* (woman) while addressing women. Instead, they prefer to use more "polite" terms such as *bayan* (missis) and hanım/*hanfendi* (mistress). In my understanding, Erdoğan intended to put her sexuality under public suspicion in order to cast an aspiration on her. Normatively speaking, whether she is an unmarried virgin woman or not would matter to the general public because women's sexuality is not a personal matter or choice but a societal issue concerning family, extended community, and the whole society in Turkey (Ilkkaracan, 2000). By doing so, Erdoğan

[14] https://www.cnnturk.com/yazarlar/basbakan-o-kadin-kiz-midir-kadin-midir

has revitalized the discursive sexist division between virgin and non-virgin unmarried (young) women in Turkey.

In May 2012, abortion discussions broke out when Erdoğan, the Prime Minister back then, made the following statement:

> I see abortion as a homicide. No one should have a right to allow this (abortion). You either kill a baby in a mother's womb or after the baby is born. There is no difference. We must be much more sensitive toward this issue. We must cooperate on this.[15]

On the following day, he equated abortion with the Roboski (Uludere) massacre that took place near the border of Iraq-Turkey on December 28, 2011. 34 Kurdish civilian citizens of Turkey who were involved in the smuggling of gasoline and cigarettes were bombed by the airstrikes of the Turkish air force as they were mistakenly thought to be members of Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK), deemed as a terrorist organization by the state authorities. Erdoğan's statements created great discussions, and he became a target of severe criticism from oppositional, especially the leftist and pro-Kurkish rights and women's rights groups in Turkey. Many protests and demos were organized in different cities of Turkey, and many women from various political affiliations reacted against Erdoğan's attempts to ban abortion. I was an inhabitant of Ankara back then and attended the demos. Feminist women made street writings and distributed pins, writing "*my body, my decision*."

However, he did not give up and insisted on making a law that would restrict or ban abortion in Turkey. AKP attempted to reduce the abortion period from 10 weeks to 4 weeks. In their anticipated law, even rape survivors would not benefit from abortion and would have to give birth to an unwanted child. This shows that AKP prioritized the top-down population policies over women's demands and needs in their pro-natalist policies (Kıpçak, 2019) and

[15] https://bianet.org/haber/erdogan-dan-kurtaj-cinayettir-138640

disregarded women's claim to have control over their bodies. This clearly shows that the AKP and Erdoğan Regime applied anti-women policies that are likely to threaten women's well-being. Notably, while preparing the policies concerning women's reproductive health, rights, and sexualities, they did not consult the women's organizations. Nevertheless, the law regulating the abortion period remained more or less the same. Women officially have the right to have abortions up to 10 weeks upon their requests in state hospitals; however, the health personnel were given the right to refuse to conduct the abortion. According to research conducted in 2015 by feminist women's organizations, only nine out of 184 hospitals in 12 cities give the service of abortion upon women's request, regardless of women's marital status.[16] These results imply that although abortion in Turkey is legal for up to ten weeks, it is not accessible for many women. My woman research participants expressed that they were worried about getting pregnant and facing such problems.

3.2.3. Religiously Informed Anti-Gender and Anti-Women Attitudes

In 2011, the Ministry of State for Women and Family was replaced with the Ministry of Family and Social Services upon the order of Erdoğan, the Prime Minister back then.[17] The closing of the Ministry of Women or the deletion of women's names from the ministry mobilized (feminist) women's organizations and gathered reactions. Women's organizations outcried their anger and criticized the change in the ministry's name. However, Erdoğan stated, *"We are a conservative democratic party. Family matters for us."*[18] Once again, women's demands, voices, and rights were disregarded by AKP and Erdoğan. The deletion of the woman's name from the ministry alongside Erdoğan's statement indicates that instead of women's rights and needs, familial values and norms are prioritized under the rule of Erdoğan.

[16] https://www.morcati.org.tr/attachments/article/370/kamu-hastaneleri-kurtaj-uygulamalari-arastirma-raporu.pdf

[17] https://t24.com.tr/haber/kadinlar-kadin-bakanliginin-kaldirilmasina-ofkeli,150075

[18] https://t24.com.tr/haber/kadinlar-kadin-bakanliginin-kaldirilmasina-ofkeli,150075

The closing of the Women's Ministry was followed by several anti-gender and anti-women policies and discourses in the following years as AKP became more authoritarian and an Islamist government.

Another controversial discussion took place in 2014, just before November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, when Erdoğan refused gender equality between women and men by making an Islamic reference. "*You cannot make women and men equal; it is against to fitrat (creation by nature),"* told Erdoğan at the International Women and Justice Summit organized by Women and Democracy Association (Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği, KADEM), a pro-governmental non-governmental women organization, and the Ministry of Family and Social Policies.[19] *Fıtrat* is an Islamic term referring to the natural creation of individuals by Allah. By using this term, Erdoğan addresses a set of characteristics attached to women and men in Islamic doctrines. This is evident in his same speech, in his following words: "*Our religion has given a position to women, a motherhood position."*[20] Erdoğan legitimizes and normalizes gender inequality and asymmetrical gender roles attained to women and men in society by referencing Islamic values. He also clearly equates womanhood with motherhood and locates women in familial boundaries. By doing so, he discursively disregards and eliminates other aspects of womanhood, such as sexuality.

Erdoğan did not change his mindset regarding his understanding of womanhood. Two years later, again, at one of the events of the Woman and Democracy Association, in which his daughter is a leading figure, Erdoğan gave a speech regarding motherhood and womanhood. He said that

[19] https://kaosgl.org/haber/erdogan-kadin-erkek-esitligi-fitrata-ters
[20] https://kaosgl.org/haber/erdogan-kadin-erkek-esitligi-fitrata-ters

> A woman who abstains from mothering just because she is working, in essence, is refusing her womanhood. This is my sincere opinion. A woman who rejects motherhood gives up on domestic labor and is in danger of losing her authenticity no matter how successful she is in her work life. And she is a missing woman and incomplete. … This is why I, at every opportunity, advise for three children. It is not me doing this. My Allah is commanding it. Our Prophet is telling this.[21]

In Erdoğan's understanding, informed by Islamic norms, a woman must give birth to at least three children and become a mother. Otherwise, she is not a complete woman but "*an incomplete woman."* His appeal to a religiously conservative understanding of womanhood and the equation of womanhood with motherhood did not consolidate his supporters. On the contrary, even some of his supporters, if not all, alongside the more critical and secular women in Turkey, were disturbed by his explanation because not all women may (want to) become mothers.[22] His explanation is critical as it signals the gendered mindset behind their policies affecting women and their lives. They explicitly locate women within a private sphere as mothers and wives. I find his explanations critical in introducing my research setting as they insightfully represent how AKP and Erdoğan imagine women's sexuality and how it may impact my women research participants' daily lives. AKP and Erdoğan equate womanhood with motherhood, disregarding other aspects of women's subjectivities, such as sexuality. In their imaginations, women's sexuality functions only for procreation, not for pleasure. They never mention or acknowledge women's sexual rights and right to sexual pleasure, even within heterosexual marriage.

Further, while the number of femicides and violence against women in all forms has been excessively increasing, Turkey has withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention through a

[21] https://www.diken.com.tr/erdogan-kadinligin-tanimini-da-yapti-anneligi-reddeden-kadin-eksiktir-yarimdir/

[22] https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/06/160608_erdogan_kadin_annelik

Presidential Decree Law signed by Erdoğan as the President of Turkey in March 2021, a couple of weeks after my revisit the field. Initially, the demand for the withdrawal from the Convention came from the radical Islamic groups. They are disturbed by the Convention as they think it embraces and promotes homosexuality, and it is in favor of equality between women and men as against Islamic values. These Islamic voices and messages were circulated and received by Erdoğan.

The withdrawal from the Convention created great turmoil in Turkey. Many (feminist) women's organization, labor organizations, oppositional political parties, and non-governmental organizations raised their voices and demanded the cancellation of the decision. Several protests took place in different cities of Turkey, many counter-sui were opened, numerous press releases were read and distributed, and social media campaigns were conducted for weeks. Nevertheless, Erdoğan did not take a step back, and Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention with the religiously informed argument that the convention was harming the national and religious values of Turkish society. The withdrawal from the Convention has deepened the division between secular and religious groups in Turkey (Özkazanç, 2022). While a group of people with secular values demands the cancellation of the decision and protection of women and LGBTI+'s rights, another group of people who are associated with highly religious values and norms hails Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.

3.2.4. Intervention in Individual Lifestyles through Arbitrary Prohibitions

2011 was a historical threshold for Turkey as AKP turned into a religiously conservative and authoritarian government that applies arbitrary prohibitions as per their political interests informed by predominantly Islamic values. It was the first time in the history of Turkey that an Islamist party was (and still is) governing the country as a ruling party and applying Islamic policies. One of the first prohibitions was the new alcohol regulations in 2013, just before the Gezi Park Protests. The new regulation banned the selling and consumption of alcohol within

100 meters of educational institutions, dormitories, and temples (read as mosques).[23] The restaurants and bars serving alcoholic beverages ghettoized through time as their alcohol licenses were canceled or were not renewed by the mayors, who have attained mainly by Erdoğan.[24] In small towns, bars and restaurants serving alcoholic drinks have moved outside the city center, and accessing these places has become difficult for many people, especially for women, as public transportation is not well-developed in Turkey. This has negatively impacted the socialization habits of youth, especially young unmarried women, as they have become less able to go out and hang out in bars.[25] This inevitably had an impact on their dating and sexual practices. Notably, the significance of the restrictions on alcohol consumption is that alcohol is considered *haram* (forbidden by Allah) in Islam and is associated with Western values in Turkey. Therefore, it is one of the ways through which AKP and Erdoğan Regime apply Islamic regulations and disidentify Turkey from westernized way of living.

There have been two main academic and political interpretations or discourses regarding the Erdoğan and AKP Regime's religio-politics concerning women and their sexualities and arbitrary prohibitions: i) shifting in the political agenda (Korkman, 2016; Özkazanç, 2018) and ii) increasing Islamic conservatization leading the path toward Sharia (Göle, 2015; Özkazanç, 2018). Concerning the first discourse, Korkman argues that "the emphasis on the agenda-shifting functions of Erdoğan's comments reduces the politics of intimacy to a secondary order of significance" (Korkman, 2016, p. 115). She highlights that this approach locates politics of gender, sexuality, and reproduction outside the real politics. Özkazanç also does not consider Erdoğan's comments and politics on gender, sexuality, reproduction, and intimacy issues as

[23] https://www.voaturkce.com/a/yeni-alkol-duzenlemesi-tartisiliyor/1668352.html
[24] https://www.birgun.net/haber/usak-ta-alkollu-mekanlar-sehir-disina-tasiniyor-173334
[25] As will be seen in the analytical chapters, some of my interlocutors were complaining about this phenomenon in Ankara as well. In the case of Ankara, the bars they used to hang out at moved to more elite places and therefore these places have become less accessible to university students and newly graduated youth because of financial reasons.

agenda-shifting; on the contrary, she argues that these are historical thresholds of AKP in its governmentality (Özkazanç, 2018).

This is closely related to or linked to the second point, the increasing Islamic conservatization of Turkey leading the way to Sharia. In the last two years, especially after the general elections in May 2023, Sharia discussions in Turkey have gained momentum because AKP and Erdoğan have collusively supported and encouraged the political Islamist cults (*tarikat* in Turkish). Islamic cult's demand for Sharia has been in line with Erdoğan's political interest of making Turkey a religiously conservative and Islamist country. Radical Islamic groups organized protests on the streets, outcrying their demands for Sharia, and they also shouted slogans in favor of Sharia in courthouse halls.[26] In fact, they went further and intervened in women's mixed-gender socializations in some cities of Turkey. For instance, a group of radical Islamist men verbally and physically attacked a group of women who wished to use the mixed-gender swimming pool in a residence block in a conservative city in Turkey.[27] This radical Islamist group did not allow rather secular women to benefit from the residence's free service and broke down sunbeds, threatening women who wished to use the swimming pool. The increasing voices for sharia from radical Islamic groups, no matter their quantitative values, are likely to refute Özkazanç's (2018) argument that sharia and Islamism are not grassroots demands in Turkey. I think both secularism and Islamism are grassroots demands in Turkey. However, as Göle argues, Islamism or Sharia and secularism are not alternatives to each other; on the contrary, they coexist in Turkey through changing and diverse "recompositions" (2015, p. 62).

Within this religiously conservative and authoritarian context, unmarried young individuals, especially women, find themselves under pressure of oppressive power. They fear

[26] https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/adliye-koridorlarinda-yasasin-seriat-sloganlari-haber-1662266

[27] https://www.gunboyugazetesi.com.tr/havuza-girmek-isteyen-kadinlara-once-baltali-saldiri-sonra-olum-tehdidi-277790h.htm

becoming the target of radical Islamist groups because of their non-conforming behaviors, such as kissing and hugging in public, their dressings, drinking alcohol, and laughing loudly in public. In this regard, one of my woman research participants stated that she uses sexting as a way of creating some sort of sexual warming, which she used to do at bars a couple of years ago.

3.3. The Dynamics of Sexuality in Turkey

Sexuality has been one of the major fields that are subject to strict regulation and scrutinization by various institutions and discourses, even though no one openly and directly talks about it in Turkey. From the early years of childhood, individuals, especially women, are indoctrinated with the moral codes of sexual conduct that are appropriate to Turkish culture. Normatively speaking, it is vitally important, especially for girls and women, to comply with moral sexual conduct; otherwise, they may be subject to various forms of violence, including rape and murder in extreme cases. However, as will be further elaborated in the analytical chapters, women are not passive objects of sexual norms.

3.3.1. Religious Regulation of Sexuality

Sertaç Şehlikoğlu, an international Turkish feminist scholar, adopts the concept of *Islamicate sexualities* from Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi's edited book titled "Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire." The term *Islamicate*, initially coined by Marshall G. S. Hodgson, "was intended to highlight a complex of attitudes and practices that pertain to cultures and societies that live by various versions of the religion Islam" (Babayan & Najmabadi, 2008, p. ix). The secularization and modernization history of Turkey differentiates it from other Muslim (majority) countries in the region in the sense that Islam does not officially regulate the ways of living and doing, including sexual life. However, Islam has been embedded in Turkish culture so much so that even non-observant

Muslims may practice Islamic rules in their daily lives. For this reason, following Sehlikoğlu, I also consider Turkey as an Islamicate culture in which Islamic ways of doing things have been pertained in gender and sexuality. Sexuality has been one of the significant fields that Islam shapes and regulates in Turkey. In this regard, Özçetin (2024) argues that secularist and Islamist discourses operate together when it comes to regulating women's bodies and sexualities.

Further, Sehlikoğlu locates gender and sexual relations within *mahremiyet,* "an institution of intimacy" (Şehlikoğlu, 2016, p. 144), denoting the private and domestic sphere as well as the sacred one that is to be preserved from outsiders and strangers. According to Şehlikoğlu, the culture of *mahremiyet*, which is open to change and rechange, shapes sexual relations within Muslim communities. The culture of *mahremiyet* manifests itself in different levels and layers of social relations. Fore and most, it functions as a "boundary-making mechanism" (Şehlikoğlu, 2015) which separates *mahrem* from *namahrem,* non-mahrem. Göle describes *mahrem* as an "interior, sacred, gendered space, forbidden to exterior and stranger to masculine gaze, which is both spatial and corporeal" (2015, p. 47). Accordingly, a house, a bedroom, a coupling, and a woman's body, or body parts can be mahrem that is to be preserved from strangers, outsiders, the male gaze, and the public.

Veiling of women, following this logic, is one of the ways in which the religiously informed culture of *mahremiyet* regulates sexuality, especially women's sexuality in Turkey, as in many other Muslim-majority societies. Conventionally, from an orientalist Western point of view, the hijab has been argued to oppress and control Muslim women, their bodies, and their sexualities. The headscarf has been one of the heated political debates in Turkey, especially since 1980 when the political Islam and Islamic women's movement gained momentum. Kemalist and secularist groups have associated the Islamic veil with backwardness for years. However, Göle (2015), among many other critical feminist scholars, argues that Muslim

women, through veiling, challenge and refute Western secularist feminists' claim for sexual liberation.

It is through veiling that Muslim women differentiate their bodies and sexualities in public. Their modesty marks the difference of veiled women's sexuality (Göle, 2015, p. 51) and inaccessibility (Şehlikoğlu, 2016, p. 152). Islamic modesty and the inaccessibility of Muslim women in the culture of *mahremiyet* also configure who can gaze at whom and how (Şehlikoğlu, 2015, 2016). Gazing and looking has a long history dating back to the *harem* in Ottoman palaces. [28] As indicated earlier, women's bodies are understood to be *mahrem*, private, sacred, to be preserved from the male gaze. Veiling Muslim women identify their bodies and sexualities as inaccessible to the male gaze (Şehlikoğlu, 2015, 2016). A male gaze is also well aware of the fact that he should not gaze at women's bodies, especially a veiled Muslim woman's body.

3.3.2. Islamic Regulation of Hetero-Sex(t)ual Affairs

> The understanding of sexuality would begin therefore not with the internal demands felt by the individual and by the community. It would start from the will of God as revealed in the Sacred Book. (Bouhdiba, 2008, p. 5)

Bouhdiba, a Tunisian sociologist and Islamologist, extensively scrutinizes the ways in which Islam sets rules for the approved sex life in Islam. As he writes, Islam does not take the sexual desires experienced by individuals as its ground point. Instead, people's claims about Allah's wishes are the origin of Islamic rules regulating sexual behaviors among Muslim communities. However, as Boudhiba argues, this does not mean that Islam does not recognize the worldly pleasure in sex; on the contrary, Islam gives a specific value to sex. For instance, Hoel (2015) in her ethnographic research found that her Muslim women respondents see a close relationship

[28] Harem and Mahrem are coming from the same etymological root. https://www.etimolojiturkce.com/kelime/mahrem

between their sexual pleasure and their belief in Allah, and, in fact, consider sex as a form of worship. Nevertheless, Islam sets strict boundaries regarding where, with whom, and how of sex. The desirable, permittable, approved, legitimate, and, therefore, good sex has been widely discussed in the Quran, the holy book of Muslims. It explains in detail what legitimate and illegitimate sex is. Sex between married heterosexual couples – wife and husband – is the only legitimate sex in Islam[29]. Any sexual conduct beyond a marital bond is strictly forbidden by Allah and is called *zina.*

Both qualitative and quantitative studies on the sexual practices of unmarried people show a very similar pattern in terms of religiosity, masturbation, pornography, and pre-marital sex among unmarried young individuals in Turkey (Ergun, 2007; Erkmen et al., 1990; Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011; Scalco, 2016; Yasan et al., 2008). Having reviewed both national and international Islamic resources, I think that there is no clear-cut consensus on whether masturbation is a sinful act in Islam or not. Instead, it stands as a debatable subject on which there are various points of Islamic interpretation. Nevertheless, national resources, such as Diyanet, the highest religious official institution in Turkey, categorizes masturbation among illicit sexual behaviors by interpreting several Islamic verses. Understanding the Islamic view of masturbation is vital in terms of gaining an insight into pious individuals' sexting practices, as sexting generally includes masturbation. A digital Islamic Encyclopedia, edited and published by Diyanet, which also considers masturbation as a sinful act and *haram* (forbidden by Allah), advises Muslims to avoid masturbation (Öğüt, 2021). To prevent masturbation, Islam recommends Muslims to socialize and to pray (Hoseini, 2017; Öğüt, 2021). A minimal number of studies conducted with university students in Turkey show that since masturbation is a religiously forbidden sexual act

[29] Note that, according to Islamic rules, men can have more than one wife, but women can have only one husband. Because Turkey is a secular state, not rules by Sharia law, having more than one spouse is illegal in Turkey. However, there are those men who have more than one wife through the conduct of Islamic wedding, but not official wedding.

in Islam, many pious Muslim believers attach negative meanings and attitudes to masturbation (Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011; Yasan et al., 2008). Notably, some pious Muslim believers were reported to have guilt after masturbating due to their religious values (Yasan et al., 2008, p. 177).[30] Accordingly, masturbation during sexting is one of the ways sexters conduct a sinful act and become a sinful subject.

Pornography, one of the sexual taboos in Turkey (Tzankova, 2015), is also among the unpermitted sexual behaviors in Islam. Unlike masturbation, there is no direct interpretation of Quranic verses for the prohibition of pornography in Islam. There are multiple forms of *zina,* such as gazing or looking, expression or speaking, and thinking or imagining, and a Muslim is required to stay away from all forms of *zina* (Esen, 2013). Pornography is considered among the zina of eyes, gazing, looking, and for this reason, it is forbidden for Muslims.[31] Pornography is understood to resemble sexting in terms of gazing, thinking, and imagining. I have a memory from my childhood concerning pornography and Muslimness. One of our neighbors was a radical Islamist. The woman was wearing a black Burqa, and she was not greeting any men outside of her family. She did not even have eye contact with men. One day, one of their sons was accused of watching porn, and it turned out to be a big issue in the neighborhood. Some people in the neighborhood said, as I recall, it was a huge sin for him to do such a thing, while some others said it was a sinful act to wrongfully accuse a Muslim boy as he would not commit such a sin. The mother defended his son by arguing that his son was a good, faithful Muslim, so he would not commit such a sinful act. He may or may not have watched porn, but the reactions showed that watching porn is not acceptable in Muslim circles. Accordingly, gazing, looking, and imagining a sexual scenario is not tolerable in Islam. In fact, it is considered a

[30] Some of my interlocutors also stated that they used to regret and feel guilt after masturbating as it is forbidden in Islam.

[31] https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/porno-yayinlari-izlemek-gunah-mi-kesinlikle-izlenmemesi-mi-gerekir-0

sinful act. This resonates that sexting is also not an acceptable practice among Muslims. Notably, AKP banned and criminalized access to pornographic sites on the Internet in 2008. Tzankova explains the AKP's ban on and criminalization of access to pornographic sites on the Internet as the "Islamization of sexual conduct" in Turkey (2015, p. 218).

Pre-marital sexual relationships, *zina,* could be the most regulated and monitored sexual conduct by Islam. Islamic discussions also find a place in the Diyanet's website, and the Encyclopedia edited and published by the Diyanet. Through citing and interpreting several verses from the Quran, Diyanet states that *zina* is among the major sins and that Muslims should stay away from it; otherwise, they would be punished in this world and the afterworld.[32] Diyanet also explains how the Islamic regulation of *zina* maintains the worldly order. Abstaining from *zina,* as Diyanet puts it, ensures the social order, linkage, inheritance, continuation of life, and prevention of several diseases (Esen, 2013).[33] Accordingly, the Islamic regulation of sexual conduct allows only heterosexual relationships between wife and husband.

In tandem with this religious information, the findings of a limited number of studies on the subject are not challenging. Studies have shown that religious individuals attach negative meaning to pre-marital sex and are less likely to get involved in pre-marital sex (Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011; Sakallı et al., 2012; Yasan et al., 2008). This topic among Muslim youth has not been qualitatively explored. Further, although the studies suggest that the value given to virginity is decreasing among upwardly mobile, educated urbanite youth, how much and what kind of value is attached to virginity among Muslim youth is unknown in Turkey.

[32] https://kurul.diyanet.gov.tr/Duyuru-Detay/Duyurular/680/islam-da-zina-ve-butun-cesitleriyle-escinsel-iliski-haramdir

[33] https://kurul.diyanet.gov.tr/Duyuru-Detay/Duyurular/680/islam-da-zina-ve-butun-cesitleriyle-escinsel-iliski-haramdir

3.3.3. The Dynamics of Women's Sexuality in Turkey

Women's sexuality in Turkey is surrounded by physical and moral codes of *namus* (honor) and virginity, which vary across and within classes, ethnic and religious communities, cities, rural areas, west and east to a great extent. *Namus* is exclusively tied to the issue of sexuality, particularly women's sexuality (Dilmaç, 2016; Kogacioglu, 2004; Sirman, 2014). *Namus* is a sexual honor, normatively speaking, that women ought to have through carefully abstaining from any sexual transgression. Depending on the region and family, walking with a man alone through a street, going to a cinema, holding hands, and kissing on the lips could even be considered sexual misconduct, putting a side to having pre-marital sex. Many women, especially young unmarried women, who transgressed and/or who were suspected by their families of transgressing the codes of sexual norms were killed in the name of cleaning the honor of the family since a women's *namus* is closely linked to her family's honor. Known as "honor crime," which is "defined as the killing of a woman by her relatives for her violation of a sexual code in the name of restoring family honor" (Abu-Lughod, 2011, p. 17), is not peculiar to any region, religious or ethnic community in Turkey or the world, even though in Turkey "honor crimes" are politically represented as the practice of Kurdish people in Eastern Turkey (Kogacioglu, 2004). Femicides in the name of "honor crimes" do not take place in the media coverage as much as they used to in the 90s and 2000s; however, women are still battered or killed by their male relatives such as fathers, husbands, and brothers, for their (suspected) sexual misconduct.

3.3.4. Women's and Feminist Agency/Resistance

As indicated earlier, feminist women in Turkey raised their voices concerning the issue of sexual violence, sexual assault, and forced virginity tests in Turkey starting in the 80s (Diner & Toktaş, 2010). However, as Altınay argues, women's sexual desires had not been among the main concerns of feminist women in Turkey in the first 20 years of the movement (Altınay,

2009). Although there was a column in *Pazartesi*[34] titled *Ayıp Köşe (Shame Column),* which was dedicated to women's sexual fantasies and genuine sexual discussions (Koçali, 2021), these issues were not voiced on street campaigns. Small women's groups were discussing the issue of virginity and trying to make this issue one of the main concerns of the women's movement in İstanbul; however, these groups were resolved in two years, and the issue could not become a primary concern until the 2000s (Altınay, 2021). In fact, a feminist writer, Gülnur Savran (1998), critically discussed sexual liberation in one of the issues of *Pazartesi* (Monday), published in 1998, arguing that sexual liberation would do more harm than good to women in Turkey as it would increase male domination in the context of Turkey. She further argued that sexual liberation for women in Turkey was not possible before the elimination of patriarchal inequality in domestic labor, workplaces, and other aspects of life (Savran, 1998).

Feminist women started to discuss the issue of sexuality in a more comprehensive way that would also include sexual orientation and non-normative sexual behaviors in the 2000s. During these years, notions such as chastity and purity were also criticized. Women's claim for their bodies and sexualities revealed itself in increasing demand for surgically reconstructed hymens. Cindoğlu (2003) argues that the increasing demand for artificial virginities implies that many women challenge the traditional and cultural sexual pressure put upon their shoulders while also negotiating with these norms. On the one hand, these medical surgeries help women deal with virginity norms as women can use this technology as a strategy against sexual norms. On the other hand, they reinforce the value attached to virginity by replacing the hymen (Cindoğlu, 2003). Studies conducted more than a decade after Cindoğlu's research show that women still use and count on surgically reconstructed hymens to secure their sexual selves and

[34] Pazartesi is a monthly feminist journal, especially published for women in Turkey between 1995 and 2005.

to present themselves as marriageable, pure, chaste women to their prospective husbands while also exploring their sexualities (Scalco, 2016).

Women's demand for their bodies and sexualities has brought a change in the value and meaning given to virginity and pre-marital sex exclusively among secular urbanite-educated unmarried young women in the 2000s (Ellialtı, 2008; Özyeğin, 2009). As against the prevailing traditional virginity norms regulating and restricting unmarried women's sexual behaviors, many secular, educated, young, unmarried women living in metropolitan cities prefer to be involved in pre-marital sex to fulfill their sexual desires. However, Özyeğin (2009) argues that this transformation in sexual behavior is highly diversified. She uses the concept of virginal facades to explain how some women consciously prefer to remain virgin and keep their hymen intact while engaging in pre-marital sex with their partners in order to deal with the traditional norms and familial expectations regarding their sexualities (Özyeğin, 2009, 2015). These women embrace sex as long as it is practiced within a steady, long-term romantic relationship, and this form of sexual relationship, in their understanding, does not damage the sexual purity of women (Ellialtı, 2008; Özyeğin, 2009).

As indicated above, this change is associated with a particular group of women who are highly educated, urbanite, secular emerging adults with modern values. However, diverse qualitative studies conducted with university students in different small cities in Anatolia indicate that the change mentioned above cannot be generalized to Turkey in any terms (Ergun, 2007; Erkmen et al., 1990; Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011; Yasan et al., 2008). These studies have found that women students are very restrictive regarding the issue of virginity and pre-marital sex. Further, ethnographic research conducted in a Kurdish village in the Southeastern part of Turkey completely contradicts the changes mentioned above occurring in the big cities (Burak, 2012). For the women living in this village, uttering terms such as sex and sexual is against the code of sexual modesty. The women in this village have to remain virgins until they get married,

and the sheet stained with blood on the wedding night is presented to the groom's family as proof of her virginity (Burak, 2012, p. 50).

However, it was only in the 2010s that feminist women developed more radical and organized views and campaigns regarding the issue of sexuality. For instance, they questioned the normative uniqueness of monogamous heterosexual relationships and compulsory heterosexual marriage.[35] Women's sexual desire and pleasure, orgasm, sex education, sexual consent, and safe sex have been on the political agenda of feminist women since the 2010s. Many feminist women started to carry banners indicating women's sexual rights on March 8 protests in Istanbul and Ankara, and they started to utter slogans. Nevertheless, their voices on these matters are not as strong as it is on issues of sexual violence and abortion (Scalco, 2016). In fact, Scalco has observed that feminist women's organizations were silent about unmarried women's right to sex and reproductive health while they were conducting campaigns against the ban on abortion in 2012 in Turkey (Scalco, 2016).

The dynamics of women's sexuality in Turkey are not stable but changing across class, west, east, rural, urban, education level, and religious affiliations. Despite the change among upwardly mobile young adults, the norms of *namus* and virginity still stand as an obstacle before many women to fulfill their sexual desires without feeling any regret, guilt, or fear before getting married.

3.4. Conclusion

Turkey had gone through a rapid and top-down secularization, modernization, and westernization process during its foundation years in the 1920s. The Kemalist elites ruled the country with the notions of *laiklik,* modernism, and Western way of life; however, these were

[35] https://www.sosyalistfeministkolektif.org/kampanyalar/sfk-kampanyalari/aile-disinda-hayat-var/30-31-agustos-2012-sfk-kamp-kampanya-guendemi/

not expanded to the whole country. The east and rural parts of the country remained "underdeveloped", and traditional. The socio-cultural, political, and economic gap between East and West and rural and urban areas reflected on the issue of gender and sexuality dynamics as well. Women living in different parts of Turkey have different gendered and sexual experiences. The impacts of the uneven modernization and westernization process are still permanent in Turkey. Cities, especially metropolitan cities, have been more progressive and liberal in non-normative gender and sexuality relationships. In this respect, the development and cluster of feminist organizations and universities in those cities have also been effective.

However, with the rise of AKP, Turkey has been transforming and becoming a religiously conservative and authoritarian country, especially since 2011. Islam, along with neoliberalism, has been a major rationale behind the AKP and the Erdoğan Regime. Göle argues that this change is not a replacement of secularism with Islamism; instead, it is a "recomposition" of these two forces (2015, p. 62). They often use, instrumentalize, and tokenize women's sexuality to emphasize and restructure the "family, society and state relations" (Mutluer, 2019, p. 15). The family and society that the AKP and Erdoğan Regime aim to establish are informed by Islamic values and therefore exclude many individuals, especially those who experience their sexual lives as against Islamic norms. Accordingly, the sexual lives and subjectivities of my research participants, especially those of women, do not correspond with the norms that the AKP and Erdoğan Regime have been imposing. For this reason, as some of my research participants expressed, they, from time to time, feel the oppressive power of the Regime and prefer to withdraw their intimate relationships into more private spheres in order to eliminate the risk of facing any disturbing and inconvenient trouble.

Further, many women, especially upwardly mobile, educated urbanite women, prefer to explore their sexual desires before marriage by breaking the sexual norms (Ellialtı, 2008; Özyeğin, 2015). These women use the advantage of living in urban sites, which provide a more

progressive environment and freedom compared to small towns and rural areas (Ellialtı, 2008). The norms of virginity do not impact all women in the same way in Turkey. I have also observed a similar pattern in my research. All of my women research participants, except two, were involved in pre-marital sexual relationships after they moved to Ankara for their university education. Although most of them had romantic relationships before moving to Ankara, they preferred or did not dare to engage in sexual relationships due to the "corporate control" (Kandiyoti, 1987) over women's sexuality and violence against women in the name of *namus* (honor).

Chapter 4: Women's Sexuality and Sex(t)ual Subjectivities In/Through HeteroSexting

In late 2023, a young married woman wearing a traditional headscarf became known for her self-produced online short videos on TikTok in Turkey.[36] She, known as "Laz Kızı" (Laz girl, in English) with her username, is unbuttoning her shirt and displaying her cleavages, including her chest and part of her breasts, in the videos. She stares at the camera with somewhat sexy glances and slightly smiles. Most of the time, she leans on a bed or a couch. Her husband occasionally appears in the videos. It is claimed that she has received a significant amount of money as a gift from the viewers in return for her online spectacle cleavages. Her videos went viral and eventually attracted the attention of the Turkish governmental authorities. The police officers of the Moral Department arrested her on the grounds of obscenity crimes. The Ministry of Family and Social Services made an explanation stating that the content of the videos threatens the well-being of children and women in Turkey. Their explanation further indicates that the videos contain images that humiliate, degrade, and offend women and their *namus* (honor), as well as their respectability.[37]

Apparent in this instant is the fact that online sexual self-representation of women disrupts the general order of Turkish society, at least in the understanding of AKP authorities, as they claimed that this woman's self-produced sexual videos "threaten" the well-being of children and women, and they humiliate *namus* (honor) of women in Turkey. As discussed in Chapter 3 in detail, women have been stripped off their sexual selves in Turkey, and political Islam has worsened it in the last decade. AKP and Erdoğan Regime have produced several policies and discourses that target women, their sexualities, and bodies and that aim to locate women in the

[36]https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/tiktok-yayinlari-gundem-olan-laz-kizi-mecbur-kaldim-haber-1649676

[37] https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/tiktokta-yayin-yapan-laz-kizi-gozaltina-alindi-haber-1649350

private sphere. The criminalization of this woman on the grounds of the production and dissemination of sexual self-videos has made me ask why it is so troubling for a group of people, especially Turkish state authorities, to see women appearing as sexual beings on online platforms. Suppose women are to be arrested for sexually displaying their cleavages on social media. What does it socio-culturally and politically mean for Turkish women to practice sexting, exchange sexually explicit messages, and sexual self-images? How would and could they sex(t)ually position themselves while practicing sexting? What does women's involvement in the practice of sexting tell us about their sex(t)ual selves and agencies that are informed and reconfigured in the context of Turkey and as against the political authorities who criminalize women's self-produced sexual videos on the grounds of obscenity law? These are the questions that I aim to discuss throughout this chapter.

I am not the first person to question women's involvement and utilization of online platforms for sexual purposes. On the contrary, the utilization of information and communication technologies by women for sexual purposes, specifically sexting, has sparked a contentious discussion among feminist scholars and researchers regarding the potential reproduction of women's sexual objectification (Jewell & Brown, 2013; Ringrose et al., 2012; Speno & Aubrey, 2019) and sexual empowerment and sexual liberation (Ferguson, 2011; García-Gómez, 2017). In my understanding, this debate echoes feminist sex wars in which two feminist stands regarding sexuality clash (Comella, 2015).

In sex wars, similar to sexting, there were two opposing groups of feminists. One group aimed to prioritize and celebrate women's sexual pleasure in consensual (hetero)sexual sex while also recognizing the potential risks involved in it (France, 1984; U. Khan, 2016; Queen, 1998). The other group, known as antipornography feminists, considered certain forms of sexuality, such as heterosexual sex and s/m, as leading to the exploitation and subordination of women (Dworkin, 1985, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989). However, these discussions did not pay

attention to women's sex(t)ual subjectivities: how they sex(t)ually positioned and presented themselves in their sex(t)ual encounters and what kind of decisions they were making.

Similar to sex wars, while a group of feminist researchers embraces sexting, arguing it may contribute to women's sexual empowerment and liberation, another group of feminists considers sexting to be threatening women's and girls' sexualities. Despite the prevailing binary perception of sexting, a substantial body of literature contends that the examination of girls' and women's participation in sexting cannot be simplified into a clear-cut and inflexible binary categorization. (Liong & Cheng, 2019; Rice & Watson, 2016). Some research indicates that women and girls engage in both sexual objectification and subjectification when participating in sexting, as suggested by Rice and Watson (2016). Liong and Cheng argue, based on a quantitative study conducted in Hong Kong, that sexting can have both objectifying and liberating effects on girls and women, depending on the specific context and content of the messages (Liong & Cheng, 2019). In empirical research conducted in the United Kingdom, Garcia-Gomez shows that young women's narratives of their heterosexual sexting practices range from "free women who use men to satisfy their own sexual needs" to women "supporting traditional patriarchal discourses" (2017, p. 396). Accordingly, women's involvement in sexting practices cannot be rendered either liberating or objectifying because these elements do not exclude one another. On the contrary, they cohabit in sexting practices. Hasinoff (2012) conceptualizes sexting as a form of "media production" and argues that those who engage in sexting are *the authors* of their content (italics as my emphasis). I find her theoretical framework to be valuable for enhancing critical thinking because it aligns the concept of sexters as the authors of sexting content, which is a sex(t)ual scenario, with the notion of sex(t)ual agency.

I am particularly interested in comprehending and examining the agencies of these women, which are manifested in the choices they make concerning their sexualities and bodies. I ask how and to what extent my women interlocutors pursue their sexual desires and perform

sex(t)ual subjectivities despite the socio-culturally and politically endorsed norms that disapprove of any pre-marital sexual practices, especially those of women, which is very likely to entail the risk of being stigmatized and becoming socially marginalized in the society. Although the value given to virginity is decreasing among educated urbanite, upwardly mobile young adults, pre-marital sexuality still continues to be a troubling issue that young adults, especially young unmarried women, are cautious about because of the cultural and familial expectations and politically reinforced norms in Turkey (Özyeğin, 2015) Accordingly, in this chapter, I aim to discuss my women interlocutors' sex(t)ual feminine subjectivities vis-a-vis the offline norms regulating sexuality, particularly unmarried women's sexuality and subjectivity in AKP's Turkey. By doing so, I aim to show their culturally specific sex(t)ual agencies revealed through their choices in and decisions about how they sex(t)ually present themselves in sexting, what kind of language they use, what kind of language they allow their sexting partners to use, what kind of self-images they share with their sexting partners and how they feel about it.

The data I am using in this chapter distinguish it from the other chapters of my dissertation. In this chapter, I present the stories of my women research participants, unlike the other chapters, where I also present the voices of my men interlocutors. The women I am referring to in this chapter were between 19 and 30 years old, residing in urban settlements (Ankara), pursuing undergraduate or graduate university education, and some of them were employed in the labor market. Their familial upbringings, religious affiliations, and socio-economic backgrounds are diverse in a way that sometimes makes them seem to come from opposite cultural and political poles within the Turkish political atmosphere.[38] As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, these differences among my women interlocutors lead them to have different paths of sexual life and sexting experiences. Further, regardless of differences

[38] I provide much detailed information about my informants in the methodology chapter.

in their socio-economic backgrounds, some of my women interlocutors identified themselves as feminists promoting the sexual liberation of women against the socio-culturally and politically accepted form of women's sexuality in Turkey. In contrast, few others did not associate themselves with feminism.

This chapter is also distinguished from other analytical chapters of the dissertation in terms of its argument and the contributions it makes. In analyzing and discussing the sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies of the women I study, this chapter contributes, complements, and complicates the overarching aim of my dissertation, which is to question how and to what extent offline norms regulating sexual norms and sexting practices re/shape and are re/shaped by each other. As I will show throughout the chapter, offline norms and structural factors have a significant impact on the ways in which my women interlocutors sex(t)ually present themselves in their sexting practices. My preliminary readings of these women's narratives suggested that there are two main ways in which these women position and present themselves in their sexting practices: a) a sexually active and assertive subject who enjoys openly articulating her sexual desires and fantasies through erotic language and b) a subject who has difficulties in expressing her sexual desires and who feels ashamed of and/or dislike speaking of her sexual desires in sexting but keeps doing it. However, as I will show in detail, this binary distinction between two women figures is superficial and not enough to explain the variety and complexity with which my women research participants sext. Later, through a more detailed reading of my data, I realized that there is multiple, sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory, ways for the women I study to sext and sex(t)ually present themselves and their sex(t)ual selves. In analyzing these women's narratives on how they practice sexting, I intend to understand their sex(t)ual subjectivities and the cultural specificity of their sex(t)ual agencies within an Islamic authoritarian context where women's pre-marital sexual behaviors are discursively marginalized, if not criminalized. The appearance of these particular sex(t)ual subjectivities

shows that sexual agencies are manifested in diverse ways in a specific socio-cultural and political context.

In a broader sense, anthropological studies inform the basis of my understanding of subjectivity: the ways in which individuals "present themselves to themselves and one another" (Biehl et al., 2007, p. 7). Accordingly, by sex(t)ual subject and/or subjectivity, I do not refer to identity formation through sex of object choice. In other words, I am not interested in discussing whom my informants are sex(t)ually attracted to in their sexting practices or with whom they are sexting. Instead, I am interested in how they present their sexual desires and fantasies through the use of written erotic language and photographs in sexting practices and how they feel about it. Therefore, I focus on the sex(t)ual subjectivities that come into being through such expressions of sexual fantasies, desires, and imagined acts of sex. I am theoretically drawn to feminist scholarship on subjectivity, which rejects dualist and binary separation of mind and body (Grosz, 1994). I also do not consider subjectivity as a biologically given entity; on the contrary, it is open to change through socio-cultural interactions (Mansfield, 2000). Methodologically speaking, as I do not have access to my informants' sexting messages and their contents, my discussion of sex(t)ual subjectivity is based on my informants' narratives of their sexting practices: when and where they are sexting, how they are feeling, what they are sharing, what kind of language they use and so on.[39]

As discussed in Chapter 2, Goffman employs the concept of "performance" to explain how individuals present themselves differently to others in various settings and act accordingly (1959, p. 13). Butler (1997) further develops and complicates the discussion of the performative aspect of subjectivity in her different works. She argues that subjectivity is performatively

[39] While designing my field research I had planned to anonymously collect my informants' sexting scripts. At the end of each interview, I asked them whether they could share me some of their sexting messages by erasing the identificatory information. However, not surprisingly, very few of them agreed and sent me the screenshots of their sexting messages. As they are not qualitatively and quantitatively sufficient, I decided to exclude them from my data.

constituted through the reiteration of certain acts imposed by broader structural norms. Accordingly, I consider subjectivity to be the various ways in which individuals present themselves to others. Accordingly, I adopt the conceptualization of subjectivity as

> the experience of the lived multiplicity of positionings. It is historically contingent and is produced through the plays of power/knowledge and is sometimes held together by desire (Blackman et al., 2008, p. 6).

Such theorization of subjectivity reveals multiplicity and unstable features of subjectivity. I will argue throughout this chapter that the women I study sex(t)ually present themselves in different, unstable, and fluid positions in a broader spectrum that contains multiple and changing sex(t)ual subjectivities. I also agree that the subjectivity of the women I study "contains a degree of resilient alterity," which is reshaped by dominant structural norms (Smith, 2016). In other words, their actions, decisions, and feelings are not consistent in themselves but change over time and across space. The reason for this can be explained through Sherine Hafez's argument that "subject making should be considered as deeply embedded in wider, complex and imbricated social and historical process" (2011, p. 5). The dominant structural norms, ongoing events, and political discourses influence how they position themselves and how they feel about engaging in sexting. To enunciate, their sex(t)ual subjectivities are linked to how they internalize or negotiate with the cultural norms and AKP policies regarding gender roles, sexuality, and modesty and how these norms and policies shape their self-presentation in sexting. Understanding their diverse subjectivities is crucial in discussing their sex(t)ual agencies since their sex(t)ual agencies are revealed through the ways in which they make choices and preferences regarding whether or not to practice sexting and how to sex(t)ually present themselves in sexting.

Western-based feminist accounts tend to consider agency as a form of or capacity for resistance to subordinating forces. In this regard, Butler's (1999) analysis of the drag queen has

been an example of such agency, as resistance to norms, because a drag queen politically challenges heteronormative gender norms by reiterating them. However, Mahmood (2005) criticizes Butler's account of agency discussion and offers insight from a non-Western context. Mahmood's critical theorization of agency greatly influences my comprehension of women's sex(t)ual agencies. In her words,

> I want to suggest that we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create (Mahmood, 2009, p. 15).

Following Mahmood's insightful theorization, I discuss women's (sex(t)ual) agency not in terms of how they develop resistance to gendered sexual power relations in the context of Turkey. Instead, as I will be elaborating further later in this chapter, I am theoretically and politically interested in how the women I study sex(t)ually position and represent themselves in their sex(t)ual encounters in the sociocultural and political context of Turkey which is characterized by increasing Islamic authoritarianism and anti-gender politics under the rule of AKP and Erdoğan Regime. As I have shown in Chapter 3, AKP and the Erdoğan Regime have been operating diverse strategies and spreading numerous discourses to surround women and their sexualities. Nevertheless, some women dare to open up spaces for themselves to pursue their sexual desires. While doing so, they, from time to time, purposefully or not, seem to comply with the dominating gender and sexuality norms. Sexting, as a chat-based online sexual activity, stands as one of many spaces that women (also men) in Turkey have opened up for themselves in living and exploring their sexual desires. By analyzing the ways in which the women I study position themselves in their heterosexual sexting practices, I wish to reveal how agency can be exercised in different socio-cultural and political contexts and, therefore, how different contexts may reconfigure the agency of women. By examining the linkages between sex(t)ual subjectivity and sex(t)ual agency, I aim to develop a more nuanced understanding of

how these women navigate and assert their sex(t)ual desires in relation to societal norms and expectations through which they have been socialized.

4.1. "Sometimes The Society Inside You Talks": Contextualizing the sex(t)ual subjectivities of the women

> Of course, it is a terrifying situation. For instance, usually, I would and could be able to kiss my partner, but I am wary of doing it outside the campus. To tell the truth, because there might be trouble, or something might happen. (Interview with Yasemin, 2021)

> I think I'm scared too. We have seen that such weird things have remained unpunished. I don't know. Someone can attack my partner or me with a machete just because we are kissing and hugging. I'm scared because I think those people are encouraged to do so. Therefore, I might be limiting this [kissing and hugging] outside. (Interview with Gözde, 2021)

In our interview, Yasemin and Gözde expressed their opinions on the tragic events that occurred in Ankara. For instance, a heterosexual couple who were kissing in a Metro station in May 2013 were verbally assaulted because they were kissing in public; therefore, in the understanding of some people, they transgressed the codes of moral values of Turkish society. Another incident took place during Ramadan (an Islamic fasting period). A man in public physically attacked a young woman wearing a miniskirt in June 2017. Yasemin and Gözde come from different socio-economic, cultural, and familial backgrounds. Nevertheless, despite these disparities, they both align themselves in opposition to the intimate political strategies employed by AKP and share comparable sentiments regarding the assaults on couples in public. Yasemin, a woman who identifies herself as a feminist and atheist, was born and reared in a strongly conservative religious family and a socially conservative environment in a small town in Anatolia, where even romantic relations, excluding sexual intimate interactions, were not approved. There was a commonly accepted and unquestioned understanding that women should

not flirt or have romantic relationships in her social environment. Further, while mentioning her family, Yasemin stated, *"My family is an example of pure patriarchal feudalism."* Nevertheless, she said she had become liberated from these norms when she moved to Ankara for her university education, especially when she met feminism. As she explained, there was a feminist student club at her university campus, which was organized by women students who had different feminist views. They had regular meetings and demos. Yasemin began attending their meetings, where they discussed various issues affecting women on campus and in Turkey. Gradually, Yasemin has begun to identify herself as a socialist feminist woman. Yasemin was not a talkative person. I had the impression that she was not happy discussing her family and pre-university years.

On the other hand, Gözde, a graduate student with a part-time home-office job as a white collar, has very open-minded atheist and educated parents who have been open to discussing Gözde's romantic and sexual relations. Gözde explained how her parents were open to pre-marital sexuality by telling me about a memory in which her mother gave her a brief safe sex education when Gözde was in high school.[40] She told her memory through these words:

> I was sixteen years old, and I was going to go to a festival. My mother asked me to sit with her, and she started to talk. She gave me a sex education. I listened to her. It was a bit embarrassing. (Interview with Gözde, 2021)

For this reason, Gözde has never needed to hide her intimate life from her parents or other people because, as she told me, *"I've never had such concerns like what if they, I don't know who, my parents, relatives and so on hear or learn that I have sexual life,"* which she believes has made her strong enough to stand against normative sexuality and the intimacy norms imposed by AKP.

[40] This significantly differentiates Gözde from my other women interlocutors because, unlike Gözde's parents, other women's (also men's) parents are not open to discussing sex-related topics and intimate relations, and even in some cases, romantic relations.

I started with quotes from two feminist women who come from very different socio-economic cultures to indicate that AKP's intimacy politics directly or indirectly impact how my women research participants feel or act, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds and familial upbringing. As the quotes I shared above demonstrate, Yasemin and Gözde are not scared of AKP and the Erdoğan Regime's intimacy politics and being a target of AKP. Instead, they are scared of the societal consequences of AKP's intimacy politics, which Erdoğan and other party members expressed on several occasions. By societal consequences, I mean the increasing attempts to intervene in individuals' behaviors, such as kissing and hugging in public places. In other words, neither Yasemin nor Gözde is afraid of being AKP's target, but they are scared of being physically attacked by people who are encouraged to do so. As also discussed in Chapter 3, many conservative people were motivated by these discourses and considered themselves to have the right to "violently" intervene, in fact, assault those individuals who did not comply with the Islamic societal norms that AKP and Erdoğan Regime wish to construct. As a result of this fear of being attacked, they consciously or not limit their intimate interactions with their partners in public.

Most of my women interlocutors, if not all, believe that the AKP and Erdoğan Regime escalated the oppression of women's sexuality, particularly their pre-marital sexual practices, especially since 2011. In their understanding, AKP regulates women's sexual behaviors and tries to reduce sexual practices to the "legitimate" domain of sex, between husband and wife in the bedroom, through several discourses and policies, primarily through Islamic discourses. For instance, as shown and discussed in Chapter 3, the arbitrary attempt to ban mix-gender off-campus housing of university students in 2013 originated from AKP and Erdoğan's Islamic concerns about the cohabitation of unmarried women and men. Erdoğan declared that as a conservative party, they are responsible for protecting societal values and the country's youth. They were deeply disturbed by the mix-gender co-habitation of university students because, in

their understanding, the co-presence of women and men in-door places incites sexuality (Özkazanç, 2018). These discourses and policies aim to align women and their public appearances, as well as their private behavior, with the image of a modest and faithful Muslim woman. One of the women I interviewed, Yasemin, was more critical of this issue. She argued that AKP is not that much different from the previous governments and the nationalist and secularist governmental ideologies of the founder of the Turkish Republic in terms of the question of women and sexuality. The founders of the Republic eliminated Islam from educational, juridical, and governmental spheres, which AKP has reintegrated over its rule. She thinks that women had never been sexually liberated or free from these norms but had always been located within the domain of heterosexual family in the history of Turkey, even before the AKP period. Many critical feminist scholars in Turkey agree that from the very early years of the Republic, women were stripped of their sexuality and equated with motherhood by the nationalist secularist Kemalist elites, the founders of the Republic (Müftüler-Bac, 1999; Sancar, 2012; White, 2003). According to Mutluer, in the discourses of Kemalist, secularist, and nationalist founders of the Turkish Republic, women were publicly asexual as they were asked to leave their sexuality behind in the private sphere, while in AKP and Erdoğan's discourses, there is a strong emphasis on women's sexualities which is located in private spheres (Mutluer, 2019, p. 15).

The main characteristics of this woman figure have been revealed through AKP and Erdoğan Regime's discourses on different occasions, as I extensively elaborated in Chapter 3. For instance, this modest woman should remain a virgin and stay away from any sexual affairs until she gets married. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, Erdoğan has tried to revive the value attached to women's virginity by publicly verbalizing the distinction between *kadın* (woman) and *kız* (girl) in one of the party mass meetings in 2011 where he questioned a woman protestor's virginity by saying *"this woman, I don't know whether a woman or a girl" (O kadın,*

kız mıdır, kadın mıdır bilmem) in order to cast aspersion on and disworth her in front of society.[41] The woman in question was a protester in a town in the Black Sea region attending the protest for the murder of a leftist teacher by a police officer during a protest against the AKP. As I discuss in Chapter 6, despite its grammatically ungendered feature, the Turkish language contains very gendered phrases that link gender and sexuality. The distinction between *kadın* (woman) and *kız* (girl) is not a differentiation based on their age but on their sexuality. *Kız* (girl) becomes *kadın* (woman) through "losing" her virginity when she gets married. Only *kadın* (woman) but not *kız* (girl) is a sexual being, no matter how old she is. Accordingly, through questioning whether the woman he was talking about was *kadın* (woman) or *kız* (girl), Erdoğan explicitly referred to her virginity and discursively attacked her body and sexuality.

Furthermore, as I have discussed in detail in Chapter 3, on numerous occasions, several AKP members, including ministers and parliamentarians, have intervened in how women appear in the public sphere. Bülent Arınç, a prominent figure in the AKP, argued in a 2014 speech to the media that women should not laugh loudly (kahkaha atmak in Turkish) in public.[42] They have gone further and intervened in women's clothing as well. For instance, Hüseyin Çelik, the Vice Chairman of AKP back in 2013, commented on a speaker's dress on a competition program on a TV channel by saying that this way of clothing is not acceptable.[43] Afterward, several women were attacked by conservative men in different public spheres due to their "inappropriate" clothing. AKP and Erdoğan Regime tried to ban and criminalize mix-gender off-campus housing for university students in 2013.[44] As I have discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, Erdoğan and Party members do not recognize gender equality. On the contrary,

[41] https://www.cnnturk.com/yazarlar/basbakan-o-kadin-kiz-midir-kadin-midir
[42] https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/bulent-arinc-kadin-herkesin-icinde-kahkaha-atmayacak k
[43] https://t24.com.tr/haber/huseyin-celikin-elestirdigi-dekolteli-sunucu-isten-cikarildi,241453
[44] https://bianet.org/haber/erdogan-o-evlerde-karmakarisik-seyler-olabiliyor-151065

by citing the Quran, they argue that women and men complement each other. Erdoğan constantly recites the word *fitrat,* which can be translated to English as natural creation (by Allah), while talking about how women should behave and live a good life. In the understanding of AKP and Erdoğan Regime, due to their *fitrat,* women are and should be fragile, naïve, self-sacrificing mothers and wives, and dependent on either their father or husband. Motherhood and wifely duties lay at the heart of their discourses. In a meeting with a pro-government civil organization of women, Erdoğan stated that

> A woman who abstains from becoming a mother because of her career actually denies her womanhood. A woman who rejects motherhood and gives up doing housework is missing a half, no matter how successful she is in her job (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 2016)[45]

During the interviews, I asked my interlocutors whether and to what extent they feel the impacts of AKP's intimacy politics in their lives, including their sex(t)ual practices, to understand their sex(t)ual subjectivities in relation to AKP's politics. The immediate response I heard was a precise "no!" most of the time. I think a prompt "no" answer was a reflection of how most of my women (also men) interlocutors wish to position themselves in relation to AKP. They want to place the meaning of their existence and practices outside the political domain of AKP by rejecting the idea of being influenced by its politics. In other words, they imagine themselves as subjects free from the effects of official intimacy politics, as autonomous and free subjects in relation to AKP and Erdoğan Regime; however, as I will show, this is more complicated. For instance, Esra told me that *"of course, they intervene in individuals' lifestyles, but it does not have any impact on my life or how I live."* Most of the women I study do not only imagine themselves free from AKP's conservative intimacy politics, but they also present themselves to me as free subjects. This indicates that they wish to have strong, independent,

[45] https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/06/160605_erdogan_kadin

fearless (sexual) feminine subjectivities despite the conservatisation of society at the hands of the AKP and the Erdoğan Regime.

However, when I posed the question from a different angle by asking how they think AKP and the Erdoğan Regime might intervene in other people's lifestyles, they argued that AKP definitely intervenes in individual lifestyles and does not want to leave a space for alternative nonnormative lifestyles. After listening to them reflecting on their ideas on how AKP intervenes in personal lifestyles, I asked them to think about how they might have been affected by these politics and discourses. This time, their answers were away from a precise "no." Esra initially stated that these politics have never been influential in her life, but she agreed that AKP implements interventionist policies, and they have an impact on many people's lives. Nevertheless, while talking about Erdoğan's attempt to ban and criminalize mix-gender off-campus housing for university students, Esra said that

> Well, it created restlessness for me, but it didn't prevent me from sharing a flat with my partner. During that period, there were many times he [her boyfriend at that time] stayed overnight, or I slept in his place for several days, and there were times we lived together. It seems like I am more comfortable when I sleep in his place, but I feel uneasy when he visits me. As I said, this uneasiness never prevented him from staying overnight in my place, but… sometimes the society inside you talks, and it talks back to me that time. It said, "what if the neighbor sees him visiting me, what if s/he tells my parents, "Umm, your daughter is living with her boyfriend here?". So much so that I have always had problems and contradictions with my family, mainly because of my intimate relations. And I thought if my parents learned that I was doing this [living with her boyfriend], but then somehow, I managed to shut this speaking society down. (Interview with Esra, 2019)

As seen in the quote above, AKP's policies and discourses did not impact what Esra was doing and practicing; however, they did affect how she felt about her so-called transgressive lifestyle, in this case living with her boyfriend. Esra was worried about her parents being informed and

its potential consequences. Esra's uneasy feelings regarding her parents' reaction to her sharing a flat with her boyfriend from time to time originate from their gendered and sexist parenting style. Esra grew up feeling a solid disciplinary power observing her sexual behaviors. She was born to an Alewi, highly educated, well-known family in one of the southwestern cities of Turkey.[46] Esra had/has a rough, violent father who wanted Esra to be under his control in every aspect of her life. Her mother was ignorant of her subjection to her father's violence, as she recalls. Esra was allowed to have a boyfriend and male friends, but her father and mother desired to know every detail of her friendships. Although she was allowed to have a boyfriend, Esra's father, as she narrates, always questioned her virginity and told her that *"you will be a whore eventually"* almost every time she returned home after meeting her friends. She understands this *"you will be a whore eventually"* as a way of humiliation that she was subject to through her early teenage years. Accordingly, AKP's attempts to regulate university students' off-campus housing and intimacy politics in general do not directly impact Esra's life. Yet, they cause troubling feelings and thoughts through her parents' reactions. In a Foucauldian sense, by hiding her romantic and sexual relationships - co-housing with her boyfriend - from her parents, Esra acts as a self-regulating subject as well as a subject regulated by others (Foucault, 1995).

Acting and becoming a self-regulating subject as a way of dealing with or as an outcome of AKP's intimacy politics is quite common among my women interlocutors. Although this was not the case in Esra's story, changing one's ways of practicing romantic and sexual life was common among the women I interviewed. It was apparent, especially while discussing how they prefer to interact with their significant others in public spaces, especially considering the

[46] Alewism is an Islamic sect that is very marginalized and have been subject to cleansings because of its secular characteristics It is considered in Turkish society as the most modern and progressive sect. Alewism does not recquire women to wear headscarf. Unlike the other Islamic sects, Alewism is not in favor of sex-segregation. On the contrary, women and men can socialize and pray together. AKP develops a discriminatory politics against Alewi people.

instances where heterosexual couples were attacked, as I mentioned at the beginning of this section.

> Look, when you asked this question, I now realize that my daily practices have actually changed. I am thinking… I would not, and I do not hook up with a guy at bars now, but I used to do that. Also, I do not see people kissing each other at bars or on the streets. It is sad to say, but I don't kiss at bars anymore. These intimate practices, I mean mine too, have also become less and less visible. (Interview with Çağla, 2019)

Apparently, Çağla used to hook up with random men whom she met at bars or to perform physical closeness such as hugging and kissing at bars. Nevertheless, due to the increasing Islamic conservatisation in society, she has unconsciously started to beware of acting in this way because, like many women, she is also occupied with the concern of having troubles. The trouble that Yasemin and Gözde explained well: the potentiality of being physically or discursively attacked by conservative people, as many women have experienced in Turkey after the instances in which Erdoğan and several Party members intervened in women's clothing and behaviors. In my understanding, it is not a surprise to see that people, especially unmarried young women, avoid performing physical closeness with men or being assertive in public because AKP and the Erdoğan Regime have constantly been telling people, especially women, how they should appear in public or what kind of woman they should be. Women are repeatedly reminded how they should and should not appear and be visible in public spheres. Those women who do not comply with the norms that Erdoğan imposes are likely to face the risk of being verbally and physically attacked by AKP and Erdoğan's followers.

Nevertheless, Çağla, like many other women, does not want her life and practices to be re/shaped according to what AKP and its members say or do, mainly because Çağla identifies herself as a feminist woman and ally of the LGBTI+ movement. Her critical positionality rejects being influenced by AKP's politics, as she positions herself against the AKP government.

However, even if she does not want this to happen, her romantic and sexual practices have gradually changed and "*become less and less visible*." The invisibilisation of intimate interactions, such as kissing and hugging, in public spheres also appeared in other women's narratives, such as Yasemin and Gözde, whose stories I shared at the beginning of this section.

In a Foucauldian sense, they unwillingly act as self-regulating subjects and move their intimate interactions and sexual bodies away from the public domain to a more private sphere because the circulation of specific emotions and fear, in this case, does things. As Ahmed argues, "emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of 'towardness' or 'awayness'" (2004b, p. 8). Here, the fear also has reconstituted "the bodily spaces" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 29) and has re-configured what bodies, especially women, can do in the public domain. To enunciate, because of the increasing conservatisation of society, which has made a group of people unrightfully intervene, in fact, attack, a threatening attitude against those whose behavior does not conform with the norms has been circulating in society. The women I study have been surrounded with fear as an outcome of this threatening attitude, and they willingly or not become self-regulating subjects to protect themselves. Accordingly, their gendered sexual subjectivities are constituted within the broader structural power relations that surround them and enable them to act in specific ways.

Further, acting as a self-regulating subject in a way that limits their intimate interactions resonates with Çağla's observation of invisibilation. Keeping one's self from intimate interactions – kissing and hugging – in public spheres, which has been caused by the threatening fear circulating in society, results in the invisibilisation of nonnormative women's sexual subjectivity. Public invisibility of intimate practices such as kissing and hugging, especially those of women, compromises the AKP's imagination of conservative subjects and society based on Islamic values (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011). However, these women do not really conform to the AKP's imagined religiously conservative subjectivity; on the contrary, they

masquerade a 'modest' image to the general public because to "pretend" *(-muş gibi yapmak)* obeying the norms allows them to pass in society without facing any troubles in the Islamic authoritarian context of Turkey (Özkazanç, 2018).

Considering the very religiously conservative political context of Turkey, the women I interviewed agree that the very act of their involvement in sexting practices, as well as their offline sexual practices, do not correspond with the socio-culturally and politically accepted/promoted women's sexual subjectivity and the intimacy politics of the AKP and Erdoğan Regime in Turkey. In their account, the whole society, including health institutions, family, neighbors, some friends, the state, and the Erdoğan Regime expect them to remain virgins and avoid sexual affairs until marriage because, as I have explained, there is a cultural and political pressure on young unmarried women to stay away from sexual affairs until marriage. This pressure also brings along a cultural and political misassumption that young unmarried women do not have sexual desires and lives. This normative expectation and misassumption that women should abstain from sexual relations and physical contact, and sometimes even romantic relations before marriage, well represent the normative sexual subjectivity of women in Turkey. This normative woman figure is characterized by modesty, chastity, and sexual pureness (Altunok, 2016; Ilkkaracan, 2008; Nazik et al., 2021; Özyeğin, 2015; Parla, 2001). Followingly, I will explain how some of my women informants think of and experience their offline sexual life considering the predominant normative gendered sexual expectations and norms in order to provide a contextual basis for my further analysis of sex(t)ual subjectivity.

İnci, a 28-year-old educated young woman, comes from a middle-class urbanite family with nationalist and Islamic values. She graduated from one of the most reputable public universities in Turkey. She is getting her graduate education, and is working as a teacher at a private school. She still lives with her family - parents and a younger brother - in a neighborhood

where her paternal aunt and grandparents also reside. Her parents disapprove of her having romantic relations and courtship, which do not intend to end with a marriage. She does not talk to her parents about her romantic and intimate relations due to their strict understanding that one – especially a woman – ought to marry the person she is dating. For this reason, she also hides her sexual life from her family and most of her close friends because she thinks that in the account of people in general, sex must occur within a heterosexual marriage. Despite all the pressure on her, she seems to be a vivid person, smiling and laughing loudly and performing a sexy femininity while talking. She explains the reasons why she hides her sexual self in this way:

> Some of my friends know; some of my friends don't know that I have a sex life and that I am not a virgin anymore. My parents don't have that much influence on my personal life, but the social pressure… Well… I have only two friends, but no one else I can talk to, ask for advice, or make fun of my or their sexual relations. It is limited to only two people. Of course, I have other close friends, but it is still taboo for them. They think you can have boyfriends and date men but should not have sex with them. So, it's not easy to share it with them, although they are good friends of mine. If I tell them, they will say, "Aaa, how did you do that? How dare you? Why? bla bla" rather than asking how I am and feel. So, I don't tell them anything about my sexual life. I don't know. I guess I'm afraid of being judged. … I feel the same way about hospitals and doctors. Once, I went to a hospital to get an HIV test because I had unprotected sex. While waiting at the hospital, I got nervous because there was an assumption like… Well, when you give them your national identity number, hospital staff or doctors can see all kinds of information on the online system, whether you are married or single. So, there is this understanding that… If you are unmarried, they directly assume you don't have a sexual life. But when you ask for an HIV test, there you go: "You had sex!". However, I didn't see any change in the doctor's face when I asked for an HIV test, but I got too nervous while asking for the test. I thought I must be strong and calm if he judged me because I had thought about what

> the doctor or hospital staff would possibly say. And I was afraid. It's the society we live in, you know. People believe they have all the right to talk about you or judge you about your sexual life. (Interview with İnci, 2019)

İnci thinks that her family and close friends, except two, would judge her for her sexual life - having sex -because, as a young unmarried woman, she is normatively supposed to abstain from sexual affairs until she gets married. The normative socio-cultural and political expectations of women to stay away from sexuality and remain a virgin (Özyeğin, 2015), which AKP and Erdoğan Regime constantly revive, is a source of anxiety for İnci when imagining disclosing her sexual life to most of her close friends and even at hospitals while receiving health services. It is not difficult to sympathize with these women, especially considering the suspicious instances in which state health services sent pregnancy test results to women's fathers and/or husbands.[47] Such troubling feelings are common among most of my women interlocutors. These women believe that they would be subject to normative judgmental comments and treatments because, in their accounts, their sexual practices do not correspond to the normative sexual subjectivity of women, which is imagined as sexually "pure," passive, and chaste (Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011; İlkkaracan, 2000). For instance, Dilara's narrative on the times when she had her first sexual relationship and how she felt and is still feeling about it is a telling case in this regard. Dilara was born and raised in a very religiously conservative city in Turkey. She lived and attended primary and high school there and left the city for her university education. Her parents are not conservative, which Dilara sees as her good fortune in her life. However, they are not open or tolerant of pre-marital sexual relations.

> I had evaluated it so much before having my first sex. It took me so long to make this decision. Firstly, I had to detach myself from there and the judgmental attitudes there. Then, I had to understand my ideas- what I wanted. It took so long for me to do it. I mean, I couldn't detach myself for a

[47] https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/tebrikler-kiziniz-hamile-352408

> very long time. I had fears… I used to think pre-marital sex was wrong, but I didn't know why it was so. … I was afraid of regretting it [having sex], of being used by him. I could do it only when I left this city and moved to Ankara for my university education. Now, I still feel this pressure. I am afraid that my parents will learn it somehow, and I'm also scared of getting flagged. It might sound insane or very extreme, but I am so scared of being excluded and flagged because of this virginity issue. For example, I might have difficulties in job application/recruitment or my daily life if it is known that I'm not a virgin. It is massive baggage for a woman (Interview with Dilara, 2021)

Having lived in that city for many years made her internalize the normative perceptions of women's sexuality and think that *"pre-marital sex was wrong."* However, she did not know the reasons why it was constructed in this way. Although she managed to disassociate herself with such perceptions that predominantly shape women's sexuality in the city she used to live in, Dilara still feels the social and political pressure concerning her sexual practices. It becomes evident when she says, *"I still feel this pressure. I am afraid that my parents will learn it somehow, and also I'm afraid of getting flagged. It might sound insane or very extreme, but I am afraid of being excluded and flagged because of this virginity issue*". Accordingly, her sexual subjectivity is reshaped by dominant structural norms (Smith, 2016) and the uncomfortable feelings produced by not obeying these dominant structural norms. In this regard, I suggest that while making particular decisions, she exercises a culturally specific sex(t)ual agency. To enunciate, instead of resisting these cultural norms that impact her feelings, Dilara accepts the impact of these norms on her life and acts accordingly.

Pursuing one's sexual desires and engaging in sexual relations produce troubling feelings for Dilara and many other women because they know their sexuality is an object of a control mechanism in society. In this sense, Deniz Kandiyoti argues that there is a "corporate control" over women's sexuality, which she explains in this way:

> [T]he large number of different individuals … see themselves as immediately responsible for ensuring women's appropriate sexual conduct. Parents, siblings, near and distant relatives, and even neighbors closely monitor the movements of the postpubescent girl, firmly imprinting the notion that her sexuality is not hers to give or withhold. (1987, p. 325)

According to prevailing sexual norms shaping the common understanding in Turkish society, women and adolescent girls do not have control over their bodies and sexualities. On the contrary, as the quotes from İnci and Dilara demonstrate, women's bodies and sexualities are seen as a terrain under the control of others, such as parents, male siblings, relatives, and neighbors. Consequently, different institutions and individuals come together to monitor and discipline girls' and women's behaviors to keep them away from any sexual "misconduct." I suggest considering "corporate control" (Kandiyoti, 1987) over female sexuality as a form of disciplinary power through which female subjects are "manipulated, shaped and trained" (Foucault, 1995, p. 136). The primary work of disciplinary power, Foucault argues, is to "train" the subjects through "observation" for the purpose of making them docile bodies (1995, p. 70). As they are implicitly or explicitly trained in particular manners to be docile bodies, women learn and are somehow indoctrinated in the sexual norms regulating their bodies. They are silently and implicitly taught not just to stay away from pre-marital sex but also not to please themselves sexually, touch themselves, explore their bodies, and not speak of their sexual desires. However, within these structural factors, women and girls are not passive and obedient subjects. On the contrary, they make their own choices regarding their bodies and sexualities. Their decisions do not always align with the structural norms; on the contrary, they may also challenge these norms, although not necessarily. Mahmood's theorization of agency helps me further deepen and complicate the meaning of women's decisions. As Mahmood (2005) shows in her work on the Egyptian women's mosque movement, women may consciously prefer to be involved in "patriarchal" practices, such as veiling, the meaning of which is different to them

from what it would mean to Western liberal feminist thinking. She argues that in the account of these women, veiling and praying the Quran is not becoming an obedient object; on the contrary, they understand their actions as becoming pious subjects within the socio-culturally and historically specific conditions that enable and subordinate their actions (Mahmood, 2005).

I have given the socio-cultural and political context in which my women interlocutors experience their sexual lives. The women whose stories I am telling in this chapter "dare" to pursue their sexual desires and to be involved in pre-marital sex(t)ual relations despite familial, societal, and political expectations from and pressure on women to stay away from sexuality until they get married and, on some occasions, to abstain from romantic relations. While questioning and discussing the different modalities of agency, Mahmood (2005) also inquires sequence of desire, practice, and action. According to Mahmood, innate desires do not proceed with human actions; on the contrary, performative, repetitive behaviors create human desires (2005, p. 157). Accordingly, the women I study "dare" to challenge the sexual norms not because of their innate sexual desires but because of their repetitive sexual behaviors, which create some feelings and emotions that encourage them to transgress the norms. On the one hand, it might seem that these women resist and challenge the sexual norms surrounding their bodies and sexual practices and, therefore, exercise agency as it is conceptualized in Western-based theories. However, as it will become more evident in the following section, the hesitations, the decision processes, and the feelings behind their nonnormative sexual behaviors are more complex than simple resistance.

4.2. Playing with the Gendered Sexual Roles

Sezen, who is a young feminist woman coming from a highly educated secular family with an Alewi background, has worked and developed a political awareness to liberate her sexual life from the hegemonic heterosexual sexual behaviors that generally position women as passive objects. She prefers to sext with "open-minded" men and has a Premium Tinder account

to meet men living in other countries, especially in Europe. Interestingly, she mentioned (and showed me) an Excel document on which she keeps a list of her sex(t)ual partners with certain information such as nationality, physical appearance, penis size, and imagination skills in sexting. More importantly, how she positions herself in her sex(t)ual practices, which she names *gentle-dom,* also transgresses normative heterosexual feminine subjectivity.

> I have a dominant sexual character. I don't have humiliation degradation kinks by any means. No way. I am disturbed by such things. For instance, he shall not say "you are my whore" to me because he is my whore. Similarly, he can't give me commands; I give the commands. I also don't send photographs or videos. He has to deserve it [photos and videos]. (Interview with Sezen, 2019)

Sezen applies what she has invested in her offline sexual life to her sexting practices and rejects the passive feminine position in sexting. Instead, she takes charge of her sex(t)ual practices, giving no place for her sexting partner to dominate her. Women taking control of hetero-sex(t)ual events is rare and transgressive because men purposefully prefer controlling the sex(t)ual acts to protect their masculinity (S. I. Khan et al., 2008). The transgressive, or nonnormative sex(t)ual subjectivity of Sezen becomes more apparent when she says, *"he is my whore"* which definitely disorders the heteronormative gender roles in sex as it is shaking the ground of men's sexual supremacy and its erotization by heteronormativity. Further, by refusing to send her photographs and videos, she consolidates her active position in sexting. Plus, her principles and practices in sending and receiving visual content to her sexting partner challenge transnational research findings, which show that women are more likely to send their sexual images (Döring, 2014; Englander, 2012). Accordingly, her sex(t)ual practices, as she narrated, do not correspond to normative feminine sexual subjectivity in Turkey, which is associated with passiveness, submissiveness, and obedience in the accounts of the women I study. In other words, Sezen's sex(t)ual practices subvert heteronormative feminine subjectivity by challenging men's sexual supremacy and normatively idealized sexual passiveness of women.

İlkay's narratives of her sexting experiences resemble those of Sezen. İlkay is a graduate student working as a public school teacher, and she defines herself as a feminist, just like Sezen. She started practicing sexting with her ex-boyfriend because of the time and space factors. Other than her romantic/sexual partners, she also sexted with random men whom she met on online platforms. However, unlike Sezen, İlkay does not always take an active position in her sexting practices. In fact, how she obscures the gendered sexual roles in her sexting practices is not really about activeness or passiveness in sexting practices but more about mocking the sexting partner. She said that she often ridicules her sexting partners, especially those she meets on online backgammon platforms, to have fun but not sexual satisfaction in itself. İlkay enjoys teasing those men through her sex(t)ual commands while watching a TV show, drinking tea, or stroking her cat. She perceives what she is doing as a form of playing with gendered sexual norms.

> Sometimes, I send sexually provocative messages to tease him, but I don't aim to have sexual pleasure from it. Besides, on these occasions, I don't have such sexual feelings or am not in such moods. Controlling and commanding him gives me a sort of pleasure, but not sexual. I don't know. They think they are taking advantage of me, I mean sexually, as I am sexting with them, but actually, I am making fun of them. I say, "Look at this poor thing". I think I am playing with the classical and traditional gender roles. Here, there is queerness in it. (Interview with İlkay, 2019)

The existing studies have shown that individuals may practice sexting for non-sexual purposes, such as making jokes or having fun (Burkett, 2015; Dobson, 2015). However, İlkay's sending sex(t)ual messages to tease men, not for sex(t)ual pleasure, but for having fun is peculiar compared to my other interlocutors' motivations to sext because all other women I interviewed use sexting for sexual purposes such as seeking sexual pleasure and initiating an offline courtship. Although İlkay does not receive sexual pleasure while making fun of her sexting partners through sending sexts, she enjoys doing it; therefore, she finds something pleasurable

in it. By doing so, İlkay subverts the "male-centered heterosexuality" for which women's orgasm is essential as it demonstrates the sexual capacities and abilities of men (Holland et al., 1994, p. 30). As İlkay clearly articulated, this pleasure originates from the act of *"playing with the classical and traditional gender roles,"* which she also sees as queering her heterosexual sexting practices. Queerness in her heterosex(t)ual practices is linked to the fact that she plays with normative heterosexual femininity and masculinity but not about identity politics. Queer heterosexuality "reinscribe(s)" and "actively subverts" gendered roles reinforced and embraced by heteronormativity as an oppressive regime (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994, p. 445). In this respect, İlkay time to time queers her heterosexual sexting practices by subverting the heteronormative gender roles. Importantly, taking advantage of sexting's immateriality, she textually presents herself in a sex(t)ual interaction and ridicules her sexting partner. By ridiculing the men with whom she is sexting, İlkay again queers her practice because she consciously challenges men's (sexual) authority and supremacy in normative heterosexual sex (Seidman, 2001). Therefore, Ilkay gains a sex(t)ual agentic position in which she looks down on these men, saying, *"Look at this poor thing."* Accordingly, she enjoys reading men's sex(t)ual messages that tell how those men turn on through her eroticized words. In one sense, she becomes the subject who enjoys -though not sexually- "watching" the imagined actions of her sexual object while sex(t)ually guiding them.

The women I interviewed think that women are socio-culturally and religiously positioned as passive objects in sexual relationships. In other words, women, in general, act to meet the sexual needs, desires, and fantasies of men instead of favoring their sexual desires. They also agree with the idea that most women in Turkey do not take control during sex or express what would sexually please them. Yunusoğlu, in studying the vaginismus experiences of women in Turkey, has found that the sexual knowledge provided to women in Turkey is primarily full of myths and doctrines that undermine, restrict, control, and silence women's

sexuality, which often disables women to speak up for and enjoy their sexualities (Yunusoğlu, 2021, p. 13).[48] The construction of such gendered sexual behaviors and expectations has an influence on the sex(t)ual lives and behaviors of my women interlocutors in one way or another. Their sexual life narratives show that they have become aware of their sexual desires later in their sexual life. Some of those women are politically against this gendered sexuality construction and consciously try to challenge it through their sex(t)ual practices.

Considering the current prevailing heterosexual culture among young adults in Turkey, these sex(t)ual subjectivities become even more transgressive in terms of the possibility of sexting to challenge heteronormative femininity and even their potential to queer heterosexual sex. Scholarly works conducted in the last decade have shown that the value attached to virginity has been decreasing. Although there has been progress in young adults' attitudes and engagement in pre-marital sex among emerging and young unmarried adults, especially urbanite university students, sexual affairs of unmarried women tend to remain within the boundaries of steady and regular romantic relationships in Turkey (Deniz, 2020; Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011; Özyeğin, 2015; Sümer, 2015). As a group of women using mobile dating apps in İstanbul expressed in research, the act of women approaching a man and initiating communication for romantic and sexual purposes already strays from ordinary heterosexual feminine subjecthood, and most men prefer women conforming the gendered sexual roles (Deniz, 2020, p. 117). In fact, a myth that men, but not women, should initiate sex and be active in sex is significantly common among university students in Turkey (Boratav & Çavdar, 2012; Kukulu et al., 2009). Therefore, sex(t)ual feminine subjectivity that I have observed in some of my women interlocutors' narratives on their heterosexual sexting practices stand as

[48] Psychiatry and medicine have considered vaginismus as a psychological and physiological disorder that causes women to have difficulties in having penile-vaginal intercourse. Recent social research, such as Yunusoğlu (2021), argues that socio-cultural factors have a significant impact on women experiencing vaginismus.

transgressive, as they take complete control and dominate their sexting partners, perform an active and playful sexiness by subverting the heteronormative practice of women's sex(t)ual behaviors. By performing the sex(t)ual subjectivity beyond the domain of heteronormative femininity, these women signal, if not cause, the uncertainties regarding contemporary heterosexual femininities (Stewart, 1999, p. 281). Accordingly, their sexual agencies resemble a heterosexual feminine sexual agency, which is widely discussed in Western popular culture and which Gill formulates as "a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power" (2008, p. 41). Accordingly, what is at stake in this particular form of sexual agency is sexual autonomy, assertiveness, and empowerment.

However, this form of agency is one among many possible ways of manifesting sexual agencies. I do not intend to generalize this form of sex(t)ual subjectivity and agency and do not claim that this kind of sextual subjectivity and agency is stable and fixed in a group of women's sexting practices. On the contrary, as I will discuss in the next section, women who perform transgressive sex(t)ual subjectivity and exercise a sexual agency (with sexual assertiveness and empowerment) at certain times may also conform to heteropatriarchal sexual rules in their sexting practices at other times, depending on how they are affected by offline political atmosphere, gender and sexuality norms, and how they socio-culturally position themselves regarding their sexting partners. For, as Shively (2014) argues, individuals living in complex societies are subject to contradictory demands of normative systems.

4.3. Negotiating with the Male Dominance and Gaze

All of my women interlocutors have felt the presence of male domination and gaze in their sexting practices, though not all named it in this way. Some of them expressed that they enjoy men taking the doer position and performing hypermasculinity through written language, while some other women find being the passive and obedient object of male dominance and gaze as disturbing. The discourse of male domination emerged while my women interlocutors

were talking about the things that annoy them in sexting. Gözde, as I introduced earlier, is a very confident woman in her sexual life, including sexting. As she remembers, she started to have sexual feelings in her early teenage years, and she could talk about sexual relationships with her parents, unlike the rest of my women (also men) interlocutors. She thinks this helped her to understand what she likes in sex and to tell her partners what she likes and does not like. Her ability to speak up for her desires and dislikes in her sex life also applies to her sexting practices.

> For instance, let's say there is a man who automatically assumes that I would be submissive. I don't *always* accept being submissive. He writes, "I'm putting your head on my cock and pressing your head on my cock". And things like that. Do not press my head down! I don't like it. (Interview with Gözde, 2021) (Italic as my emphasis)

The man in Gözde's narrative unquestionably considers Gözde (or women, in general) *"submissive"* and, by definition, passive, which, I believe, originates from the working of male domination. He imagines that Gözde would enjoy what his hypermasculine imaginary body is doing: *"I'm putting your head on my cock and pressing your head on my cock"*. In this particular sex(t)ual scene, he sex(t)ually dominates Gözde by positioning himself as an active doer while positioning Gözde as the passive recipient of his erotic actions. His masculine domination is also reinforced through the symbolic power of the penis, which he imagines Gözde as sex(t)ually serving. However, Gözde, as she clearly stated, does not "*always"* accept or enjoy being a submissive, passive, and obedient object in sex(ting). Here, the notion of *"always"* implies that there are times in which Gözde enjoys being submissive in her sex(t)ual relations. I find this critical as it evidences the unfixed, unstable, and changing nature of sex(t)ual subjectivities. When Gözde finds such reflections of male dominance in sexting practices disturbing, she can warn her sexting partners with ease, highlighting her dislike. For instance, she can write, *"Wait a second, I really don't like being dominated in this way."* I think

this makes Gözde a sex(t)ual subject caring about her sex(t)ual desires and may fight for them even if it may ruin the sex(t)ual atmosphere at a given time. Accordingly, Gözde takes the "risk" of destroying the atmosphere, which may end the sexting and cause her to leave the sexting without having sexual pleasure and satisfaction. In my understanding, she prioritizes her sexual enjoyment over her partner's fantasies and seeks her pleasure. In this regard, she exercises a particular form of sexual agency, which is characterized mainly by the ability "to refuse unsafe, unwanted, unenjoyable sexual interaction" (Bay-Cheng, 2019, p. 2). Nevertheless, I do not intend to explain Gözde's sexual agency through the concept of resistance to patriarchal sexual norms. Instead, I find it more crucial to look at her "will, desire, intellect, and body" through which she exercises a particular sex(t)ual agency (Mahmood, 2005, p. 162).

Unlike Gözde, there are some women or moments in which women may prefer not to warn their sexting partners when they feel annoyed primarily for not killing the vibes of the moment. On these occasions, the sex(t)ual agency they exercise differs from the one I discussed above. It cannot be explained within the binary frame of submissive vs. resistance suggested by Western liberal feminist thought. For instance, Dilara's narrative exemplifies how some women may feel annoyed by their sexting partner's domination over their bodies and sexualities but may not voice it and keep going.

> He saying, "You are mine, your body is mine, your boobs are mine," was disturbing me. I was not warning him or telling him, "Don't write such things" at those moments, but it was disturbing me. I see it as a toxic possession. However, it is more innocent if he says, "You are mine" while drinking a coffee at a coffee shop. But, men saying things like, I don't know, "Your boobs are mine, your hole – I shall say – is mine, only I can go inside you" annoys me a lot. I am me; I am not yours. When he wrote such things, I always felt disturbed and did not enjoy it at all (Interview with Dilara, 2021)

Different from Gözde's story, male dominance in Dilara's case comes into existence, not through men's dominating women based on sex(t)ual imaginary masculine bodily acts but rather through claiming a possession of a woman's body and sexuality, which Dilara finds disturbing and considers it *"toxic possession."*. Rather than voicing her disturbance in this instance, Dilara preferred to continue sexting by keeping her silence as she did not want to ruin the sex(t)ual atmosphere growing out of the exchange of erotic messages. Her disturbance by her partner's messages is likely to affect negatively, if not ruin altogether, her feelings of sexual excitement and pleasure.

> I was thinking more that you are you, and I am I. I mean, we, two people, are doing this thing together. You don't own anything of mine; likewise, I don't possess anything of yours. This was really disturbing to me. I was not telling him at those moments. I've never told him, but it was disturbing me. (Interview with Dilara, 2021)

In one sense, this implies that she prioritized, if not served, his sex(t)ual desires by putting aside what she likes and does not like in a sex(t)ual relationship and, therefore, her sex(t)ual desire because, despite the spoiling in her sexual excitement and pleasure, Dilara did not end the sexting or warn him at the given time. I interpret her silence and prioritization of her partner's sex(t)ual desires over hers as a form of subordination to male domination. However, this cannot be rendered a simple submissive sex(t)ual agency. In Dilara's narrative, her disturbance by male domination, on the one hand, and subordination to it, on the other hand, creates an ambivalent sex(t)ual subjective position and sex(t)ual agency. I find it ambivalent because it contains both a critical awareness of male domination (manifesting itself through disturbance) and traditional femininity (appearing in her silence). This ambivalent subjectivity is crucial as it evidences my argument that sex(t)ual subjectivities are unstable and complex and occupy changing positions in a broader spectrum. Socio-culturally and specifically nuanced sex(t)ual agency that appeared in Dilara's sexting practices resembles the Egyptian Muslim women who participated in

Mahmood's (2005) research. As Mahmood discussed in length, the women in her study consciously and willingly made an effort to develop "shyness" and "modesty" in themselves as part of their pious subjectivities as Allah commands it (2005, p. 156). Rather than taking agency into account as a synonym of resistance, Mahmood approaches it "as a modality of action" and argues that these women critically train and tutor themselves to become pious Muslim subjects (2005, p. 157). Similarly, I consider Dilar's decision and action not warning and continuing sexting a form of action that is neither submissive nor resistant to patriarchal gender norms.

The concept of the male gaze, closely tied to male domination, was initially introduced by a feminist cinema theorist, Laura Mulvey, to pinpoint the gendered man-centered dynamics behind cinema production. She argued that cinema is written, produced, and seen by and for men and their desires (Mulvey, 1988). My analysis, informed by poststructuralist feminist theories, challenges her structuralist understanding of the male gaze. Feminist scholars further developed and applied the concept in different fields concerning spectacles of women, such as literature, beauty (Glapka, 2018), fashion and body images (Ponterotto, 2016; Ruggerone, 2006). As an extension of male domination, the male gaze forces women to conform to normalized and idealized a particular woman figure and body shape (Ponterotto, 2016). However, as my interviews with a group of women suggest, the male gaze in sexting does not necessarily target women's bodies but the ways they articulate their sex(t)ual desires and present their sexual selves. To enunciate, some women may feel timid in front of a man during sexting, which affects what they are writing to express their sexual desire and tease their partners in sexting. The reasons for their timidity are diverse and may not always be related to sexuality, for which İlkay's experience is a telling case. As I introduced earlier, İlkay is a self-identified feminist woman who takes pleasure in her sex(t)ual life in general and enjoys playing with some of her sexting partners once and again. However, there was one man – her ex-boyfriend – whom she wished to marry and who was intellectual and wealthy. As the quote

below demonstrates, the financial gap between İlkay and him made İlkay feel interior in her relationship, shaping her sexting behaviors with him.

> Generally, I am unconstrained; I don't have difficulties expressing myself during sexting. But I had difficulties with one of my ex-boyfriends with whom I was close to getting married. He was a wealthy man, and his financial situation created a feeling of shyness *(çekinme)* in me, and I felt weak and lame *(ezik)* in front of him. These feelings shaped my preferences of words while expressing myself in sexting; I have tried to find words that would be more suitable for him. Well, he created a power relation over me, and I was conforming to it. I was very cautious about what I was typing and at what time I was sending such messages, and I was not sending messages too late at night. I was very mindful. I tried to generate my randiness *(edepsizlik)* through more refined words that would delight him, too. However, while sexting with my fuckbuddy, who was a bit pleb type and didn't have intellectual profundity, I was not attentive to what I was writing. (Interview with İlkay, 2019)

İlkay's ex-boyfriend's wealthier social status caused İlkay to feel "*weak"* and "*lame (ezik)"* because she did not see herself as socio-culturally and economically equivalent to him, which gave rise to asymmetrical power relations between them, at least in the ways İlkay perceived her relationship. Furthermore, these negative feelings made İlkay careful regarding the erotic language she used in her sexting practices with him because she wanted him to like and admire her. In order to keep his appreciation and not lose his liking for her, she consciously or not performed a moderate sex(t)iness, which is adequate enough to tease him. Notably, as a feminist woman, İlkay is conscious and critical of gendered power relations and tries to apply this to her sextual life; however, in this particular relationship, she purposefully masqueraded her sex(t)ual "*randiness"* to suit his sex(t)ual and socio-cultural taste, because she wanted to be desirable for her ex-boyfriend. One way of explanation could suggest that Ilkay presented a more withdrawn sex(t)ual subjectivity in this particular relationship compared to those in her other sex(t)ual

practices. However, I find Ilkay's socio-sexual and emotional calculations and the sex(t)ual strategies she developed, such as masquerading a comparatively moderate sex(t)ual self and willingness to do for the sake of her relationship, more crucial in understanding her sex(t)ual agency. Her sex(t)ual agency cannot be explained through submissiveness to male taste as it involves İlkay's willingness to use her intellectual capacity to use *"more refined"* erotic language.

Zeynep, - another self-identified feminist woman having difficulties in expressing and verbalizing her sexual desires, fantasies, and pleasures during sex(ting) -, was raised by a single mother who used to have romantic and sexual relationships. She stated that her mother's easiness in living a non-conforming sexual life has made Zeynep feel very comfortable initiating contact with boys/men starting from her early childhood years. She became aware of and began to explore her sexual desires in her childhood when she was 5 or 6 years old. She started to practice sexting in high school when she became aware of her heterosexual desires. Zeynep remembers that it was also burdensome for her to verbalize her sex(t)ual desires back then, but she has continued practicing sexting.

> For me, sending messages is difficult. The fundamental reason is that I don't know what to write. I think there are certain limits to pleasing or teasing the other party. … I may send a photograph, but I don't do that. All I can do is through language, by writing. … I can't also do dirty-talking things during sex. I find it funny, and well, I don't want to seem foolish if I try to do it. I'm a bit timid in this regard. This is why I don't feel comfortable and like writing messages while sexting. (Interview with Zeynep, 2021)

Zeynep concentrates more on her partner's sexual pleasure and satisfaction rather than putting her sex(t)ual desires forward and expressing what she would enjoy, which is evidenced when she states, *"I don't know what to write. I think there are certain limits to pleasing or teasing the other party."* In other words, she is concerned about the ways of *"pleasing or teasing"* her

sex(t)ual partner but not receiving sexual pleasure out of her sex(t)ual interaction. In my opinion, Zeynep's difficulty with verbalizing her sexual desires in sexting is related to her dislike of *"dirty-talking"* in offline sex. The reason behind her disfavor of *"dirty-talking,"* which she explained as *"I don't want to seem foolish,"* is vital in understanding her sex(t)ual subjectivity. She is concerned about how she would be seen by her partner because, in her words, *"I don't want to seem stupid while trying to be a sexy woman because I don't think I am a sexy woman."* The question of to whom Zeynep does not *"want to seem stupid"* reveals the presence of the male gaze because, apparently, she minds what her sex(ting) partner will think about her if she verbalizes her sexual desires, fantasies, and pleasures through *"dirty-talking"* while *"trying to be a sexy woman."* Accordingly, she holds off from sending sexually explicit messages not only because she does *"not know what to write"* but also because she is anxious to be judged and seen *"foolish"* by men with whom she is sexting or having sex. This gaze is not an external Other who is doing the work of looking, but it is an indoctrinated male gaze that makes these women question their femininities through self-disciplining.

Many heterosexual women in modern capitalist societies have become self-regulatory and self-disciplinary subjects to fit themselves into the idealized feminine body and subject for the purpose of teasing and pleasing men. In this regard, Bartky argues that "a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his and under his judgment (1997, p. 101). Further, she states that any practice or behavior that threatens a woman's "sense of herself as a sexually desiring and desirable subject" carries the risky potential of "desexualization" her; therefore, many women prefer to avoid such conduct (Bartky, 1997, p. 105). Accordingly, the sex(t)ual subjectivities of İlkay and Zeynep are constituted through the disciplinary power of the learned male gaze, which does not look at and judge their bodies but rather their skills of linguistically performing sexually desiring and desirable and sexy women.

İlkay and Zeynep's experiences of the male gaze in sexting resemble each other in a way that they both become mindful in expressing and verbalizing their sexual desires. In this regard, the male gaze does not operate to objectify women's bodies but to scrutinize the ways they sex(t)ually present themselves or their abilities to tease and please men's sexual desires. As we see in İlkay's and Zeynep's narratives, such operation of the male gaze in sexting gives rise to a timid sex(t)ual subjectivity who watches out for what and how to say in sexting. Accordingly, the male gaze, in this instance, does not target a woman's body, physical appearance, and beauty; instead, it reveals itself in Zeynep's internal performance anxiety. This indoctrinated male gaze evaluates and judges Zeynep's sex(t)ual femininity during sexting by making her feel unsuccessful in being/performing a sexy woman through dirty talk.

Notably, although Zeynep does not enjoy sending sexually explicit messages, she continues practicing sexting under no pressure or coercion. Despite the misalignment between her feelings while practicing sexting and her keeping practicing, it is vital to understand her sex(t)ual agency through the terms Mahmood discusses mosque women's agencies in her study. Mahmood discusses that the women in her research exhibit "shyness" and "modesty" as part of their pious Muslim subjectivities (2005, p. 156). However, some of these women could not feel the feeling of shyness in themselves, which, according to the Quran, they should feel. Despite the lack of inner feeling of shyness, some of these women were performing a shy woman figure. They were working on developing these feelings to align their internal and external dispositions through praying and discussing Quranic verses among themselves. Similarly, Zeynep, despite her inner negative feelings regarding sexting, practices it in the way she can.

The theorization of women's sexual agency through sexual assertiveness, autonomy, and empowerment is not inclusive of the particular sexual subjectivity that I discussed through İlkay and Zeynep's narratives. In fact, looking through the lens of such theorization of sexual agency misrepresents these women as lacking sexual agency. However, as I have been arguing in this

chapter, sexual agency can be manifested in different forms. İlkay and Zeynep's narratives on their specific self-representation in sexting and their sex(t)ual subjectivities reveal a culturally specific sexual agency that cannot be explained through sexual autonomy, assertiveness, and empowerment. Nor do they fit the categories of submissive sex(t)ual agency. Instead, this culturally specific form of sexual agency can only be understood through "context-dependent and multifaceted sexual desire, wantedness, pleasure, interests, and behavior" (Bay-Cheng, 2019, p. 3). Depending on the given relationship and context, these women make conscious choices and preferences regarding whether and what kind of picture of themselves to send and what kind of erotic language to use. Their sex(t)ual agency is manifested in and through these conscious decisions and how they *want* to position themselves within their sexting practices sex(t)ually.

4.4. Trusting the Sext Partner

> As I said, I generally don't send my photographs or videos. But if I am going to send it, I don't show my face and I cover my tattoos because I don't want to be identified if things go wrong. Sexting is not a normative practice, and I don't want to deal with the consequences (Interview with Sezen, 2019)

> We talk about this a lot, and I always tell my women friends not to show their faces while sending photographs to men in sexting. (Interview with Zuhal, 2021)

Both Sezen and Zuhal pay attention to removing the identifier parts of their bodies, such as their faces and tattoos, in order to keep themselves unrecognizable to others in the case of the unauthorized dissemination of their images. Covering one's bodily markers or face in shared images during sexting is a commonly used tactic among my women interlocutors, especially those who are afraid of the potential risks of sexting and those who do not trust their sexting partners.

Trust shapes the ways in which a group of women express and verbalize their sexual desires, fantasies, and pleasures in sexting. The women I study mind not only their sexual desires but also protecting themselves. For instance, they are afraid of the non-consensual distribution of their sexting messages and the images that they share during sexting. Because of this fear, they tend to be cautious about what they are sharing until they develop some level of trust in their sexting partners. This, consciously or not, impacts how they sex(t)ually position and present themselves in sexting; therefore, their sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies. Interestingly, the intensity of fear raised by the possibility of non-consensual distribution of sexting content may change depending on the sexting partner and across time. Offline occurrences can also escalate fear. Yasemin explained how this fear had impacted her sexting practices in this way:

> It depends on the other party. I felt a meaningless fear at one stage because of this social pressure. There is social fear, and this fear stresses you. It affects what I am typing and sending. I used to send a picture of myself easily, but when the feeling of security disappears, I beware of doing it. For instance, I was affected too much by the incident in which a woman's sexual video was leaked, and then people watched it. Even though the person with whom I am sexting does not distribute it, these messages and images are stored somewhere because technology is dangerous. And this scares me. (Interview with Yasemin, 2021)[49]

As I introduced earlier, Yasemin is a self-identified feminist woman who grew up in a traditionally and religiously conservative social environment where even courtship was not approved. Yet, she stated during the interview that she worked hard to liberate herself from the gendered norms regulating her romantic and sex(t)ual behaviors. However, as the quote cited

[49] I was unaware of the incident in which a woman's sexual video was leaked. I searched the news online; however, I could not find it. Although there has been no news on the leaking or unauthorized dissemination of sexting messages in Turkish news in the last decade, there are numerous law offices giving legal advice and services on this matter. This implies that despite the lack of original "real" events, fear or threatening discourses are spreading in society.

above shows, unfortunate events affect her behaviors in sexting. When her trust is damaged, she starts holding herself off doing what she would do with ease in normal circumstances. Therefore, willingly or not, Yasemin acts as a more careful and mindful sex(t)ual subject to protect herself while still pursuing her sexual desires in sexting. Dilara's experience also evidences how trust, which is to prevent the fear regarding the non-consensual distribution of sexting content, can shape women's sex(t)ual behaviors and how open they can talk about their sexual desires.

> It took a while for me to trust that person [first sexting partner, also ex-boyfriend]. In the beginning, he was sending more than I did. I was sending sext messages less. Then, our relationship period increased, and our dialogues and meetings escalated, so my trust was improved. Only then I started sending sext messages with ease. It was my first sexting experience, and we all saw the non-consensually distributed photographs, and this scared me a bit. Because I was concerned about his sharing my images with other people, say his friends, I was trying to send unidentifiable photographs of me. I mean, I was hiding my face, for instance. I was cautious. … Similarly, at the beginning, I was not able to… I was not able to express myself and my desires. I don't know how to explain this to you. I couldn't express my sexual desires and pleasure. I was a bit shy to do so. Again, this is related to the trust you have toward your sexting partner. (Interview with Dilara, 2021)

Dilara had difficulties in expressing and verbalizing her sexual desires, fantasies, and pleasures to tease both herself and her partner, and she was hiding her face in the photographs she sent at the beginning because she was afraid of the unauthorized dissemination of her sexting contents and its consequences. However, by that time, Dilara, like other women, had developed a certain level of trust in her sexting partner and had become comfortable in expressing her desires and pleasures in sexting. In this regard, trust does not only enhance the intimacy between sexting partners (Amundsen, 2020, p. 9), but it also re-configures the

sex(t)ual subjectivities of women by shaping how open women can verbalize their sexual desires and how comfortable they share their erotic images.

Non-consensual distribution of sexting content, especially erotic videos, and nude or semi-nude photographs, has been widely debated mainly in terms of its (potential) harm to adolescents, girls, and women involved in sexting practices (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Bianchi et al., 2021; Harder, 2021; Krieger, 2017; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021). These studies have pointed out that girls and women are blamed and seen as responsible for the non-consensual distribution of their self-produced images and sexual cyber harassment. However, few have addressed the gender-based violence behind sharing sexting content without consent or against one's will (Henry & Powell, 2015). While the scholarly works on the non-consensual distribution of sexting content have focused on its harmful consequences for girls and women, they have not questioned how and to what extent the fear of potential cyberbullying and cyber harassment (caused by the non-consensual distribution of the contents) might impact women's sexting practices, their sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies. In my opinion, the fact that women are the most vulnerable group who are or might be negatively affected by the non-consensual dissemination of their sexting contents is vital to understand the culturally specific sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies of women. In this respect, trust plays a significant role in reconfiguring sex(t)ual subjectivity and agency manifested in women's sexting practices as time proceeds. As I exemplified above, women may develop several strategies in their sexting relationships to protect themselves until they develop some level of trust in their sexting partners because they do not want to take the risk of facing the non-consensual dissemination of the sexual images that they share during sexting.

None of my participants had a first-hand experience of the non-consensual distribution of their sexting messages, including photographs and videos; however, all of them are aware of its possibility to occur and are worried about it. As widely discussed in transnational studies, these

women also think that if their sexting messages are shared with other people or on the Internet without their consent, they will face the typical attitude of responsibilization and victimization of women on such occasions (Burkett, 2015; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021). Notably, these women agree that they, as women, are in a disadvantageous position and at a higher risk than men because it is mostly, if not exclusively, women who are shamed for their involvement in sexting (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Englander, 2012; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Pavón-Benítez et al., 2021; Ringrose et al., 2013). For this reason, these women consciously act cautiously and take measures and prevention, such as hiding their bodily remarks or faces while exchanging their self-images during sexting in order to avoid any unwanted consequences. They represent sex(t)ual self with caution, and therefore, their sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies are informed by not only their sex(t)ual desires but also their intention to protect themselves from the unwanted consequences of the unauthorized dissemination of their sexual images and messages. In my understanding, such manifestation of sex(t)ual agency is not exercised through sexual assertiveness. Instead, it reveals itself in these women's active and conscious decision-making: their decision to be cautious in what they are writing, what kind of sexual images they are sending, and how they are hiding their body parts such as face and tattoos that would reveal their identities while also presenting a sexual self. As Mahmood (2009) emphasized, this form of agency is not compatible with and cannot be understood through the Western-based theorization of agency, which is mainly linked with resistance. Nor can it be reduced to submissiveness to patriarchal norms, as these women are afraid of being blamed and victimized as a result of the non-consensual dissemination of their sexual images rather than resisting them. What is at stake here is that these women's conscious decisions and preferences regarding the potential risks of sharing self-images can be explained as an intention to protect and secure their future lives, which, as Bay-Cheng (2019) argues, should also be understood as a particular and significant manifestation of sexual agency. These women can

see the potential risk in sexting with someone whom they do not fully trust, someone who potentially disseminates their sexual images. Instead of giving up practicing sexting and their sex(t)ual desires, they develop several strategies by using their "will, desire, intellect, and body" in this kind of sexting practice to protect themselves (Mahmood, 2005, p. 162).

4.5. Conclusion

I have started this chapter by addressing the debate among feminist scholars and researchers about whether sexting is liberating or objectifying for women and girls. As I have mentioned earlier, while a group of feminists (Jewell & Brown, 2013; Ringrose et al., 2013; Speno & Aubrey, 2019) claims that sexting is a dangerous practice as it reproduces women's sexual objectification, another group of feminists (Ferguson, 2011; García-Gómez, 2017; Hasinoff, 2012) argues that sexting may be empowering and liberating for girls and women because it provides them with a space and opportunity to speak up for their sexualities. I agree with the feminist scholars and researchers who consider this debate limited and suggest going beyond this binary understanding of sexting because sexting can be both (Hasinoff, 2012; Liong & Cheng, 2019). In this regard, Hasinoff states that through exchanging sexual messages and images, individuals exercise certain kinds of autonomy and, therefore, agency in sexting. She argues that this challenges and moves the discussion beyond the conceptualization of sexting as a risky and dangerous practice. From this perspective, she claims that focusing on women's agencies rather than risky and dangerous potentials in sexting is much more critical and fruitful in understanding sexting. In line with her argument, I have focused on my women interlocutors' sex(t)ual subjectivities in sexting – the ways in which they sex(t)ually present themselves to their sexting partners - to shed light on the discussion of women's agentic positions in sexting. The culturally specific analysis of my women interlocutors' sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies supports and contributes to my dissertation's overarching quest to explore how offline norms regulating sexuality and heterosexual sexting practices re/shape and are re/shaped by

each other. I have shown that their decisions and preferences in sexting have been influenced by broader structural norms, ongoing events, and AKP's intimacy politics. Depending on how and to what extent they feel they are affected, they may prefer to constrain themselves and be more cautious in their sexting practices. However, as I have shown throughout the chapter, they from time to time, may also prefer challenging the broader structural norms by playing gender norms and speaking up for their sexual desires. Hence, this chapter shows that sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies of the women I study are open to being affected by the offline norms along with the intimacy politics regulating sexual desires and practices.

The ways in which broader structural constraints affect my women interlocutors' sex(t)ual subjectivities and how they take action through their agencies also address the overarching question of my dissertation research, which is how and to what extent offline norms regulating sexuality and sexting practices shape and are reshaped by each other in the socio-cultural and political context of Turkey. In Turkey, sexual relationships, especially those of women, are historically and politically located within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage, which has been reproduced and supported through nationalist and religious discourses. Notably, although urbanite educated middle-upper class young women and men have become more open to pre-marital sex, this normative regulation of sexuality impacts unmarried young adults, especially women's, sexual practices and behaviors (Boratav & Çavdar, 2012; Özyeğin, 2015; Sümer, 2015). As women interlocutors have also expressed, the AKP and Erdoğan Regime have escalated regulatory and disciplinary mechanisms over intimate and heterosocial relations by spreading interventionist discourses and policies such as intervening in women's clothing, trying to criminalize mix-gender housing and discursively discriminating against "virgin" and "nonvirgin" unmarried women in the last decade (Altunok, 2016; Özkazanç, 2018). The ever-increasing discursive interventions in alternative individual lifestyles, ranging from women's dressing and mix-gender housing to basic intimate interactions in public, have generated fear

among my women interlocutors in a way that their intimate practices such as kissing and hugging have been withdrawn into the private spheres. It is within this context - where intimate practices and sexual subjects have been becoming invisible, and women's chastity and modesty have been promoted – in which I situate a spectrum of feminine sex(t)ual subjectivities and agencies. Not all women interlocutors are impacted by these broader constraints in the same way. The ways in which they are influenced are manifested through their agencies and their capacity to take action within the context mentioned above.

Through examining a group of urbanite-educated women's narratives on the ways in which they present their sex(t)ual desires – including how they position themselves, what kind of language they use, whether and what kind of photographs and videos they send, and how they feel about doing these – in sexting, I have argued for the diversity, instability, and flexibility of sex(t)ual subjectivities. In my understanding, these multiple and fluid features of women's sex(t)ual subjectivities can be best understood through Mahmood's theorization of the agency. According to Mahmood, it is much better to understand agency "as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (2009, p. 15). Such theorization of agency reveals how sex(t)ual subjectivities are informed by broader constraints. In other words, how these women sex(t)ually present and position themselves in their sexting practices, which I call sex(t)ual subjectivity, is re-configured by their perceptions of and feelings regarding the already existing offline norms regulating gendered sexual practices and behaviors. The women I study are making conscious preferences and choices regarding how they sex(t)ually present themselves depending on the specific circumstances at hand. To enunciate, the ways in which these women are impacted by the broader structural constraints and how they accordingly take action in sexting change from person to person and also over time. As we have seen in the cases of Sezen and İlkay, some of the women I interviewed are more open, confident, provocative, initiative, and playful in their sexting practices and may

open spaces to challenge the heteronormative gendered sexual roles/norms. However, the same women may also be withdrawn and cautious about what kind of erotic language they use and what sort of self-images they share with different sexting partners and at other times while dealing with the male dominance and gaze or when they do not trust their sexting partners. On the other hand, some women do not feel comfortable expressing their sexual desires, fantasies, and pleasures and sharing their nude/semi-nude images in their sexting practices. This proves my arguments that their sex(t)ual subjectivities are not stable; on the contrary, they are changing and fluid.

The unstable, flexible, and fluid feature of the sex(t)ual subjectivities of the women I study shows us that their sex(t)ual agencies cannot be understood and rendered to the Western-based theorization of agency as resistance. On the contrary, as Mahmood (2009) argues, their agencies are manifested in their capacity to make conscious choices in their sexting practices regarding how they sex(t)ually present themselves. In other words, instead of explicitly transgressing the structural norms regulating sexuality by resisting them, these women may also prefer to act within these structural norms.

Regarding the differences between the women, I study in terms of how they sex(t)ually present themselves in their sexting practices, familial upbringing (as in the case of Gözde, for instance,) and openness to talk about sex and sexuality in the family, religious affiliation, socio-economic background, and political affiliations such as feminist movement are determining factors. In the following two analytical chapters, these aspects become more revealed as I discuss the issues of Islam and the use of vulgar, obscene language.

Chapter 5: The Reciprocal Relationship Between Islamic Religiosity and Sex(t)uality: Digitally Mediated Materiality and Pious Sex(t)ual Selves

> I don't think sexting is less sinful. At least for me, it is not. And it is not the reason for me to practice sexting. In sexting, you are in a fantasy world. More precisely, you are in your brain, where you can do everything you don't do in real life. You can fantasize about your partner in a way and the position you want. And this impacts the pleasure you get. In real sex, there are certain limits before your pleasure. (Interview with Erman, 2021)

> I do not go beyond a particular stage; I mean sexual intercourse in my sexual relationships because of the severe consequences it may cause and also my Islamic values. … I don't think it [her pre-marital sexual relationships] harms someone. No one is a perfect Muslim. Everyone commits different sins in different ways. My focus, in this matter, is not to harm anybody. (Interview with Zuhal, 2021)

Erman, a devoted Muslim man in his late twenties, pinpointed sexting's "immaterial" aspect, which differentiates his sexting practices from his offline sexual behaviors and the pleasure he receives in offline sex. The idea of *"you can do everything you don't do in real life"* was something I have observed among my pious Muslim research participants as well as on *Kızlar Soruyor* (Girls are Asking), my online field site.[50] The "immateriality" of sexting enables some devoted Muslim believers to experience certain sexual behaviors, sex(t)ual intercourse, which they consciously and purposefully abstain from in their offline sexual relationships due to their Islamic values.

[50] *Kızlar Soruyor* (Girls are Asking) can be accessible through this link: https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/

Zuhal, a veiled Muslim woman research participant, is involved in offline pre-marital sexual relationships and, therefore, commits *zina*. In the Quran and the Hadiths, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, *zina* is referred to as any sexual relationship outside legitimate (Islamic) wedlock, and it is listed among the major sins in Islam (Bouhdiba, 2008). Otherwise indicated, I use *zina* to refer only to pre-marital sexual affairs due to the scope of my research, which focuses on a group of unmarried heterosexual young adults' sex(t)ual behaviors in Turkey. Just like Erman, Zuhal's offline sexual relationships do not include sexual intercourse *"because of the severe consequences it (sexual intercourse) may cause and also (my) Islamic values."* However, similar to Erman, her sexting practices include sex(t)ual intercourse. Further, like some other Muslim research participants, Zuhal tends to compare *zina* with other kinds of sins and finds her offline sexual relationships less sinful because she is giving no "*harm"* to anyone through her "illicit" conduct. Accordingly, Zuhal, as an unmarried, devoted Muslim subject, is involved in pre-marital offline sex by excluding sexual intercourse, the reason for which she explains through her Islamic values. Both Erman and Zuhal practice sexting and their sexting practices involve sex(t)ual intercourse, while their offline sexual relationships exclude sexual intercourse. This implies that premarital sex and Islamic piety, which are normatively understood to be mutually exclusive, cohabit in their mundane lives, because, as Asad (2011) argues, religious commitments and modern practices can exist together. Further Schielke and Debevec suggest, there is a gap between and at the "moment where daily practice and grand schemes come together in contradiction as people navigate a complex and inconsistent course of life" (2012, p. 2). I seek to understand the sex(t)ual and religious subjectivities of my devoted research participants at this gap.

The regulatory power of Islamic norms outlawing pre-marital sex *or* excluding sexual intercourse from pre-marital sex among a group of devoted Muslim believers does not reverberate in their sexting practices. In other words, as I will discuss further in this chapter,

my devoted Muslim research participants who abstain from offline pre-marital sex or sexual intercourse in their offline pre-marital sex life involved in sexting practices, which notably include scenes of sexual intercourse that I call sex(t)ual intercourse. I find this crucially significant in the context of Turkey, where political Islam has been *re*configuring moderate *(makul, in Turkish)* and acceptable (*makbul, in Turkish)* (Muslim) masculinities and femininities, especially since 2011. AKP and the Erdoğan Regime repeatedly remind people to be good Muslims and ask them to align themselves with beloved, good Muslim subjects. In Erdoğan's discourses, sexuality occupies a significant portion in the ways of being a good Muslim subject, as discussed in detail in Chapter 3. In the account of AKP and Erdoğan Regime, Islamic religiosity and faith are linked with sexual pureness, chastity, and modesty (Mutluer, 2019). Accordingly, the sexual desires and practices of unmarried Muslim subjects are surrounded and regulated not only by Islamic norms but also by AKP and the Erdoğan Regime, which cites these rules to align Muslim subjects to Islamic norms in Turkey, even though the Republic of Turkey is not an Islamic state.

Throughout this chapter, I will argue that the digitally mediated materiality of sexting enables my devoted Muslim research participants to play around with Islamic norms that regulate sex(t)uality. My argumentation has three main implications. First, it will show that Islam is an adaptable, flexible, and *re*interpretable religion rather than a centralized and stable institution with regulatory and disciplinary power, at least in terms of matters concerning the issue of sex(t)uality. Second, it will shed light upon our understanding of how embodied religious norms and values can reconfigure the ways in which sex(t) and sex(t)uality are understood and can be experienced and explored differently in a Muslim context. Third, it will reveal that sex(t)ual and Islamic selves do not exclude each other; on the contrary, they mutually *re*shape each other, which becomes evident in the act of sexting practices of Muslim subjects.

In other words, when pious Muslim subjects engage in sexting practices, they do not leave their Islamic selves behind.

This chapter methodologically differs from the other analytical chapters as the data I gathered from *Kızlar Soruyor* (Girls are Asking) significantly supports it. *Kızlar Soruyor* is a digital platform founded in İstanbul in 2010 as a Turkish version of *GirlsaskGuys* based in the USA.

Figure 1: Screenshot from Kızlar Soruyor Home Page

Kızlar Soruyor defines the platform as a question-answer website where women and men help each other by asking all the questions they have in their minds and answering them. The platform claims to have a sense of community among its members. The members gain membership points and increase their membership levels as they ask and answer questions. *Kızlar Soruyor* has an application for mobile phones, and social media accounts with a significant number of followers: Instagram with 115 thousand followers, X with 21,6 thousand followers, and Linked In with 6 thousand followers. The number of followers it has indicates the popularity and common usage of *Kızlar Soruyor* in Turkey.

Despite the platform's name, women and men-identified profiles can post questions, answer them, and comment. Forty sub-topics, ranging from marriage to cleaning, health to

vocation, and beauty to cooking, compose the site's main structure. To post a question in sexuality-related sub-topics, a member must have a specific membership level, which is achieved through community interactions. Sexting has been one of the most discussed issues on *Kızlar Soruyor.* The very reason for me to turn to *Kızlar Soruyor* in empirically supporting my dissertation is to deepen my understanding of how sexting is generally discussed in Turkey and to widen my data on the use of sexting by devoted Muslim individuals. Considering the sensitivity of my research topic and the conservative component of Turkish society, the number of pious people – who reached out to me through social media channels after my call on social media platforms – who participated in my research was limited. When I started to spread a call for research in late 2018, there was a state of emergency that was announced by Erdoğan after the 2016 Coup d'état and lasted more than two years. People living in Turkey were highly timid in talking about sensitive issues because of the mass exiles, detentions, political threats, and random police investigations. Sexuality is among these highly sensitive issues in the context of Turkey as it is normatively located in the private sphere. It is primarily and particularly very sensitive for unmarried people to talk about sexual matters as they are socio-culturally and politically expected to stay away from sexuality until marriage. When I look back on those days, I think that having lived under such circumstances for more than two years had made many people afraid of daring to transgress norms in daily life. It is for this reason that many Muslim people who would have spoken to me in other circumstances, I believe, preferred to stay silent and did not prefer to participate in my study. Nevertheless, I wanted to make religion (read as Islam) one of the key analytical themes of the dissertations.

Before moving on, I want to remind you of the theoretical lenses that have shaped my perspective in this chapter. Theories of materiality offer disparate conceptualizations of materiality. John Law and Annemarie Mol suggest that materiality and sociality are constructed interactively and that outside this interaction, there is no materiality (1995, p. 277). They also

state that there might be different forms of materialities based on the changing forms of socialities. Nigel Thrift (2005) further develops this approach in his analysis of different registers of materiality by focusing on screens, software, and body. Similarly, Susanne Küchler, in her work on materiality and cognition, reads materiality through the advanced development of technology, in essence, intelligent devices, and states that the articulation of "mind/brain/body/thing" has challenged the conventional way of understanding of materiality (2005, p. 208). Materiality is commonly understood as an artifact and practice (Gillespie et al., 2014) that can be *bodily* sensed and used (my emphasis). In other words, materiality is commonly used to refer to what we can touch, feel, and smell. Further, Küchler underlines the timely necessity of thinking of the materiality of images and argues that "thought can conduct itself in things and things [read as materials] can be thoughtlike" (2005, p. 225).

Scholars working in the field of virtual/cybersex have argued that the premise of cybersex is transcending the body and moving to an imaginary and animative sphere. From this perspective, cybersex is theorized as immaterial, beyond material life, because it lacks the flesh of the sex partners, and it is imaginary (Eerikäinen, 1999). For, in cybersex, individuals do not touch, feel, and smell each other's bodies, different from "real" sex. I find these scholarly debates on materialities of great importance in discussing the im/materiality of sexting. Framing the practice of sexting as a specific form of media, I consider media

> "…not merely as messages that affect minds, but as social relations, and engagement of people through information and things, that happens to use words, sounds and images as a social currency" (Gillespie et al., 2014, pp. 1–2).

Accordingly, sexting is not merely an exchange of messages that affects people. Instead, it is an interactive social relationship enabled by digital mediation. Hence, sexting appears as a digitally mediated sociality. In analyzing several short stories, Law and Mol (1995) suggest that

relationships between objects (including humans, machines, institutions, the natural world, and so on) gain materiality at the moment of their interaction because it is through interactions that materials are constituted. They further claim that the sociality of humans' relations with objects, machines, and other humans is shaped by pre-existing matters, meaning the purpose and content of their relationship (Law & Mol, 1995, p. 288). In their argumentation, different socialities have different materialities, or vice versa. To demonstrate, they give an example of the differentiating usage of Doppler by a surgeon, a midwife, and a technician.[51] The surgeon intends to find the problem to diagnose the disease while the midwife happily listens to the heartbeats of the unborn baby in the belly. The technician's work is not related to health care, but to figure out the reason why the doppler is not working. For this reason, their relations with the Doppler machine, their purpose in using it, and their feelings attached to it are quite different. Following their argument that different socialities have disparate forms of materialities (Law & Mol, 1995), I take sexting into account as digitally mediated material rather than immaterial because it is a form of sociality mediated by technology. Arguing for the digitally mediated materiality of sexting is crucial in eliminating normative binary oppositions of online/offline spheres, materiality/immateriality, embodied and disembodied, which enables me to better understand my pious research participants' sexting practices.

Religiosity is the second principal component of the theoretical lens shaping my perspective in this chapter. I link im/materiality and religiosity together through my pious Muslim research participants' negotiations with Islamic norms and their faith (religiosity) in their sex(t)ual behaviors by benefitting from the digitally mediated aspect of sexting. In other words, im/materiality (of sexting) and Islamic religiosity are linked in my Muslim research participants' particular ways of using sexting. All monotheistic religions are known to have varying degrees of sexual moralities; however, there is an interpretation or suggestion that

[51] Doppler is a type of ultrasound technology used in medicine.

Islam is distinguished from other religions as it puts more restrictive norms concerning the matters of sexuality and has less tolerance of pre-marital sexual affairs (Kogan & Weißmann, 2020). Kogan and Weißmann (2020) further suggest that there is a reciprocal relationship between religiosity and sexuality, meaning they mutually re/shape each other. In other words, while individuals' religious values can draw the boundaries of their sexual behaviors, their romantic relationships, particularly first relationships, may also challenge and change their religious values (Kogan & Weißmann, 2020). Regular religious attendance is found to increase the level of religiosity; therefore, it is likely to be negatively associated with pre-marital sexual behaviors (Kogan & Weißmann, 2020; Visser et al., 2007). From a similar perspective, Jones argues that Islamic clothing has a disciplining effect in a way that it reminds individuals how to act and interact with people of other gender (2010, p. 624). Accordingly, I suggest that religious values and religiosity have im/material impact on pious individuals in re/shaping their sexual behaviors.

As mentioned before, im/materiality, religiosity, and sexuality are intertwined in my pious Muslim research participants' sexting practices. I utilize these scholarly accounts to understand how pious Muslim sexters I study make use of sexting and how they negotiate with Islamic norms while involving sexting, which eliminates the necessity of physical interaction, one of the mandatory requirements of offline sex.

5.1. Heterosex(t)ual Affairs and Islamic Religiosity

I have observed that there are several ways through which Islam and Islamic religiosity regulate and control the sexual selves and practices of my pious research participants. First and foremost, all of them, especially women, have grown up with the knowledge that they should abstain from *zina,* sexual proximity, and relationships outside marriage. From the beginning of their early childhood, they, particularly women, have been implicitly, sometimes explicitly, taught that pre-marital sex is wrong and that they should not engage in sex until they get

married. This message is usually given through conventional media, mainly TV series, news reports, religious groups/leaders, and families. Unmarried young women or girls who engage in pre-marital sexual relationships are mainly represented as sexually exploited objects by men, and they are subject to various violence, discrimination, and loss of honor (Öztürk, 2011). As discussed in Chapter 3, honor and women's sexuality are closely tied to each other, and women should protect their virginity until marriage for the sake of their own and their families' honor. Yasemin was born with the knowledge that pre-marital sex is forbidden. However, in her religiously conservative family living in a small Anatolian town, sex-related topics had never been discussed during her childhood and teenage years. In her words,

> Of course, there was a negative attitude toward it [pre-marital sex], especially for women. It was never mentioned or discussed in my household. I learned these rules through implicit messages and sub-texts. I don't know how, but I, as a child, knew that I shouldn't insert anything in there [in her vagina]. As a child, you are afraid of sex, and you grow up with this fear. (Interview with Yasemin, 2021)

Despite the silence over sexuality-related topics, Yasemin, like many other research participants, had cultivated the knowledge of protecting her body and her virginity by staying away from pre-marital sex and also from *"inserting anything in there."*

Similarly, Gamze, who was born and grew up in a highly religious family with sex-segregated social habitus, expressed that sexuality-related issues had never been discussed and verbalized among her family. Islam necessitates sex-segregated socialization (*haremlik selamlık,* in Turkish) for women and men outside their familial spheres. Religious ceremonies, whether they are in Mosques or houses, are conducted in sex-segregated ways in conservative communities in Turkey despite its secularization history. I remember from my childhood that several weddings in rural areas we attended were also sex-segregated. I think the idea of having sex-segregated wedding ceremonies is to hide the dancing women's bodies from the male gaze.

In contemporary Turkey, the AKP and the Erdoğan Regime have been trying to implement sex segregation in education and public transportation. There are several examples of sex-segregated public transportation and high schools in several cities, which attracted criticism from secular groups.[52] The organization of public and private spheres in a sex-segregated way is embraced among fundamentalist and radical Islamist groups and highly conservative communities in Turkey.

Putting pre-marital sexual and romantic affairs aside, Gamze's parents did not give any information about menstruation and other physio-biological changes that she would experience throughout her teenage years. She told me that she had never talked to her mother and older sisters about her menstruation. Accordingly, talking within her family about pre-marital romantic and sexual affairs was out of the limits. When I asked her whether she could speak to her parents about sexuality-related topics, she was very shocked and reacted unambivalently.

> No way! We don't talk about it [sex and sexuality]. My mother did not even tell me that I would bleed. I learned it in the school. I also didn't tell my mother when I had my first bleeding. I don't know, but I can't discuss such issues with my mother. I feel ashamed. … I don't know how, but people are growing up knowing that *zina* is forbidden. No one told me anything about it, but I have known it forever (Interview with Gamze, 2019)

Despite the "no talk on sexuality" rules (Özyeğin, 2015) within the *Islamicate* culture of Turkey, Gamze has learned that *"zina is forbidden."* Marshall G. S. Hodgson originally introduced the concept of *Islamicate* to refer to societies or communities where some version of Islam is lived. Later, Babayan and Najmabadi (2008) adopted the term and suggested *Islamic Sexualities* to study peculiar sexualities in Muslim contexts. Sertaç Şehlikoğlu (2016) has successfully applied this term to the context of Turkey. Although Turkey is not an Islamic state,

[52] https://haber.sol.org.tr/toplum/bursa-ve-malatyadan-sonra-marasta-da-toplu-ulasimda-harem-selamlik-221676 https://www.sozcu.com.tr/yeni-egitim-modeli-haremlik-selamlik-wp7556519

the society, including the secular groups, has embedded several Islamic solid values and ways of doing things. I think the ambivalent silence over sexuality is a component of the *Islamicate culture* of Turkey. As discussed in Chapter 3, there is no talk/education on sexuality either at schools or in families in Turkey; however, people grow up knowing the rules and feelings surrounding it. In this regard, Gamze has also been socialized with the feeling of shame attached to sexuality. There is a common understanding that sexuality-related issues and the transgression of sexuality norms are a source of shame that is very likely to break one's (especially women's) connection with their communities in Muslim societies (Bouhdiba, 2008). Shame and sexuality are glued to each other with *namus (honor),* particularly that of women. Men's reputation in society greatly depends on their honor, which is maintained through the protection of women's *namus* in their immediate families (Dilmaç, 2016; Sev'er & Yurdakul, 2001). Accordingly, women's sexual misconducts threaten their male relatives' social status, which results in the alienation of the women and the family within the community (Dilmaç, 2016). In this sense, I suggest that religiously informed norms regulating sexual behaviors have an im/material impact on unmarried young adults, especially devoted Muslims, in shaping their sexual behaviors. This well explains why Gamze had and still has stayed away from talking to her mother about sexuality-related issues. For this reason, although it was never talked about within the family, she has been socialized with the norms regulating sexuality, such as protecting virginity until marriage, staying away from sexual affairs, and hiding the menstrual kits. These norms mainly work for women and their sexualities. For instance, women are generally taught to keep their menstruation cycles invisible. In some small and medium-sized shops, hygienic pads are wrapped in old newspapers by the cashiers after the payment so that the sexuality of the woman purchasing the hygienic pad is covered from the public eye.

The quotes from Yasemin and Gamze further signify and demonstrate the unspoken nature of sexuality and the value given to virginity, particularly women's virginity, in Turkey,

especially among Muslim communities. Despite this unspoken nature of sexuality, individuals learn the rules regulating sexual matters and behave accordingly for years until they encounter alternative lifestyles, mostly on university campuses, because some university campuses provide comparatively liberal, secular environments, especially those in big cities. In this regard, Avcı and Özdedeli note that many women in Turkey have grown up with the idea that sex is a sinful and shameful act (2015, p. 235). Accordingly, the primary and ultimate principle, especially for girls and women, is to protect their virginity by staying away from pre-marital sex, namely *zina.* It is very striking that even though they have grown up in a society where there is supposedly no talk on sexuality, both Yasemin and Gamze, like many others, know that *zina* is to be avoided. As a child, Yasemin knew that she "*shouldn't insert anything in there,"* and Gamze was aware of the regulation of *zina,* although no one had told them a word.

Having been socialized with the Islamic norms regulating sexuality from early childhood, my devoted Muslim research participants have developed a certain level of self-discipline concerning their sexual desires. I suggest that my pious research participants' self-disciplining of their pre-marital sexual desires and behaviors are closely linked to Foucault's concept of "techniques of the self," through which individuals actively shape and govern their conduct (Foucault, 2005). By engaging in these practices, individuals contribute to their self-discipline, aligning their behavior with societal, in our case, Islamic, expectations. The self-disciplining originates in their Islamic religiosity and faith through which they wish to become good Muslim subjects. In my understanding, self-disciplining through Islamic norms is closely tied to Mahmood's (2005) theorization of agency as these individuals willingly and consciously prefer to cultivate Islamic values to deepen their Islamic faith for the purpose of becoming a particular Muslim subject, even though these Islamic norms seemingly subordinate them. In other words, instead of resisting Islamic norms that surround and subordinate them, these devoted Muslim individuals prefer to commit themselves actively to these norms as they believe

this is what a good Muslim must do while they also engage in sex(t)ual relationships. Accordingly, I suggest that my pious research participants both resist and submit themselves to the Islamic norms that enable their very sex(t)ual and religious subjectivities.

Having been socialized with Islamic norms regulating sexuality and developing self-disciplining for sexual matters have a significant impact on how my pious research participants pursue their sex(t)ual relationships and how they feel about it. In other words, Islamic norms of sexuality act as a "thoughtlike" and have im/material influence on my research participants' sex(t)ualities in terms of shaping their sex(t)ual behaviors (Küchler, 2005, p. 225). For instance, my devoted Muslim research participants consider their religiosity and faith a kind of control mechanism that functions to balance their sex(t)ual desires. Their religiosity and faith work as integral components of self-disciplining to keep them away from what Islam forbids. Due to their religiosity and faith, they consciously or not control and monitor their sex(t)ual behaviors and limit their sexual desires. By doing so, in return, they further cultivate their Islamic faith, which enhances their pious agencies. Regarding the constitution of Islamic piety and ideal selfhood, Shively, in her research on Muslim individuals in Turkey, argues that submission and resistance take place simultaneously because Muslim individuals are subject to diverse, sometimes contradictory, expectations and norms (2014, p. 466).

Herd1071 is a recently graduated young businessman with right-wing nationalist political views, as indicated by his preference for pseudonyms. Although I asked all my research participants to pick a pseudonym for themselves, only Herd1071 suggested one for himself. Herd1071 does not have any meaningful significance in Turkish. However, in my opinion, by 1071, he referred to the Battle of Manzikert, which took place in 1071, when the Turks decisively defeated the Byzantine Empire and opened the Anatolian gates to the Turks. The Turkification of Anatolia followed this battle. The right-wing nationalist parties in Turkey, which are most likely to have religiously conservative politics, embrace the Turkification of

Anatolia as they promote the spread of Turks in the world, and they are proud of the Turks' conquest of Anatolia. These parties are likely to ally with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in most of the general and Presidential elections, and they share very similar attitudes concerning gender and sexuality, such as LGBTI+ rights, abortion, and women's sexuality. For instance, these parties acted together and supported AKP and Erdoğan in their arbitrary decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention. Regarding how his religious values and faith impact his sexual behaviors, Herd1071 stated that

> My Islamic faith actually positively impacts my sexual life. I mean, I used to perform worship regularly, and at those times, my worship prevented me from gazing at women and interacting with them in any form, which may lead to something sexual. It was repressing my sexual desires. This is why I consider it to have a positive impact. (Interview with Herd1071, 2021)

Herd1071 strongly agrees with the idea that Islam disapproves of premarital sexual affairs; however, like most of my pious research participants, he often follows his sexual desires and transgresses the Islamic sexual rules. In his understanding, his Islamic religiosity and sexual desires, and subsequently sexual acts, are in inverse proportion because when he prays regularly, he stays away from sexual interactions. For this reason, his religiosity functions as a control mechanism that has an im/materiality acting as a "thoughtlike" preventing him from having premarital sex, which, in his understanding, is prohibited by Allah (Küchler, 2005, p. 225).

Erman, a devoted Muslim man, has an offline sex life and practices sexting. Erman's Islamic values have a significant impact on his sexting practices. In his words,

> When I have ablution *(abdestli olmak in Turkish),* I am very conscious of what kind of messages I am sending on my phone because I remember that I have ablution. I don't send and receive sexual images

> because of my ablution. The idea of ablution is to keep you on the ethical side. (Interview with Erman, 2021)

Erman's proximity to Allah through an Islamic ritual, namely ablution, restricts Erman's sexting behaviors. In the understanding of Erman, the Islamic purpose of ablution is to preserve Muslims from sins and to prevent them from sinning. His ablution reminds itself when Erman is about to conduct sin to prevent him. Accordingly, his Islamic values and practices have an im/material impact that functions as a control mechanism, keeping devoted Muslim believers away from sexual misconduct such as sexting. My argument that religiosity functions as a control mechanism for self-disciplining is in line with Eşsizoğlu and his colleague's finding that a higher degree of religiosity is linked with a lower or null engagement with sexual behaviors (Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011). The proximity to Islamic values and Allah through regular praying performances shapes my research participants' perception of *zina* in a way that they stay away from what is religiously outlawed. Jacobson observes a similar pattern among Muslim individuals in Norway. She has found that "controlling of nafs … to achieve a balance between the different dimensions of the self" was common among her informants (Jacobsen, 2011, p. 70). For instance, her pious Muslim women informants abstain from going out with men even though one part of their selves want to do so.

Further, regret is among the most well-known notions in the Quran and is a crucial aspect of Islamic piety (Reynolds & Moghadam, 2021). Allah commands its believers to seek forgiveness through regret (repentance), which leads them to cultivate their piety. Muslim believers who regret their sins and turn to Allah seeking forgiveness must be sincere; otherwise, Allah will not accept their wish for forgiveness (Ḥusain, 1969, p. 193). Accordingly, the feeling of regret is an integral component of Islamic self-disciplining concerning pre-marital sex(t)ual desires and practices. My interviews with the devoted Muslim research participants and the close reading of the discussion threads on *Kızlar Soruyor* suggest that regret is a feeling that

most of my religious research participants experience when and after they are involved in sex(t)ual relationships. The feeling of regret, which is associated with sex(t)ual affairs, originates in the act of straying from Islamic norms and the commands of Allah, therefore becoming a sinful subject. Gamze, a pious, veiled woman, was born and grew up in a strictly conservative family where Islamic norms dominated the way things were done. For instance, men and women were not allowed to socialize together within their extended family because of Islamic norms that enforce sex segregation. Gamze engages in sexting practices only with her boyfriends, and she regrets her sex(t)ual "misconduct" as she disobeys the commands of Allah.

> My Islamic belief does not prevent me from doing it because I practice sexting. However, I regret it afterward. I suffer from conscience. It is cumbersome for me. This is why I want to get married and have a sex life in a *halal* [permitted by Allah] way. (Interview with Gamze, 2019)

Like almost all of my pious research participants, Gamze is involved in sexting despite her religious commitment, which requires her to stay away from any pre-marital sex(t)ual relationship. However, she *"suffer(s) from conscience,"* which is a sign of her regret for sex(t)ual "misconduct." Her regret of having sexted with her boyfriend was so powerful that she wanted to marry him even though they had been together for six months.

Some pious members of *Kızlar Soruyor* who practice sexting also experience a similar feeling of regret as a result of their engagement in sexting practices. For instance, a confidential profile signed up as a woman member between the ages of 18 and 24 posted a question: *"I'm a veiled woman, and I had sexting. I feel very restless and unsettled. Is there anyone like me?"*[53] The most liked answer was from "mihribann1", a profile signed up as a 32-year-old woman member who has given 6 thousand and 300 answers in sexuality-related posts. The answer was, *"If you did it voluntarily, don't be unrest, dear; don't bother yourself."* "mihribann1" did not

[53] https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/qt/cinsel-yasam/q21261450-tesetturluyum-ama-seksting-yaptim-cok-huzursuzum-benim-gibi-olan-var

refer to any religious values but tried to comfort the woman posting the main thread, pinpointing her willingness to sext. There are several posts under the main thread. Some of them share their similarities: how they engage in sexting despite their religious faith and, as a result, feel regret. However, they express that despite their Islamic regret, they continue to engage in sexting practices, which implies that their sexual desires and religiosities are fighting, but neither of them can win. In this regard, Shively states that "the individual would have to consciously position and reposition herself among various normative systems in a lifelong process that may never be fully settled" (2014, p. 476).

The above cases further demonstrate that Islamic norms regulating sexual behaviors have an im/materiality with a capacity to re/shape my research participants' sex(t)ual behaviors and how they feel about it afterward. Accordingly, Islamic religiosity functions as a disciplinary mechanism that primarily works through generating the feeling of regret when and after my pious research participants perform sex(t)ual practices such as masturbation, offline sex, and sexting, which are condemned in Islam. The feeling of regret originating from Islamic religiosity does not prevent my research participants from engaging in pre-marital sex(t)ual relationships. On the contrary, despite the regret they feel, my research participants continue practicing sexting. The crucial task that the feeling of regret achieves is to remind devoted, pious Muslim research participants of their religious selves and what Islamic norms command. However, as I will show in the next section, my pious research participants are not passive objects who directly implement the religious doctrines. On the contrary, despite the robust control mechanisms and self-disciplining, they tend to negotiate with and *re*interpret Islamic norms regulating sexuality. As against the Islamic norms which forbid pre-marital sexual affairs, *zina,* the pious people whose stories I share, engage in sex(t)ual relationships without leaving their religiosity; therefore, as it will become more apparent in the following pages, Islamic religiosity and sex(t)ual self can cohabit in a Muslim body.

5.2. How Sinful Is Sexting?

> "Is sexting sinful and disgraceful?"[54]

> "I had sexting with my lover. Do you think it is sinful? I feel bad about it."[55]

> "As I'm thinking of my sins, I also think of this: sexting. I haven't sent any photos but only sext and I do it often. I want to know whether it is *zina.*"[56]

Whether and how sinful sexting is among the most recurring and debated questions on *Kızlar Soruyor*. Numerous posts are questioning sexting in terms of Islamic norms, particularly *zina.* The devoted Muslim believers I interviewed, on the other hand, contended that sexting is a sinful act. However, they did not have precise ideas about whether sexting can be considered *zina.* The very reason that makes these people question sexting in terms of Islamic norms – whether it is a sin or *zina* – is linked to the religious regret that they feel. The discussion of whether it is a sin or *zina* is crucial because sin can be forgivable; however, *zina* is listed among the major sins that are not forgivable in Islam. In fact, in Islamic countries that are ruled by Sharia law, *zina* is punished by death as it is written in the Quran. This is why *zina* carries such a burden. Because the members of the *Kızlar Soruyor* want to eliminate their regret, they wish to be assured that their sex(t)ual practices are not sin or *zina.* Since physical bodies do not interact and bodily fluids do not spread, some Muslim sexters think that sexting is less sinful than offline sex and cannot be *zina.* There is also a group of Muslims who state that they do not share their self-images in their sexting practices and keep their bodies unseen; therefore, they tend to consider their sexting practices less sinful than offline sexting, "real" sex. Nevertheless, they want to know for sure whether the lack of physical interaction and preservation of the

[54] https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/qt/cinsel-yasam/q21789594-sexting-sanal-tatmin-gunah-ayip-bir-sey-mi

[55] https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/cinsellik/q18238868-sexting-yapmak-kotu-bisey-mi

[56] https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/qt/cinsel-yasam/q19863385-sexting-yapmak-z-naya-giriyor-mu

Muslim body, which is enabled by the digitally mediated materiality of sexting, makes sexting less sinful and not *zina.*

Although there are several answers on *Kızlar Soruyor* to these questions that argue that sexting is a sinful act and indeed a *zina,* there were also shared views that sexting cannot be *zina,* as the following excerpts demonstrate.

> In my opinion, it cannot be really *zina.* While sexually pleasing yourself, it is normal to get some help *without touching and seeing someone else*, without harming yourself *through your fantasy world,* in order to satisfy yourself excitedly.[57] (italic as my emphasis)

This is an answer given by "sevgiperisi034" (lovefairy034), who signed up as a 33-year-old man-identified profile and gave 308 answers on sexuality-related topics. The phrases *"without touching and seeing someone else"* and *"through your fantasy world"* resonate with the digitally mediated materiality of sexting, which enables sexting partners to "embody" the sensational impacts of imagining and exchanging erotic and sexual messages. Accordingly, the lack of bodily interaction, the absence of "material" touch, smell, and bodily fluids in its conventional meaning, makes "sevgiperi034" think that sexting "*cannot be really zina."*

> I don't think it is anything like that. In the end, there is nothing *real*. You don't know the other person, and you are only having a nice time; that's all. …[58] (italic as my emphasis)

This is a comment under the question of *"Is sexting sinful?"* and was made by a confidential member who signed up as a man profile. The notion of *"real"* in the comment is crucial as it differentiates sexting from offline sex and explains why sexting is not sinful on account of the person who made this comment. However, I find the notion of *"real"* tricky regarding the practice of sexting. I am occupied with the question of the extent to which sexting is imaginary

[57] https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/qt/cinsel-yasam/q19863385-sexting-yapmak-z-naya-giriyor-mu
[58] https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/cinsel-yasam/q17432648-seksting-gunah-mi

and not real, especially considering the existence of tangible exchanged messages and the bodily embodied impacts of sexting. The conventional understanding of materiality as an artifact that one can touch, smell, taste, or hear has faded to new ways of conceptualizing materiality. According to new ways of understanding materiality, things we experience through digital devices are also material (Thrift, 2005). The images that appear in our minds due to these experiences also have material capacities (Küchler, 2005). In sexting, parties visualize sexual scenarios in their minds depending on the exchanged words, fantasies, and desires. Therefore, what is imaginary in sexting acts like material in operating bodily sensual impacts on the parties as individuals receive specific sexual pleasure and have orgasms in some cases. It is this ambiguous, half real and half imaginary, digitally mediated materiality of sexting that enables a group of devoted Muslim believers to consider sexting less sinful and not *zina* while also having sex(t)ual pleasure out of it.

Zuhal, a devoted veiled woman research participant raised in a religiously conservative family and studying Islamic theology at a university level, also considers sexting less sinful compared to offline sex.

> In my opinion, it is definitely less sinful. Let me first tell you this: It is not a reason for me to practice sexting. I'm thinking now that there is no *physical contact*. Some people even do this without sending photos. It is sinful because you are generating wrongful emotions on the other party. Why is it wrong? Because you two are not married, it is wrong. It is sinful but less sinful. … It is a sin that cannot be compared to *zina.* (Interview with Zuhal, 2021) (Italic as my emphasis)

In the account of Zuhal, sexting is certainly less sinful compared to offline sex because it lacks *"physical contact":* physical co-presence and interaction of bodies, touch, smell, and bodily fluids. While mentioning the people who practice sexting without exchanging self-images, Zuhal addresses the anonymity that sexting provides, which enables the parties to keep their

bodies or themselves unknown to their sexting partners; therefore, they do not sex(t)ually display their bodies. As discussed in length in Chapter 3, women's bodies are considered *mahrem* (private, intimate, sacred), which needs to be kept hidden from outsiders, strangers who are not bound through marital or familial ties (Göle, 2015; Şehlikoğlu, 2015). In this sense, sexting provides a form of sex(t)uality that does not break this norm because the sexting partner does not see the other party's body. Nevertheless, Zuhal agrees that because sexting creates *"wrongful emotions"* on the people who are not married and, therefore, who are not halal (permitted by Allah) to each other, it is sinful.

However, I have also observed on *Kızlar Soruyor* that these views are countered by more Islamic views arguing that sexting is a sin and, indeed, *zina.*

> What do those who comment in this way think so? The notion of sin does not vary from person to person. That what you are saying (sexting) is a sin. How come that woman and man chatting about such things, seducing each other, and even ejaculating cannot be a sin? Besides, even holding hands with a woman and a man who are not married to each other is a sin.[59]

A confidential profile, signed up as a woman member aged between 18-24, posted a question: *"Is sexting (cyber satisfaction) something disgraceful and sin?"* and the above comment was posted as an answer. At first glance, this comment seems to function as putting socio-religious pressure on Muslim people who engage in sexting and to make them obey Islamic norms. Savitri Hartono (2018) also observed similar behavior on Facebook, where Indonesian Muslim women engage in discussions through posts and comments to put pressure on others concerning piety and modesty. However, there are several meanings embedded in this comment. One point I find crucial in this comment is an emphasis on the "realness" or "materiality" of sexting through the words *"chatting," "seducing," and "ejaculating."* Unlike some devoted Muslim

[59] https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/qt/cinsel-yasam/q21789594-sexting-sanal-tatmin-gunah-ayip-bir-sey-mi

believers who believe that sexting is not "real" and, therefore, is less sinful or is not a sin, as I exemplified and discussed earlier in this chapter, this comment referring the reality of sexting by pinpointing embodied impacts of sexting such as *"ejaculating"* and considers sexting a sin. In sexting, parties do not physically touch, smell, or kiss each other's bodies. Instead, they imagine doing these things and feel the effect of their imagined sexual and erotic scenarios. As mentioned earlier, Küchler argues that "thought" (read as imagined sexual scenarios) can work as material and have material impacts (2005, p. 225). Here, ejaculation is one of the material consequences (in its conventional meaning) of sexting. Sexting spreads sexual pleasure between the parties involved and makes them have tangible changes in their bodies and minds. The material changes in their minds, feelings, and bodies reveal the reality of sexting.

Another critical point in the comment is its reference to Islam's in/stability and in/flexibility. The comment argues that Islam's rules are set and apply to all Muslims; they cannot change depending on people. However, the very discussion of whether sexting is a sin or *zina* implies that Islam is open to *re*interpretations and adaptations. Besides, the multiplicity of views on the subject also shows that Islam is not stable, but flexible. Islamic belief is subject to change based on the cultures in which it is practiced and lived (Esposito, 1998). The instability and inflexibility of Islam, along with the digitally mediated materiality of sexting, I suggest, enables devoted Muslim believers to question Islamic norms concerning the issue of sex(t)uality.

The sinfulness of cybersex, whether it is phone sex, sexting, or cam-sex, was also discussed by more institutional religious figures in the early 2000s in Turkey. For instance, in 2005, Zeynel Abidin Çiçek, Diyarbakır Muftiate Fetwa Council President, talked about the sexual and erotic chats between men and women on the Internet and argued that these behaviors

are sin and considered *zina of eye.*[60] There was a blooming of Internet café houses in Turkey in those years, as computers with Internet connections in houses were not as common and accessible as they are today. Many people, especially youth and young adults, used to spend their leisure time surfing on the Internet in those cafes. Chat rooms also gained popularity, especially among young adults, through increasing Internet accessibility in those years. Diyarbakır is a city in southeastern Turkey. Multi-ethnic, primarily Kurdish, and multi-religious people inhabit Diyarbakır, which has a mosaic social structure. Nevertheless, Islamic and conservative values are dominant in the city. Çiçek expressed that such behaviors are religiously wrongful and would cause great spiritual torment. Similarly, Ali Rıza Demircan, a Turkish Islamic scholar, in his question-answer-based blog, argues that chatting and talking about sex and sexuality is *haram* (forbidden by Allah) for unmarried couples but not for married couples (Demircan, n.d.). Demircan states that sex-related chats between women and men who are not married transgress the norms of *zina.*

Hence, whether sexting is sinful or *zina* is a vexed debate with multiple and contradictory views. Although institutional views claim that sexting is a sinful practice and advise unmarried Muslim believers to stay away from this practice, many Muslim believers continue to question the sinfulness of sexting. In other words, while a group of Muslims consider sexting less sinful and not *zina,* others certainly agree that sexting is a sin and *zina.* For this reason, they not only negotiate with each other but also with their Islamic and sex(t)ual selves to maintain both. In doing so, the digitally mediated materiality of sexting and the instability and flexibility of Islam provide a space for Muslim believers to question and consider sexting less sinful and practice sexting. Furthermore, what is at stake here is my pious research

[60] Müftü is an official religious person attained by the Directorate of the Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) which is governed by the person attained by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the President of Turkey and the founder and chair of Justice and Development Party (AKP)
https://www.haber3.com/guncel/sanal-seks-de-zinaya-giriyor-haberi-25286

participants' conscious choices regarding their religious and sex(t)ual practices. In this regard, Dokumacı, adopting a relational approach to understand pious women's subjectivities and agencies in Turkey, argues that "autonomy (otonomi), intention (niyet), and choice (seçim)" matter for the constitution of pious subjectivity (2020, p. 10).

5.3. What Does Sexting Provide to Devoted Muslims?

In their quest to understand why an increasing number of people engage in sexting, particularly in the North and Western countries, many scholars have tried to reveal the promises of sexting. They have claimed that the anonymity and im/materiality that sexting, cybersex in general, provides are what allure the people involved in this practice (Burkett, 2015; Carvalheira & Gomes, 2003; Hasinoff, 2015; Walker et al., 2013). For instance, Carvalheira and Gomes (2003) suggest that im/materiality may allow shy people to express their feelings, primarily erotic and sexual ones, to their sexting partners. In this section, I discuss how my pious Muslim research participants benefit from the im/materiality of sexting. At the same time, I question how the digitally mediated materiality of sexting enables a group of unmarried Muslims to maintain their Islamic selves while engaging in sex(t)ual practices that are normatively understood to be forbidden in Islam.

5.3.1. Sex(t)ual Intercourse

My field research suggests that virginity is likely to lose its significance, especially among secular, educated urbanite women and men, in line with Özyeğin's (2015) research on upwardly mobile elite university students in Istanbul. She links the decreasing value attached to virginity among the upwardly mobile secular elite young adults through the increasing individualism, globalism, and neoliberalism (Özyeğin, 2015). That means these young women and men prioritize their ideas and desires over the normative expectations of society and their families. I have encountered only one man but no woman who values virginity and, therefore,

stays away from offline sex. Nevertheless, despite the decrease in the value attached to virginity, most of the devoted Muslim men and women I interviewed prefer to exclude sexual intercourse through which virginity is likely to be "lost" in their offline sexual affairs. Erman and Zuhal's sexual preferences and subjectivities are a telling case in this regard. Erman is a Muslim believer whose story I started this chapter with, and he adopts Islamic norms in his daily life and his decision-making concerning several daily issues, including his romantic and sexual affairs. As he told me, he consciously abstains from sexual intercourse in his offline sexual relationships.

> There are certain limits in sexual relationships. I do not cross these limits because of Islamic norms. I do not find it right to experience the same sexual things in pre-marital sex and marital sex due to my Islamic values. Let's put it this way: I do not think foreplay is taboo for me. It is something I already practice. However, I do not approve of the next level in pre-marital sex. I mean sexual intercourse. I do not approve of sexual intercourse in pre-marital sex due to my Islamic beliefs. (Interview with Erman, 2021)

While he was telling me that he does not *"approve of sexual intercourse in pre-marital sex,"* my mind was occupied with the cultural value given to virginity in Turkey. Although the value given to virginity has been losing its significance among secular, educated, urban young adults (Özyeğin, 2015), the issues of pre-marital sexual relationships and virginity continue to remain taboo subjects in Turkey (Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011; Özkazanç, 2018). It is not common, in fact, tolerable behavior for unmarried women to have sexual affairs outside wedlock. As discussed in Chapter 3, women are socio-culturally expected to and taught to protect their virginity until marriage. For instance, Özbay and his colleagues in their research found that "more than half" of their women participants who were university students did not have sexual intercourse before their interviews (2023, p. 36). The notion of virginity in Turkey is almost always linked to women's sexuality. For this reason, I had thought that the reason for Erman to avoid sexual intercourse was linked to the value he attached to women's virginity, especially considering that

some men still prefer to marry virgin women (Scalco, 2016). However, his answer was puzzling for me because he told me, *"No, I don't value virginity or hymen. It's very outdated and has no importance to me".* Therefore, I asked him to explain further if it is not hymen or virginity, then why does he consciously exclude and disapprove of sexual intercourse in pre-marital sex, while having sexual affairs? He replied in this way:

> Because, firstly, how shall I say it… There are some problems that individuals may experience as a result of this union[61] [sexual intercourse]. Such as extramarital children. My partner might get pregnant and would have to give birth to an extramarital child. (Interview with Erman, 2021)

I understood that Erman was concerned about the biological results of penile-vaginal intercourse, such as pregnancy and extramarital children. Extra-marital pregnancy is a source of burden for unmarried women in Turkey. If an unmarried woman gets pregnant and does not want to have a baby, she seeks an abortion. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, although abortion up to 10 weeks is legal in Turkey, very limited state hospitals provide this service because Erdoğan unofficially prohibited abortion. Besides, most women do not want to have their abortion operations recorded on their National Health Record System, which is surveilled by the government and can be accessed by other doctors. The other option is to go to private clinics that agree to provide abortion services without any record in return for a tremendous amount of money. Therefore, not all women in Turkey can access healthy and accessible abortion services. Besides, women have to deal with all these procedures in secret, hidden from their families and relatives. Otherwise, they will most probably be subject to different forms of violence, ranging from psychological to physical and murder in extreme cases (Abdo, 2004; Kogacioglu, 2004). Having extra-marital children is not an option for women in Turkey as it

[61] The term "union" (birleşme in Turkish) is a commonly used euphemism denoting sexual intercourse.

will cause societal stigma, exclusion, and several kinds of violence, not only against the women but also their children (Ustek & Alyanak, 2016).

Accordingly, in order to avoid such societal troubling experiences, Erman consciously prefers staying away from sexual intercourse in his pre-marital sexual relationships. What needs to be highlighted is that he engages in some sexual relationships despite his Islamic religiosity and faith and despite the commonly accepted doctrine that Islam strictly forbids *zina,* any sexual affair outside a legitimate marriage. This became even more meaningful for Erman because he studied at an Islamic religious school, Imam Hatip School, a secondary religious (Islamic) education institution dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Imam Hatip Schools were initially founded to train government-employed Imams who work in mosques.[62] That is, Erman has trained to be an Imam who is responsible for religiously serving Muslims, showing them the religious path, and calling them to pray. Therefore, it is shocking that Erman, as a religious person trained to be an Imam, strayed from institutional Islam.

A very similar concern appeared in Zuhal's self-inhibition of sexual intercourse in her pre-marital sexual relationships. Zuhal is a veiled woman adopting an Islamic lifestyle and wishing to be a good Muslim subject whom Allah loves (*Allah'ın sevgili kullarından olmak*, in Turkish). She also studies Islamic theology at a university level. Zuhal tries to avoid what is forbidden in Islam, such as gossiping and alcohol consumption, and she minds her modesty in the public sphere. She wishes to be loved by Allah, as it is one of the best qualities a Muslim can achieve, and beloved Muslims are promised to go to heaven. Nevertheless, just like Erman, despite her Islamic piety, Zuhal engages in sexual affairs with her steady romantic relationships

[62] Students graduated from these schools were not allowed to take nation-wide university exams and enter the Turkish universities; however, AKP has changed this regulation in 2012 and has made the universities accessible to Imam Hatip School graduates.

against the commands of Allah. Her pre-marital sexual relationships purposefully exclude sexual intercourse.

> In Islam, premarital sexual relations are prohibited. Why? It leads to the uncertainty of lineage. That is, the parentage of the child becomes unclear, sexual disorders increase, and moral issues occur in society. Also, married individuals engaging in extramarital relationships with unmarried individuals, and so on and so forth, can lead to problems. Actually, when we think about why it is prohibited in Islam, several main reasons come to mind. Due to these reasons that I just mentioned, I do not view pre-marital sexual intercourse favorably (Interview with Zuhal, 2021)

As an unmarried pious woman living in a society where unmarried women, especially religious ones living in Muslim communities, are expected to obey the norms of *zina* and protect their "hymen" until they get married, Zuhal did not mention the value attached to virginity while explaining the reasons for her to avoid pre-marital sexual intercourse. Instead, the potential uncertainty in parental lineage, among other things, such as sexually transmitted diseases, was more significant in her reasons to avoid sexual intercourse in her pre-marital sexual relationships. At the time of our interview, I was unaware of the significance and importance of parental lineage in Islam. Later, while engaging in scholarly works on Islam and sexuality, I realized that parental lineage has significant importance in Islam and is considered one of the reasons why *zina* is forbidden in Islam (Bouhdiba, 2008). An uncertain parental lineage may cause issues with family relations, marriage, and inheritance. It is for this reason, of course, partially, as opposed to its common application in today's Muslim communities, that *zina* is prohibited for both women and men in Islam (Bouhdiba, 2008).

Further, it is exciting that both Erman and Zuhal pinpointed the issue of heteronormative family institution in Islam, and also in Turkey as an *Islamicate* culture, by mentioning the *"extra-marital children"* and *"parentage of the child."* According to Islamic laws, it is only

heterosexual marriage in which sexual relationships and childbearing and raising can take place (Bouhdiba, 2008; Mohammed, 2017). However, the lineage of the men, not women, needs to be protected. Islam allows men to marry up to four wives. Although polygyny was outlawed during the foundation years of the Turkish Republic, it still endures in Turkey. A member of Parliament from the Again Welfare Party (*Yeniden Refah Partisi*), a radical political Islamist party, is known to have three wives.[63] Although it has been a criminal act, there are no investigations against him.

Erman, a pious man who tries to pursue a life in the light of Islamic values, abstains from sexual intercourse in his pre-marital sexual relationships, but his sexting scenarios contain sex(t)ual intercourse. Returning to the quote from Erman that I shared at the beginning of this chapter, the phrase *"certain limits"* refers to sexual intercourse, which he does not experience in his offline sex due to his Islamic values. Erman enjoys the digitally mediated aspect of sexting as it enables him to go beyond *"certain limits."* His sexting practices include scenes of sexual intercourse. He imagines and fantasizes about having sexual intercourse during sexting. As he states, the inclusion of sex(t)ual intercourse in his sexting practices gives him sexual pleasure, which he does not receive in his offline sexual relationships. Accordingly, what is conventionally understood as "immaterial," namely sexting, gives Erman material sexual pleasure that he bodily senses. Here, sex(t)ual scenarios, fantasized by the involved parties, act as "thoughtlike" and achieve a material impact on sexting partners (Küchler, 2005, p. 225).

In a very similar way, Zuhal, a pious and veiled woman, does not practice sexual intercourse in her offline sex life. However, her sexting practices include sex(t)ual intercourse, from which she receives sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

[63] https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/siyaset/yrpli-ali-yukselin-3-esinin-oldugu-ortaya-cikti-tbmmde-olmasi-suc-2086588

> I do not go beyond the certain stage; I mean sexual intercourse in my sexual relationships because of the severe consequences it may cause and also my Islamic values. However, in sexting whatever you do does not bring such consequences. There will be no pregnancy, no transmission of disease, or no damage to kinship linkage. (Interview with Zuhal, 2021)

Since sexting lacks the interaction of flesh, physical bodies, and bodily liquids, it has no material (in its normative meaning) consequences, such as pregnancy and sexually transmissible diseases. In the account of Zuhal, a pregnancy that occurred through *zina* threatens the *"kinship linkage"* because the father of the child to be born would be unknown. This will break the heteronormative familial linkage, which is strictly protected, especially in Muslim circles. For this reason, Zuhal, similar to Erman, prefers having sex(t)ual intercourse in her sexting practices, while she abstains from sexual intercourse in offline pre-marital sex. Accordingly, both Zuhal and Erman extend the limits of their sexual acts, which they set for themselves in light of their Islamic religiosity, through the imaginary feature of sexting. In this regard, they benefit from the digitally mediated materiality of sexting, which enables them to experience a sex(t)uality with sex(t)ual pleasures but without bodily traces that would transgress their Islamic religiosity, namely sexual intercourse. Here, in Küchler's terms, materiality appears in thought and acts as "thoughtlike" (2005, p. 225). Through their thinking and imagining, Zuhal and Erman feel the pleasure of sex(t)ual intercourse without "really" having it. I find this crucial because it refutes the normative and conventional perception of sexting as immaterial and not "real" sex.

Unlike Erman, Zuhal does not sext with the men she may encounter in her daily life, in her friend circles, at school, or extended family gatherings. On the contrary, she consciously prefers to meet her sexting partners online and keep her identity unrevealed to the men she is sexting in order to protect herself. She does not even share her phone number until she develops a certain level of trust, which I have also discussed in Chapter 4. She sexts with her partners

only after their relationship achieves a certain mutual trust level that she knows she can open her sex(t)ual desires to her partner. International studies suggest that digitally mediated communications give Muslim women more say and control over their online relationships than they do over their offline ones (Rochadiat et al., 2018). For instance, as mentioned earlier, the matchmaking of a Muslim woman and man involves third parties to make sure that there is no "misconduct." In other words, according to strict Islamic norms, they are not permitted to stay alone and converse at length without the presence of a third party, who is typically a family member. However, digitally mediated communication channels enable women to eliminate third parties and to have opportunities to get to know their dates in person online without the involvement of a family member (Rochadiat et al., 2018). Accordingly, as is the case in Zuhal, Muslim women can actively decide what to include and exclude in their online romantic and sex(t)ual communications by benefiting from the digitally mediated materiality of sexting. I suggest that this highlights their sex(t)ual and religious agencies as they take active responsibility and authority to decide with whom, to what length, and what to talk about. I find it significantly important that they do not ultimately reject the Islamic norms while pursuing their sex(t)ual desires. In this regard, Mahmood argues that "Norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted, …, but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" (2005, p. 22). From a different perspective, Dokumacı (2020) argues that pious individuals, especially pious women, may engage in "non-Islamic" practices in their daily lives, because no single discursive tradition (Islam) determines their subjectivities and agencies. On the contrary, as she claims, "the discursive traditions of Islam, Turkish secularism, as well as feminism" determine who pious individuals are and what they do and do not do.

Further, as mentioned earlier, neither Erman nor Zuhal addressed the protection of their virginity as a reason for them to stay away from sexual intercourse in their offline sex while having sex(t)ual intercourse in sexting. However, for Karaboyy, who signed up as a man

member of *Kızlar Soruyor*, who is a pious person (as they represented themselves to me, at least), virginity is crucial to be a good Muslim subject, to be loved and appreciated by Allah. For this reason, Karaboyy puts a tremendous amount of effort into staying away from offline sex. Nevertheless, although Karaboyy considers sexting also sinful, they practice it.

> I haven't experienced sex yet. *Zina* is a huge sin in Islam. Allah forbids it. However, everyone is doing it these days. Even I, a firm believer, hardly keep my control of it. I will wait until I get married. I practice sexting… Virginity is very important to me. As I said, I will wait until I get married. (Chat-based informal interview with Karaboyy on Kızlar Soruyor, 2019)

The capacity of sexual desires to draw a Muslim subject into "illicit" sexual contact manifests itself in Karaboyy's involvement in sexting practices, even if they perceive sexting as sinful (though less sinful than offline sex). The absence of physical interaction between partners in sexting opens a space for Karaboyy to experience sex(t)ual relationships without engaging in physical, sexual interaction. Regarding the protection of the hymen and, therefore, virginity, Özyeğin uses the concept of "technical virginity " in discussing how a group of young urbanite educated upwardly mobile women "engage in various sexual activities but avoid penile-vaginal intercourse" in order to keep their hymen intact (2015, p. 54). Özyeğin (2015) argues that these women develop "virginal facades" to engage in sexual relationships to experience and explore their sexual desires while also protecting their hymen in order to avoid any trouble they may experience. Although this concept can be instrumental in understanding and discussing the use of sexting by women who abstain from sexual intercourse and engage in sexting, it is rather challenging to apply this concept to understand and explain Karaboyy's case, as Karaboyy represented themselves to me and the general public as a man on *Kızlar Soruyor*. Unlike women, men are not socio-culturally expected to stay away from pre-marital sex in Turkey. Having sexual experience is regarded as a masculine trait for men. Nevertheless, Karaboyy

believes they maintain themselves as virgin by engaging in sexting practices while exploring their sexual desires and fantasies. Here, what is crucial, I suggest, is the working of digitally mediated materiality of sexting, which provides a sex(t)uality for those Muslims who want to explore their sexualities but also wish to remain pious and religiously pure.

5.3.2. Preserving the Sex(t)ual Muslim Body

While talking about whether sexting is a sin and *zina,* Zuhal stated that *"some people even do this without sending photos."* These women prefer not to visually represent their bodies to their sexting partners, men to whom they are not married. According to Islamic norms, looking and being looked at is not *halal* (permitted by Allah). For this reason, instead of visually representing their bodies, some people may prefer to represent their bodies while sexting by utilizing the digitally mediated materiality of sexting. There were also numerous discussions on *Kızlar Soruyor* about devoted Muslims, particularly veiled women's preference for not sharing their self-images with their sexting partners. For instance, a confidential member aged between 18 and 24 asked, "*Is it a sin to sext without sharing photos and voice messages, but only text?"*[64] The following are some answers to the question posted:

> With only text – 20.
>
> With voice – 40
>
> With – 60 good deeds points (*sevap point*, in Turkish) (27-year-old man identified profile)
>
> Of course, it is a sin. You are talking to a stranger man through your hand and taking pleasure out of this. (Woman identified confidential profile aged between 30-35 years)

[64] https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/cinsel-yasam/q17432648-seksting-gunah-mi

> Well, I'm doing it. I think it's better than sleeping with someone. (Man identified confidential profile, aged between 30-35 years)

> It is a sin but a need. (28-year-old, man identified profile)

As the samples demonstrate, the answers range from ridiculing to blaming and supporting the person asking the question. Some of them think sexting, regardless of whether it is with photos or voice messages, is a sin, while others consider sexting a better option compared to offline sex to meet their sex(t)ual desires and needs. There is no consensus or an agreed view on whether it is less sinful to *"sext without photos."* Here, what I question is not the sinfulness of sharing sexualized self-images during sexting. Instead, I am interested in the religious, cultural, and theoretical implications of (not) sharing self-images in sexting. How could sending or not sending self-images in sexting be linked to Islamic piety, particularly to pious Muslim women? It is mainly for women because it was almost always woman-identified profiles that asked questions regarding the sin of sharing self-images in sexting. Interestingly, unlike the pious women I interviewed, my pious men interlocutors were not worried about sending their self-images during sexting. Besides, it is primarily women's bodies that must be hidden from the male gaze and strangers (Göle, 2015; Şehlikoğlu, 2015).

Through veiling, Muslim women not only perform their religious faith but also conceal their bodies.[65] According to Jones (2010), veiling and the Islamic way of dressing have a disciplining effect on women as it constantly reminds them of the Islamic rules of inter-gender

[65] There is an enormous literature on Muslim women and veiling; however it is impossible to cover them all here. I would like to address some of them: Scott, J. W. (2009). *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton University Press.; Najmabadi, A. (2000). (Un)Veiling Feminism. *Social Text*, *18*(3), 29–45.; Hoodfar, H. (2001). The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women. In E. A. Castelli (Ed.), *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* (pp. 420–446). Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-04830-1_22; Khiabany, G., & Williamson, M. (2008). Veiled bodies — naked racism: Culture, politics and race in the Sun. *Race & Class*, *50*(2), 69–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396808096394; Odeh, L. A. (1993). Post-Colonial Feminism and the Veil: Thinking the Difference. *Feminist Review*, *43*(1), 26–37. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1993.2

social interactions. Concealing of Muslim women's bodies is closely linked with the notion of *mahrem,* which "signifies the interior, sacred, gendered space, forbidden to exterior and stranger masculine gaze which is both spatial and corporeal" (Göle, 2015, p. 47). Accordingly, through veiling, Muslim women preserve their *mahrem* body parts from those men who are not members of their nuclear family or with whom they are not bound by blood tie; therefore, with whom they can marry. Speaking in Islamic terms, they are hiding their bodies from the gaze of men who are not halal to them. A woman and a man who are not halal to each other, who are not married, in secular terms, are not allowed to see and look at each other's bodies. It is for this reason that a group of Muslim women prefer to practice sexting by not sharing their self-images. By doing so, they engage in sex(t)ual activity in which their bodies remain unknown, unseen, and untouched by "the stranger male gaze" (Göle, 2015, p. 47). In its normative understanding, it might seem that the bodies or the images of bodies lack in this kind of sexting, as the sexters prefer not to share their self-images. However, the "bodies … come to matter through world's iterative intra-activity-its performativity (Barad, 2003, p. 823). In other words, bodies are materialized through reiterating and citing what signifies the body in sexting. In this sense, sexting messages and the feelings they create are material.

Therefore, the digitally mediated materiality of sexting enables a group of pious women who practice sexting to bypass the conventional rules of sex, which require the bodily interaction of partners. To put it simply, utilizing the digitally mediated materiality of sexting, they imagine their body types, bodily details, and physicality instead of seeing their pictures and their bodies. By doing so, they also play around with the Islamic norms that command the preservation of Muslim women's bodies. Accordingly, by being concerned about their Islamic selves and faith, the devoted Muslim research participants actively discipline, shape, and govern their sex(t)ual practices by employing "techniques of the self" (Foucault, 2005). Therefore, they manifest a certain "modality of action" that does not resist Islam but negotiates with it

(Mahmood, 2005, p. 157). Further, this shows us that what is normatively understood to be exclusionary -premarital sex and pious subjectivity- may sit together. Sahar Amer (2020) observes a similar pattern in the lives of Muslim women living in Europe who consume highly fashionable Islamic attire. Islam is considered to discourage unnecessary consumption, especially extravagant or fashionable consumption. However, observing the lives and consumption patterns of Muslim women living in European countries, Amer (2020) argues that being fashionable and pious are no longer exclusive.

The notions of mahrem and gaze became controversial on Turkish social media when the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) made a digital book titled "Our Family Life" (Aile Hayatımız) accessible to the public during the pandemic. The book was initially published in 2015, but it was not digitally accessible at the time. The Ministry decided to make it digitally accessible to the public during the 2020 pandemic for unknown reasons. The book's content has religiously informed advice on heterosexual family life and how to pursue a good family life. In this book, there was a piece of advice on looking at mahrem body parts for unmarried couples who are sincere in their intentions to marry.

> While it is forbidden for the opposite sexes, who do not intend to marry and who can legally marry each other, to look at each other's *mahrem* body parts through relevant verses, it is permitted with certain limitations when they have sincere marriage intentions. … Parties can look at body parts that give ideas about their physics. It is not right to go beyond the limits, as sexuality is not the primary purpose of marriage. (Yaman, 2015, p. 53)

Numerous contradictory and overlapping comments, discussions, and news about this advice existed. A group of people ridiculed it by calling it "halal sexting," while some others, rather religious ones, defended the Diyanet. I asked my research participants for their ideas on this advice. Their responses were also divergent. Interestingly, Erman did not believe that Diyanet had published a book with this advice. After our interview, I sent him the digital copy and a

screenshot of the page where this advice was written. He thanked me and made no further comment. Herd1071 found it very progressive for Diyanet to give such advice, as every individual has a right to know the bodily features of the person they are to marry. Zuhal was more critical of the advice, and she found it rather unfortunate. She also commented on how the notion of *mahrem* might be different for people with varying levels of religiosity. In her words,

> How a woman wearing a burqa understands *mahrem* is totally different from an observant Muslim. For her [a woman with a burqa], even her arms are *mahrem.* But an observant Muslim may wear a swimsuit and go to a beach (Interview with Zuhal, 2021)

Zuhal's comment implies that Muslims have different levels of religious faith and commitment and that they perceive and practice *mahrem* in different ways. I find this very explanatory in understanding whether and to what extent religiosity informs one's sex(t)ual practices. To enunciate, while some pious Muslims do not abstain from sharing their images in sexting, some others prefer not sharing their images in their sexting practices because by doing so, they preserve their Muslim bodies as commanded by Allah while also sex(t)ually satisfying themselves. Their level of religiosities has an impact on how and to what extent they conduct "techniques of the self", by disciplining, shaping, and governing their sex(t)ual behaviors and preferences in sexting practices (Foucault, 2005). Notably, their Islamic subjectivity and faith do not lead them to exclude their sex(t)ual desire. Similarly, while pursuing their sex(t)ual desires, they do not leave their Islamic faith behind. Their Islamic and sex(t)ual agencies are in constant negotiation.

5.4.Conclusion

This chapter questions the religious, cultural, and theoretical implications of unmarried, devoted Muslim women and men's engagement in sexting practices. In thinking about the use

of sexting by unmarried pious Muslims, I asked why it is that unmarried pious Muslims prefer to engage in sexting even though any sexual affair that is not between husband and wife and not within the heterosexual marriage is strictly forbidden in Islam. The answer has become clear to me as I read the discussions on *Kızlar Soruyor:* their sexual desires. Then I realized that rather than asking why, it is more meaningful to focus on how pious Muslims perceive and practice sexting.

The pious women and men I interviewed were not so much concerned about whether sexting is a sin or *zina.* In their understanding, sexting should be less sinful compared to offline sex because it lacks "material" interaction. There is no smelling, touching, kissing, or spread/exchange of bodily fluids in sexting. With the same logic, they were also confident that sexting could not be *zina.* In their understanding, for *zina* to occur, there must be material interaction and sexual intercourse, which is absent in sexting. However, there were multiple, sometimes contradictory, sometimes overlapping, views on this matter on *Kızlar Soruyor.* While a group of Muslim members does not consider sexting *zina,* for some others, sexting is undoubtedly a form of *zina* as it transgresses the norms of *zina* because those people who practice sexting commit *zina* through their seeing, speaking, and writing. Here, what I am interested in is not whether sexting is *zina* or not. Instead, I suggest that the digitally mediated aspect of sexting not only draws a group of Muslims to practice sexting but also, even more importantly, makes them question and *re*interpret the Islamic norms regulating sexuality. This is evidenced in the multiplicity of the views on whether sexting is sin and *zina,* which I find theoretically significant because it reveals the adaptable, *re*interpretable, and flexible feature of Islamic norms regulating sexuality. At the same time, it is constantly contested and negotiated.

By looking at what sexting provides to my pious Muslim research participants, I have shown that their sexting practices differ from their offline sexual acts. To enunciate, while, for instance, Erman and Zuhal avoid sexual intercourse in their offline sexual relationships, their

sexting scenarios involve scenes of sex(t)ual intercourse. By benefitting from the digitally mediated materiality of sexting, my pious research participants experience the pleasure of sex(t)ual intercourse, which, as Erman expressed, gives a different sexual pleasure compared to his offline sexual relationships. The very reason for them to exclude sexual intercourse in offline relationships while including sex(t)ual intercourse in sexting is linked to their religious values. Their religious values necessitate them to abstain from sexual intercourse, although they transgress the Islamic norms regulating sexuality to some extent. The exclusion of sexual intercourse in offline sex and the inclusion of sex(t)ual intercourse in sexting, I suggest, not only pinpoint the fluidity of the Islamic norms regulating sex(t)ual affairs but also shed light and widen our understanding of what constitutes desirable and pleasurable sex. It is the digitally mediated feature of sexting that makes my pious research participants transgress their bodily limits, namely sexual intercourse, in their textual and imaginary sex(t)ual relationships, because they think that while sex(t)ual intercourse has "thoughtlike" (Küchler, 2005, p. 225) material impact on their bodies, and it does not cause biological and physical changes in the body, such as losing the hymen, which Islam forbids.

Preservation of Muslim women's bodies, *mahrem,* from strangers is strictly crucial in Islam. It is for this reason that the AKP and the Erdoğan Regime are so obsessed with women's clothing in Turkey. On numerous occasions, they often remind women how they should appear in the public sphere. For instance, as also mentioned in Chapter 3, a frontier figure of AKP had intervened in a TV show program presenter's dress, finding it inappropriate because of its deep cleavage.[66] Further, in some Municipalities governed by AKP, it is officially forbidden for women employees to wear sleeveless, open-collared blouses and dresses, skinny trousers, and skirts above the knee.[67] These dressing regulations are part and impact of AKP and Erdoğan

[66]https://t24.com.tr/haber/huseyin-celikin-elestirdigi-dekolteli-sunucu-isten-cikarildi,241453#google_vignette

[67] https://www.sozcu.com.tr/akpli-belediyenin-kilik-kiyafet-genelgesi-tartisma-yaratti-wp6884308

Regime's Islamic political rationale. Because of the secularization history and identity of the Turkish Republic, the AKP and the Erdoğan Regime cannot enforce Islamic veiling upon women; however, they try to keep women's clothing modest as much as possible. As Göle (2015) discusses, veiling in Islam implies that veiled Muslim women are sexually inaccessible, which means that their bodies should not be seen and gazed at. I think there is a meaningful relationship between veiling and (not) sharing self-images during sexting. As I have discussed, some pious Muslim women prefer not to share their self-images during sexting as they think this makes their sexting practices less sinful. I have suggested that the preference and practices of not sharing self-images provide an opportunity for Muslim women to maintain their Muslim piety while engaging in religiously outlawed practices. I find this crucially significant as it first challenges the Western-based orientalist and femonationalist understanding of Muslim women as sexually oppressed and deprived of their sexual selves (Brooks, 1994; Hosken, 1981; Minces, 1982). As against such assumptions, my analysis shows that Muslim women (also men) are capable of transgressing the norms of institutional Islam regulating sexual affairs. By benefitting from the digitally mediated materiality of sexting and the flexibility and *re*interpretability of Islam, devoted Muslim women (and men) engage in sex(t)ual affairs while also protecting their Muslimness and pious identity. Therefore, both the sex(t)ual self and the Muslim self can cohabit and mutually reshape each other through the technology of sexting.

This discussion's theoretical significance lies at the heart of Foucault's work on self-discipline and Mahmood's conceptualization of agency. The devoted Muslims I study who practice sexting actively shape, discipline, and govern their bodies and practices through "techniques of the self" (Foucault, 2005). This is evident in their preference for the exclusion of sexual intercourse in offline ("real") sex, and not sending their (sexual) images to their partners during sexting. Their self-disciplining and self-governing of their desires, bodies, and practices are closely linked with their agencies. They do not simply resist the Islamic norms

that prohibit pre-marital sex(t)ual relationships, as a group of Western-based liberal feminist theorists would argue. On the contrary, they actively negotiate with these norms. They utilize the digitally mediated materiality of sexting in shaping and governing their sex(t)ual desires and behaviors while engaging in sexting. Accordingly, their agencies are manifested "as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2009, p. 15). They continue cultivating their faith and being good Muslim subjects by preserving their Muslim bodies while engaging in sexting practices. Hence, they wish to maintain and protect their Islamic selves while pursuing their sex(t)ual desires by involving in sexting practices.

Chapter 6: "I Don't Know Why These Words Arouse Me": Feminism, Obscene Language, and Contextuality of Sexting

> Because I adopt and internalize feminism so much that ımm … I can't tolerate swearing *(küfür)*. I mean. As if. For instance, well what can you say by swearing? He will say, *"Seni bir güzel sikeceğim"* (I will fuck you well), and this is a sign of domination, and I can't tolerate this. Believe me, we use a language totally free from swear words because we both adopt feminist ideology. For instance, we [she and her partner] don't use the notion of *sikmek* (to fuck)[68]. Instead, we use *penetrasyon* (penetration), and believe me, this is so funny that … It is as if we are doing some sort of academic study there. I don't find it arousing at all. … We don't use any notion that feminist ideology refuses. (Interview with Esra, 2019)

When I asked Esra whether she had any unpleasant or uncomfortable experiences in her sexting practices, she mentioned her dislike of using specific sexually explicit terms, namely vulgar, obscene language in which sexuality is "inappropriately" talked about and referred (Battistella, 2005, p. 74), in sexting due to her feminist identity. Vulgar, obscene language is used as a means of swearing.

> words and phrases which physically, figuratively and conceptually denote the act of copulation and various types and styles of copulation, external genitalia of animate beings and their associated parts, and inanimate objects that substitute genitalia (Aktener, 2019, p. 52)

[68] Different from fuck in English, *sikmek* in Turkish is a verb lexicalized from *sik* which is a vulgar and obscene name for penis. Therefore, *sikmek* is an active and masculine act that men are doing.

As I will discuss more in detail later in this chapter, many Turkish scholars and feminist activists argue that vulgar, obscene language, used in the form of swearing, carries negative connotations that imply sexual attack on and humiliation of women and their sexualities (Femihat, 2021; Tüzin, 2006; Zengin, 2015). The utterance of these words by men positions them as active doer subjects and women as passive, obedient, docile objects. However, throughout this chapter, I will argue that sexting partners are constituted as sex(t)ually desiring and desirable subjects rather than sexual objects through the use of vulgar, obscene language in sexting.

Esra told me that she does not use these terms, such as *am* (cunt, pussy), *sik* (cock), *yarrak* (dick), and many other words, as she thought feminism disapproves of such Turkish words. Esra met feminism through university student clubs when she moved to Ankara for her university education. She is not affiliated with any specific feminist movement and does not take part in any feminist organization. Her understanding of feminism is based on fighting against the patriarchal oppression of girls and women in every aspect of life, including objectifying and repressing women's sexualities. Initially, feminism was a tool for Esra to empower herself against her violent father, who used to beat and humiliate her, questioning whether she was a virgin or not, as I discuss in Chapter 4. Later, feminism helped her to protect herself from and cope with her abusive partners. Her feminist identity refuses to be a modest woman taking care of unpaid domestic work and becoming a selfless mother and wife. Due to her feminist identity, Esra rejects the use of the terms mentioned above, which she calls swear words, as they have negative connotations that imply male domination, (sexual) subordination of women, and violent sexual attacks on women's bodies and sexualities in Turkish.[69]

While listening to Esra explaining the reasons for her rejection of using certain sexually explicit concepts, I recalled a memory of mine in which a native Turkish-speaking woman

[69] As will be discussed in the pages to come, there are several scholarly and activist works on the use of vulgar/obscene language. Some of them are (Doğan, 2014; Femihat, 2021; Gülden, 2006; Sosyalist Feminist Kollektif, 2013; Zengin, 2015)

friend, who was also a graduate student in a gender studies program, commented on the difficulties of using Turkish in sexting. Based on her personal sexting experiences, she expressed her ambivalent feelings regarding using Turkish sex-related terms in sexting. For instance, she did not find the concept of *penis* (penis) or *vajina* (vagina), which some of my research participants name as scientific concepts, as sexually arousing in sexting because, for her and my research participants, these notions are not loaded with sexual and erotic meanings but medical connotations. Esra's statement that *"[I]t is as if we are doing some sort of academic study there. I don't find it arousing at all"* supports the common view among my research participants that Latin sex-related words used in Turkish such as *vajina* (vagina) and *penis* (penis) are not capable of generating sexually arousing feelings.

When I inquired about the difficulties my interlocutors had experienced in their sexting practices and the use of (taboo) language, almost all of them told me about their ambivalent feelings about using specific Turkish sexually explicit taboo terms, such as *am* (pussy), *sik* (dick), and *yarrak* (cock) in sexting. These Turkish terms are understood as taboo because they discursively violate moral and sacred values. I have also read several discussion threads about using Turkish in sexting practices and dirty talk on my online field site, *Kızlar Soruyor* (Girls are Asking)[70]. While a group of people find using vulgar, obscene language in sexting rude and offensive, some others embrace it, arguing it stirs up their sexual urges. In fact, some think that sexting and offline sex as well must necessarily include vulgar, obscene language. Below are some quotes from my interviews that demonstrate how the use of these terms produces ambivalent feelings.

[70] As I introduce and discuss in more detail in the methodology chapter, *Kızlar Soruyor* (Girls are Asking) is a Turkish online discussion community where members create profiles, ask questions, comment under the posted questions and express their ideas. The topics discussed on the website are very diverse, ranging from cleaning, fashion, and beauty to romantic and sexual relationships. To access the website, please click on the link: https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com/

> Sometimes, I feel like I can say these words because I know at that moment my intention is not to humiliate my partner during sexting. These words are generally used for swearing and degrading. … For instance, *amına koyayım* (I shall fiercely put (my cock) in your pussy) usually is a swearing phrase and is accepted as a humiliation of women's bodies. When my partner or I use this phrase during sexting, it is a weird contradiction because I enjoy it on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is rude and a way of swearing. (Interview with Ahmet, 2019)

> I use English during sexting because I don't want to feel like swearing at my partner, and I wouldn't enjoy my partner swearing at me. But sometimes, I enjoy using them [vulgar, obscene Turkish words] because I feel like I'm breaking a taboo. (Interview with Emel, 2019)

> Well, I don't say *penis* (penis) and *vajina* (vagina) because these are very scientific concepts. I prefer to say *am* (pussy) and *sik* (dick) or others. Because these terms arouse me (Interview with Gözde, 2021)

The quotes from my interviews with Ahmet, Emel, and Gözde, alongside Esra's statements, demonstrate that the use of certain sexually explicit taboo words, namely vulgar, obscene language in Turkish, is two-sided. On the one hand, because they carry specific connotations implying male domination and sexual humiliation of women in their daily use, these words are very likely to create negative feelings, especially on the side of who is addressed. However, on the other hand, it is these concepts that have sexual connotations rather than the Turkicized Latin words, i.e., *vajina* (vagina) and *penis* (penis), understood as scientific concepts. Accordingly, the use of these vulgar, obscene words creates ambivalent feelings due to their violently sexist but also sexual/erotic nature.

Additionally, after my interview with Esra, I became more attentive to the ways in which my interlocutors talk about their sex and sexting experiences: what kind of terms they use, how they use them, and whether they lower their volume while verbalizing these words and phrases. I observed that some of my interlocutors were timid in spelling out Turkish sex-related vulgar,

obscene concepts, especially those referring to genital parts, even though I had encouraged and asked them to speak in an uncensored way as much as possible at the beginning of each interview. Nevertheless, they either lowered their voices, apologizing to me for using these terms or used their Latin versions and non-sexual Turkish words such as *orası (there)* and *şey (thing)* when they were talking about sexual acts and genital organs. For instance, when I asked Ziya to give me some examples of vulgar, obscene words that he does not like using in daily life conversations, he declined my request in this way:

> Well, *now*. If I use these notions *now*, I will feel like I am swearing at you. It is tough for me. I prefer not to tell them (Interview with Ziya, 2021) (Italic as my emphasis)

At first glance, this apparent hardship in talking about sex, sexual acts, and sexualized body parts by using vulgar, obscene language seems to be an outcome of i) the socio-culturally attached meanings to Turkish vulgar, obscene words used for sexist swear words, ii) that their use is considered as taboo, immoral, and profane, and iii) the commonly accepted idea that feminism rejects these notions because of their sexist connotations. However, this explanation becomes insufficient when their use becomes sexually pleasurable and desirable in sexting, at least for some people. For this reason, I take the use of these sexually explicit, profane, vulgar, obscene language into account as performative utterance and speech acts (Austin, 1975; Butler, 1997) to claim that the meanings and feelings they generate depend on the context they are uttered. In other words, I argue that sexting has a particular sex(t)ual contextuality in which what is understood to be undesirable and taboo and, therefore, censored in mundane conversation is likely to become sex(t)ually pleasurable and stimulating in sexting for a group of people. At the same time, by benefitting from Butler (1997), I suggest that by using this specific taboo language, which is understood to be sexually degrading to women in mundane life, sexting partners are constituted as sex(t)ually desiring and desirable subjects rather than

sexual objects for each other within and at the moment of their sexting performances. Butler argues that the subject is constituted in language through interpellation (1997, p. 2). She states that the subject, "'I' only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated" (Butler, 1993, p. 225). Accordingly, at the very moment of sexting, during the parties' exchange of sexually explicit and erotic messages through the use of vulgar, obscene language, both parties become sex(t)ually desiring and desirable subjects for each other. At the same time, by benefitting Mahmood's (2005) theorization of agency, I suggest that these people who use vulgar, obscene language in sexting perform agency that is different than resistance to subordinating norms.

Butler's performativity theory, which indicates that subjects are constituted through linguistic acts, offers a framework for comprehending the relationship between language and identity. Vulgar language is generally taboo in casual conversation, but in the context of sexting, it becomes a performative act that reconfigures the participants' identities as desired and desiring subjects. By showing how the performative use of language in sexting can momentarily and incidentally subvert social norms and create a space where repressed and tabooed desires are articulated and shared, this transformation highlights the fluidity of sexual expression and identity. It challenges the traditional boundaries of sexual discourse. It also highlights the different modalities of agency as the individuals I study do not prefer to abandon such language; instead, they actively, consciously, and cautiously use it during sexting.

My argument has several theoretical and cultural implications. The constitution of women as sex(t)ually desiring and desirable subjects rather than sexual objects through vulgar, obscene language challenges the commonly accepted (feminist) view that vulgar, obscene language sexually degrades and humiliates women. Further, as it will become clearer in the later parts of this chapter, women's use of this language in sexting also challenges the normative heterosexual feminine figure who is socio-culturally and politically expected not to use this language. This

chapter supports my dissertation's aim to explore how the ways in which offline norms regulating sexuality and sexting re/shape and are re/shaped by each other in the contemporary socio-political context of Turkey by questioning the reciprocal relationship between censorship on sexual speech and sexting. Women's use of vulgar, obscene language in sexting has significant theoretical implications as it challenges the Western-based understanding of agency as a synonym for resistance. As against the mainstream feminist discourses that refuse the use of vulgar, obscene language, a group of women consciously use this language in seeking sex(t)ual pleasure. That is to mean that instead of resisting a language that supposedly subordinates them, these women engage in this language. In this sense, the agency manifested through these women's decisions and actions resembles the Egyptian women's agencies in Mahmood's research (2005). Mahmood argues that agency is manifested "as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (2009, p. 15). From this perspective, the women in my research exercise a peculiar agency that is to be understood in the current context of Turkey, in which Islamic conservative authoritarianism and political Islamism have been increasing during AKP and the Erdoğan Regime. Instead of resisting, rejecting, or outlawing vulgar, obscene language that is understood to subordinate women, these women consciously use it in the context of sexting to have sex(t)ual pleasure.

6.1. Talking About Sex and Sex Talk in Turkish

Talking about sex in Tukey and Turkish is a controversial issue. There is no formal or informal sex education in Turkey (Kumru, 2023; Seral & İlkkaracan, 2000; TAPV & UNFPA, 2022), and international studies explain the difficulties that some adults experience in talking about sex and sexuality through the lack of sex education in childhood (Montemurro et al., 2015, p. 146). An analysis report based on empirical research conducted by the Turkish Family Health and Plan Foundation (Türkiye Aile Sağlığı ve Planlaması Vakfı) and UNFPA states that pupils are not talked about and taught about sex and sexuality, which even includes essential

issues such as knowing body, safe sex, and protection (TAPV & UNFPA, 2022). A Turkish sexologist, Rayka Kumru (2023), argues that several obstacles, such as politics and socio-cultural prejudices, prevent people from demanding sex education and openly talking about sex and sexuality in Turkey. In this regard, a writer of an alternative website, Gözde (2023), discusses the reasons behind the difficulties of talking about sexuality.[71] She indicates that societal pressure around sexuality poses an obstacle to talking about sex and sexuality. For this reason, the lack of sex education at schools and within families in Turkey can be linked to the reasons why many people find it difficult to talk about sex and sexuality in a non-sexual way, which I have also observed in my field research.

A minimal number of studies suggest that there are two distinct Turkish vocabulary sets or terminologies used for talking about sex and sexuality: a) vulgar, obscene words such as *am* (pussy), *sik* (dick), *yarak* (cock), *göt* (ass) and so on, and b) Latin, also known as, medical words such as *vajina* (vagina), and *penis*. My field research has shown that both are used in daily life; however, their gendered dimensions, the meanings attached to them, and the contexts in which they are used are disparate. According to Akar, the names for the genital organs, verbs for sexual acts, descriptions of the cases assumed as taboo, notions used for humiliation such as "donkey, dottled, stupid, godless, imbecile," and so on, and the related idioms compose the Turkish sexual slang and sex-related swear words (2014, p. 30). Further, Boylu and Kardaş argue that the use of Turkish sexual slang is socio-culturally accepted as wrongful, shameful, and disgraceful and, therefore, seen as being against moral values and norms (2020, p. 74). For this reason, sexual slang/sex-related swear words and, by extension, vulgar, obscene words do not occur in respectful, mundane communication language. Instead, individuals use either

[71] The writer, Gözde, has a same name with my interviewee, Gözde. However, they are two different people.

Turkicized Latin words such as *penis* (penis) and *vajina* (vagina) or euphemisms while referring to genital organs and talking about sex if they need to do so.

For instance, Hazal was shocked and disturbed by her sexting partner's use of vulgar, obscene language during their first sexting relationship.

> He said *sik* (dick). I found it weird. I wouldn't be able to say it. I said *penis* (penis), *meme* (breast), *vajina* (vagina), *klitoris* (clitoris) and *kalça (*hips). He said *taşak* (balls), and I told *testis* (testicle). Because I am a salon woman [laughing]. I don't know why these words give pleasure during sexting and sex. But, yes, I was disturbed by his saying *sik* (dick)… (Interview with Hazal, 2021)

Apparently, although Hazal is not against the use of vulgar, obscene words such as *sik* (dick), reading some of these concepts during sexting did not register sexually arousing feelings in her. On the contrary, she was "*disturbed"* by them, and she did not prefer to or could not use these notions. The reasons behind this contradiction are unknown to Hazal as well as to me. Nevertheless, she linked her preference for using certain sex-related concepts understood as scientific but not vulgar, obscene words to her gendered and class positionality: *"because I am a salon woman."* Although Hazal intended to ridicule her resemblance to *"a salon woman"* by laughing afterward, I find it crucial to analyze it because it is closely tied to the gendered dynamics of the use of vulgar, obscene language. The *"salon woman"*[72], *salon kadını* in Turkish, is an upper-middle class, urbanite, well-educated, and well-mannered woman who knows how to behave in (elite) special gatherings and meetings. She is also a graceful and noble member of the bourgeoisie and has sophisticated intellectual skills. Historically speaking, this woman figure emerged in the late years of the Ottoman Empire as an out come of the upper-

[72] Fatma Türe used "salon woman" in a rather different, in fact, opposite, meaning in her work (Türe, 2013, p. 176). In her study, "salon woman" refers to a woman figure who cannot meet the ideal Republican woman figure and who mostly appears in erotic novels. One way of possible explanation why Türe and I have contradictory definitions of "salon woman" could be related to the literature that we follow because in western cultures "salon woman" figure corresponds to Türe's definition.

class women's access to elite and Westernized education (N. Abadan-Unat, 1981). The public visibility of this woman figure has gained momentum during the foundation years of the Republic of Turkey as a part of modernization and westernization aspirations (Göle, 2015). The *salon woman* is far away from street culture and, therefore, does not speak vulgar, obscene language. On the contrary, the language the *salon woman* uses is well-chosen aristocratic language. A woman who uses vulgar, obscene language, therefore, challenges and transgresses the norms of *"salon woman,"* as the use of vulgar, obscene language is socio-culturally accepted as part of street culture and seen as a wrong manner (Femihat, 2019; Sosyalist Feminist Kollektif, 2013). Notably, the use of vulgar, obscene language is associated with (vulgar) masculinity; hence, many women, like Hazal, have difficulties in uttering them (Özçalişkan, 1994) in their daily and sexual/erotic communications as their gendered habits are not defined by heterosexual masculine traits, even if they say they are not against women's use of vulgar, obscene language as in Hazal's case. The gendered dynamics behind who and when to use vulgar, obscene language matter for understanding the difficulties a group of women has in uttering such words in sexting. It is challenging for these women to transgress gendered norms of sexual speech because these norms have inhabited them over the years. It is difficult because "to move outside of the domain of speakability is to risk one's status as a subject" as a particular subject (Butler, 1997, p. 133).

I have repeatedly observed the use of substitutes (Latin words or euphemisms) among my research participants during my fieldwork. For instance, most of my interlocutors used *penis* (penis) instead of *sik* (cock) and *vajina* (vagina) instead of *am* (cunt) while referring to genital organs. I provide two cases in which Ahmet and Erol, men interlocutors, used Latin words while talking about sex-related topics in order to show that context significantly matters in terms of what kind of sex-related terms are (or can be) used while talking about sex and sexuality and their affective capacities.

Ahmet, an undergraduate student at a reputable public university in Ankara, was born and grew up in a working-class family, having immigrated from Bulgaria and living in one of the most liberal cities of Turkey. Due to his parents' shifting and long working hours, Ahmet was not close to his parents, and he did not feel their control over his romantic and sexual affairs. Ahmet had never talked to his parents about his romantic and sexual affairs. His parents were not religious; therefore, Ahmet was not raised with Islamic values and eventually became an atheist in his teenage years. He defined himself as leftist and pro-feminist, supporting the social, economic, political, and sexual rights of women and LGBTI+. Ahmet told me that he felt more convenient and comfortable talking about his sexual and romantic relations to his woman friends rather than his man friends. Unlike many other men interlocutors, he was comfortable talking to me about his sex and sexting experiences.

> One day, our sex was leading to a *vajinal bir şey* (vaginal thing, implying penile-vaginal intercourse), but she didn't want to have it [penile-vaginal intercourse]. … I send a picture of my erected *penis* (penis) during sexting (Interview with Ahmet, 2019)

Although Ahmet prefers using vulgar, obscene language in his sexting practices - despite his ambivalent feelings due to the negative connotations of such words - he used Latin words while talking about his sex(t)ual experiences during our interview. *Vajina* (vagina) is adopted from Latin and used as both medical terminology and non-offensive word, which is, according to my interlocutors, not loaded with erotic meanings. When Ahmet used *"vaginal,"* he meant a sexual act including a vagina or by means of a vagina. What is at stake here is that he did not use vulgar, obscene words such as *am* (pussy) while talking to me, even though he said he uses these words in his sexting practices. Therefore, in the context of our interview, in which we talked about sex in a non-sexual way, he preferred to use a Turkicized Latin word because, in his account, his use of the vulgar obscene word *am* (pussy) was not appropriate in the context of our interview. Ahmet's use of *bir şey* (a thing) is also critical because *şey* (thing) is commonly

used in Turkish as a euphemism for genital organs and sexual acts. To keep our communication polite and formal/respectful and non-sexual, Ahmet did not use other Turkish vulgar, obscene words, i.e., *am* (pussy, cunt) and *sik* (dick), which are understood as swear words, to name sexual intercourse because I am not a friend or sex(ting) partner of him. Further, although Ahmet used the phrase *vajinal bir şey* (a vaginal thing) to signify penile-vaginal sexual intercourse, the phrase alone does not necessarily mean sexual activity. *Vajinal bir şey* (a vaginal thing) could be vaginal white, vaginal disease, vaginal examination, or vaginal odor. Hence, something that would make it understandable as sexual activity, i.e., vaginal intercourse, is missing in the phrase. In this regard, Cameron and Kulick highlight the importance of analyzing "what is there in a text" or what is not in terms of understanding "prohibited," "repressed," and unspeakable aspects of sexuality in a given society (2003, p. 122). Accordingly, the act of vaginal intercourse stands as what is unspeakable in the context of daily semi-formal and non-erotic communication. In terms of the performative power of said and unsaid words, Butlers states that

> keeping such terms unsaid and unsayable can also work to lock them in place, preserving their power to injure, and arresting the possibility of a reworking that might shift their context and purpose. (1997, p. 38)

Accordingly, by preserving specific sex-related terms, Ahmet prevents their injurious capabilities: their possibility to wound me as a woman in a non-sexual context. If the context of our communication had been sexual, Ahmet might have preferred using vulgar, obscene words that would not wound the addressee, me, in the case of our interview.

Erol, a recently graduated biology teacher, used a language pattern similar to that of Ahmet during our interview. Erol was born and grew up in a secular extended family living in a very cosmopolitan and metropolitan city in Turkey. He told me that he prefers using vulgar, obscene language in his sexting practices and among his homosocial friend gatherings.

However, while talking about his "condition," he uses "penis" because he does not want it to be a tool of sexual jokes.

> Some animals have a colorful *penis* (penis), *testis* (testicle), and *vajina* (vagina). … I prefer saying *penis* while talking about my penile curvature condition because I don't want it to be a subject of a joke among my friends (Interview with Erol, 2019)

Erol also stated that he often uses these Latin words daily and professionally because he is a biologist. The contexts in which Erol uses these words are professional and medical contexts. For this reason, these notions do not have any sex or erotic connotations for Erol and most of my research participants. As a result, he is not aroused by hearing, reading, saying, and typing these notions. For this reason, for all of my research participants, these scientific concepts referring to genital organs are not preferable for sexual and erotic communication in sexting. Because, as Butler would argue, "the utterance" of such terms is "turned and untethered from its origin" (1997, p. 93), which means through their chain of citationality in non-sexual contexts, these Latin words have lost their sexual connotations.

Additionally, some of my research participants, especially men, clearly rejected verbalizing sex-related notions except *penis* (penis) and *vajina* (vagina) -namely vulgar, obscene words- while they were talking about their sex(ting) experiences and referring to genital organs during our interview. At these moments, I kindly asked and encouraged them to speak openly, indicating that I would not mind their use of such notions. Nevertheless, they either declined my request or lowered their volume while using certain concepts and vulgar, obscene words such as *sikişmek* (fucking), *am* (pussy), and *amını yalamak* (licking pussy).

In my understanding, Ahmet and Erol, like some other man interlocutors, did not want to or intend to sexualize and eroticize the *context* in which we were communicating, i.e., our

exchange of information on their experiences of sex and sexting practices.[73] Suppose they had used swear words and vulgar, obscene words instead of "medical" names adopted from Latin while talking about their sex(t)ual experiences during the interviews. In that case, it, at least in their accounts, might have been a transgression not only because these notions are considered disgraceful and immoral (Akar, 2014) but also because "intimacy is often achieved … through the transgression of the public taboos" (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 115). The same logic applies to their preference for using vulgar, obscene words in sexting. I read their use of vulgar, obscene words in sexting as *performative utterances,* which create erotic and sex(t)ual feelings in the sender and receiver of the messages (Austin, 1975). It is the context of sexting when and where vulgar, obscene words *do* the work of producing erotic meanings and feelings through the co-creation of a sex(t)ual scenario.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, women's *namus* (honor), which is directly linked to the *"pureness"* of their sexuality*,* must be guarded by their immediate male relatives. Vulgar, obscene language, which utilizes women's bodies and sexualities, breaks the sensitive boundaries of women's *namus* on the symbolic level. Accordingly, by minding the ways in which Ahmet and Erol communicated to me – using certain soft sex-related notions, namely Latin names or rejecting to spell them out altogether – they represented themselves as particular human beings who are well-behaved and kind in the given context (Cameron & Kulick, 2006, p. 97). By doing so, Ahmet and Erol are involved in self-censorship in talking about sex, sexuality, and sexting practices. In this regard, Butler states that

> the mechanism of censorship is not only actively engaged in the production of the subjects, but also in circumscribing the social parameters

[73] I had encounter with the instances in which some of my (potential) interlocutors and a couple of people I sent direct messages on *Kızlar soruyor* have attempted to sexualize our discussion. I discuss this issue in detail in the methodology chapter.

> of speakable discourse, of what will and will not be admissible in public discourse (1997, pp. 131–132).

Accordingly, sexuality stands as not admissible public discourse in the context of Turkey, which requires a certain level of self-censorship while talking about it. It is possible to witness such censorship in the political sphere in Turkey. The reaction of Bülent Arınç, a frontier figure of AKP, to the utterance of *"vajina"* (vagina) in the parliament in 2012 is a telling example in this case. While criticizing Erdoğan's severe interventions in women's reproductive rights and attempts to ban abortion in Turkey, a member of Parliament from the Republican People's Party and women's rights defender, Aylin Nazlıaka, stated that *"Erdoğan must stop being the guard of the vagina"* in her speech in the parliament. [74] Erdoğan was making numerous comments on abortion and how women should give birth during these days; therefore, Nazlıaka made this comment in Parliament. As a reaction to Nazlıaka, Arınç said that he felt ashamed by the words of Nazlıaka. In his words,

> A married lady PM with children, how can she talk about an organ that is related to herself? How come she is not ashamed of this? How come she can openly talk about it? My face blushed; I felt embarrassed. (Bülent Arınç, 2012)

Arınç, a religiously conservative man, openly stated that the vagina should not be publicly uttered and should be closed behind the doors, ideally bedroom doors, because it is where it belongs to. He also emphasized the feeling of shame and the fact that Nazlıaka did not feel ashamed using the term vagina, unlike himself. By doing so, he represented himself as a modest, kind, proper subject as opposed to Nazlıaka, who openly and publicly talks about sex-related organs without any shame. Arınç discursively represented Nazlıaka as a shameless and immodest woman.

[74] https://t24.com.tr/haber/bulent-arinc-bayan-milletvekilinin-organindan-bahsetmesi-yuzumu-kizartti,219480

6.2. Feminist Interventions in Vulgar Obscene Language

Although Turkish is not among the grammatically gendered languages such as German, Italian, and Spanish, it has highly gendered dimensions (Aydınoğlu, 2015; Gülden, 2006). Analyzing daily Turkish language, Menekşe Gülden (2006) has shown that men and women use differentiating terminologies in Turkish in everyday life. A minimal number of Turkish scholars and researchers have written about vulgar, obscene language, sex-related swear words and sexual slang, gender, sexuality, and feminism. The majority of the discussions are primarily published on feminist blogs and websites, and they are not based on scholarly empirical research but on everyday experiences and observations. A feminist writer, using Femihat as a pen name, argues that feminist reactions to sexist swear words (also vulgar, obscene language) are two-sided, and feminists might have different points of view in this regard (2021). Femihat states that, on the one hand, as a feminist, they[75] love some *occasions* (my emphasis) in which women use sex-related sexist swear words because it profoundly challenges the normatively accepted and idealized modest Turkish women figure who ought to not talk about sex and use sexual slang. In other words, Femihat considers women's use of such language in some instances a transgression of the idealized heterosexual femininity norms because women's use of degrading sexual terms is understood to violate femininity norms in society (Murnen, 2000, p. 323). In this respect, Femihat (2021) also mentions some feminist women groups' political efforts to appropriate and claim Turkish vulgar, obscene language to challenge the idealized Turkish woman figure. However, on the other hand, Femihat (2021) criticizes the use of vulgar, obscene language and sexual slang as they are the symbolic reflection of sexual violence against women and their bodies. They argue that because sexuality-related swearing phrases formulated through vulgar, obscene words and sexual slang such as *amına koymak* (to fiercely put a penis

[75] Femihat does not give any hint for which gender pronouns they are using; therefore, I use they as a pronoun while referring to Femihat.

in a woman's pussy) imply severe sexual violence against women, in fact, rape, it is impossible for feminist women to appropriate and claim such violent, sexist language (Femihat, 2021). In fact, Selin (2012), a Turkish feminist writer, states that women's use of such violently sexist language contributes to the reproduction of men's (sexual) domination and superiority over women in society.

Zehra Akçay (2021), a Turkish feminist scholar, states that sexual slang as part of and composed of vulgar, obscene language, especially sexist ones, is an aspect of misogyny and is constructed over women's bodies. She also argues that these sexual phrases function to normalize the sexual violence against women and the humiliation of women's sexuality through their circulation in everyday use (Akçay, 2021). Similarly, Aslı Zengin (2015), another Turkish feminist scholar, argues that the Turkish sexuality-related swear words (read as vulgar, obscene language) are loaded with heterosexist connotations, humiliating and passivating women, femininity, and women's sexuality while positioning heterosexual men as active masculine doer subjects while depicting women as sexual objects. In a similar vein, D. Tüzin (2006) brings out that sexist, vulgar, obscene phrases position women and gay men as passive sexual objects, which reproduces the objectification of women's bodies and sexualities. For this reason, one branch of Turkish feminist thought argues that women's bodies and sexualities are rendered into passive sexual objects through and in this language.

A group of feminist women university students' on-campus protests of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's severe intervention in and efforts to prohibit abortion in 2012 can be an excellent example for different feminist accounts regarding the use of vulgar, obscene language. These women painted the walls of the Middle East Technical University (METU) campus with a drawing of Erdoğan, writing *"Am Bekçisi"* (the Cunt Watcher in English).[76]

[76] Due to copyright issues, I cannot provide the image in my dissertation. The image can be accessed here.

I was a sociology student back then at METU, Ankara, and I well remember the reactions this graffiti had created among women students on the campus. Some (feminist) women students were disturbed by the use of *"am"* (cunt) to refer to women's genital organ because, for them, it is socio-culturally and politically "inappropriate" to use this Turkish sexual term as it is a vulgar, obscene word, a sexual slur and which is also primarily used by men as a means of swearing. Besides, using (sexual) slang and obscene language has been traditionally "tabooed" for women and girls (Kutner & Brogan, 1974, p. 476). On the other hand, there were also those feminist women students who appreciated this graffiti not only because of its political message but because they considered it a feminist reclaiming and reappropriating of the vulgar sexual words referring to women's bodies.[77]

Katherine Bass's approach to sexist and sexually offensive sexual slang is also explanatory of why a group of feminists rejects the use of sexually offensive, vulgar, obscene phrases in Western cultures. Bass (2015), in their PhD dissertation, linked sexual slang with sexual assault as part of the rape culture. They adopt a radical feminist approach and argue that sexual slang, especially violent ones, blurs the division between consensual sex and rape (Bass, 2015). They further argue that the creation and the use of violent sexual slang maintain patriarchy, (sexually) subordinating women to men. International studies also put forward that the daily language to talk about sex and sexuality mostly mirrors and reproduces men's sexual domination and women's sexual subordination (Haywood, 1996; Murnen, 2000). Similarly, Kutner and Brogan argue that sexual slang and its use in daily life sexually objectify women while depicting men's (sexual) domination over women (1974, pp. 481–482). Regarding the rape culture, Crawford (2000) argues that verbal jokes about rape silence women, leaving them

[77] Although not truly comparable, Following Butler's argumentation, I think that it might be possible for Turkish feminist women to reclaim and reappropriate *"am"* (cunt) as was the case for the term "queer" in the USA (Butler, 1993, p. 14). The concept of queer was used in a derogatory way connoting strange and odd to refer to same-sex attracted men. Through time, queer activists reclaimed and reappropriated this notion by calling themselves queer in a prideful way.

speechless. In this regard, Butler (1997) argues that discriminatory speech acts, particularly injurious ones, not only wound the ones addressed through their performative utterances but also silence them. Accordingly, through the use of vulgar, obscene language, women are deprived of their right to speak up for their bodies and sexualities.

Another telling example of feminist/queer women's rejection of and intervention in using vulgar, obscene language and sexist swear words occurred during the Gezi Park protests in İstanbul and beyond in 2013. In May 2013, many activists started sit-in protests at Gezi Park, located in Taksim Square, Istanbul, to protect trees in Gezi Park from the Turkish government's plan to demolish the park and build a military barracks with a shopping mall. With the order of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Prime Minister back then, the police officers used violent and excessive power against the protestors to wipe out them from Gezi Park.[78]

While resisting the violent police interventions, most of the Gezi Park protestors used great amounts of sexist and gendered profanity and obscene language by means of swearing. For instance, *amına koymak* (putting fiercely a penis in pussy), *ibne* (fagot), and *orospu* (whore) were the commonly used sexist phrases during the Gezi Protests (Şakir, 2022). These sexist swearing words injure women, sex workers, and LGBTI+ people as they carry sexist and degrading connotations in Turkish. Some protestors used these phrases to show their anger against the police officers and the government. A group of feminist women and LGBTI+ protestors was disturbed by hearing these phrases because, as I have discussed, these phrases

[78] The Gezi Protests lasted for several weeks and moved beyond Istanbul, and millions of people, women, men, LGBTI+, elderly, children, disabled, with various political views attended these protests. Millions of people occupied streets in İstanbul and other cities in Turkey to cry out their discontentedness against the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Erdoğan and demand justice, equality, and freedom. The protests that started with the Gezi Park went beyond the protection of trees in the Gezi Park and turned into country-wide protests to criticize the AKP government's politics. Women and LGBTI+ were especially disturbed by the AKP and its gendered politics and occupied the streets. During the protests, eight people lost their lives, and thousands of people were severely injured. Many people were arrested and put in jail. Some law suits are still in the proceeding. During these years, there were severe interventions in women's rights to abortion, preference for clothing, their reproductive preferences, and the absolute rejection of the existence of LGBTI+ and their rights in Turkey. Hence, the Gezi Park protests were a rebellion against the authoritarian politics of AKP and its intervention in private spheres and individual lifestyles (Göle, 2015).

target and humiliate women and, on some occasions, LGBTI+ bodies and sexualities. In the case of the Gezi protests, even if protestors used vulgar, obscene language to show their anger against police officers and the government, they not only discursively instrumentalized women's and LGBTI+ bodies and sexualities but also their speech injured them. For this reason, a group of feminist women and LGBTI+ stood up. They expressed their disturbance by hearing such sexist and gendered language, which was used as a means of showing political demands and critiques toward the Turkish government and police officers during the Gezi Protests as the utterance of these phrases humiliated women, LGBTI+, and sex workers who actively took place in the protests (Altınay, 2013; Batur, 2018; Rahte & Tokdoğan, 2014). These feminist women activists organized a workshop on June 8, 2013, at Gezi Park to raise awareness among the protestors and prevent the use of sexist, vulgar, obscene language for swearing, which targets women's bodies, sex workers, and LGBTI+. They explained that sexist swearing phrases are the products of a patriarchal mode of thinking that tries to take possession of and overcome someone or a group of people by passivizing their sexualities by using women's bodies and sexualities (Femihat, 2019). These women agree that swearing is a good and satisfying way of crying out their anger against the government; however, they strictly prefer alternative swear words and slang that do not degrade women and LGBTI+ (Sosyalist Feminist Kollektif, 2013). For instance, they suggested using the following slogans *"Tayyip kaç kaç kaç, kadınlar geliyor!"* (Tayyip, flee, flee, flee; women are coming), *"Ağzına tüküreyim"* (I shall spit in your mouth), *"Küfürle değil, inatla diren!"* (Resist not by swearing, but your stubbornness)

These women and LGBTI+ people might have felt threatened, even though they were not the addressee of the utterances, simply because, as Butler argues, "implicit in the notion of a threat is that what is spoken in language may prefigure what the body might do: the act referred to in the threat is the act that one might actually perform" (1997, p. 10). Accordingly, when the protestors loudly uttered the phrase *"amına koyayım"* (I shall forcefully put my penis in your

pussy) in a group, some women, if not all, are likely to feel the threat of being raped due to the performative power of speech acts.

The feminist accounts for a group of feminists' negative attitude toward the use of sexual slang/obscenity, and sexist swear words are well exemplified by the feminist/queer interventions in the use of swear words during the Gezi Protests and the majority of my feminist women interlocutors' intolerance regarding the use of sexual slang in daily conversations. As I demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, Esra explicitly stated that *"feminist ideology rejects the use of swear words, and as a feminist woman, I cannot tolerate them."* Similarly, Yasemin, one of my research participants, also highlighted her feminist identity while expressing her intolerance of using sexually offensive swear words and vulgar, obscene language in daily life conversations.

> I am a feminist woman. Of course, I do not allow anyone to use such words against me or to someone else in my presence. (Interview with Yasemin, 2021)

Both Yasemin and Esra met feminism when they moved to Ankara for their university education. Yasemin, coming from a very religiously conservative working-class family that has been living in a small town in Anatolia, was affiliated with socialist feminism, one of the most politically active, rooted, and radical feminist movements/organizations in Turkey. Socialist feminists in Turkey consider sexuality as one of the vital aspects of predominant masculine power (Sosyalist Feminist Kollektif, 2013). All aspects of unequal gendered power dynamics matter for the socialist feminists in Turkey. Accordingly, class struggle, gender inequality, and women's (sexual) oppression were significantly crucial for Yasemin's feminist perspective. She also promotes women's activeness in sex and their sexual pleasures. Yasemin stated that meeting feminism had enabled her to disassociate herself from the hetero-norms with which she had been raised and socialized during her childhood and teenage years. In her words,

> Only after I met with feminism, I happened to realize the subordination of women to men and women's secondary position in society. Feminism has enabled me to detach myself from the oppressive norms in my family (Interview with Yasemin, 2021)

On the other hand, Esra, a daughter of a highly educated, reputable, and secular family living in a West Eastern city in Turkey, identified herself as a feminist but was not affiliated with or close to any specific feminist thought or movement in Turkey. Nevertheless, women's empowerment in social, economic, and political spheres, women's sexual liberation, and the autonomy of girls and women inform her feminist identity and perspective. For her, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, feminism was a tool to understand and stand against her violent father, who often sexually humiliated Esra, referring to her virginity. She considers feminism as a power that

> has enabled me to say "no" to my father and to go against him. When he beats me now, I punch him back. I don't allow anyone to tell me who I am and what I am capable of doing (Interview with Esra, 2019)

Apparently, Esra's affiliation with feminism originates in her effort to deal with her patriarchal, violent father and societal gendered oppression that she has felt throughout her life. Accordingly, despite their different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and engagement with the feminist movement in Turkey, they are against the use of vulgar, obscene language in daily life.

Hazal, another self-identified feminist woman research participant, challenged the idea that *"feminists neither use nor tolerate the use of swear words"* while talking about the use of vulgar, obscene language during sexting. She stated that

> I don't think it is right to say feminists don't say this or they don't do that. I haven't spelled them [vulgar, obscene words] out so far, but I may

> use them one day. Just because I am a feminist, it doesn't mean that I am not allowed to or shall not use these words (Interview with Hazal, 2021)

Like Esra and Yasemin, Hazal met feminism when she moved to Ankara for her university education. She was born and grew up in a small town where the residents were acquainted with each other, which prevented Hazal from transgressing the intimacy norms such as kissing her partner in public. She has well-educated and secular parents with egalitarian values. They were not against Hazal's having a boyfriend; on the contrary, they knew and used to allow Hazal to hang out with her boyfriend during her high school years. However, Hazal kept her sexual experiences hidden from her parents because, as Hazal told me, sexual relationships were and are outside what was allowed by her parents. Becoming a feminist woman has made her politically promote women's and LGBTI+'s sexual liberation as well as their social, political, and economic rights. Yet, she still keeps her parents unaware of her sexual life and prefers not to talk to them about her sexuality. Unlike Esra, Yasemin, and some other women interlocutors, Hazal's understanding of feminism does not reject or forbid the use of vulgar, obscene language, which is evident in her statement, "*Just because I am a feminist, it doesn't mean that I am not allowed to or shall not use these words."*

Apparently, these three self-identified feminist women, Esra, Yasemin, and Hazal, have different understandings of feminism and, therefore, agencies. Their feminisms differ in terms of what a feminist woman should and should not do/say regarding sexuality. In my understanding, this is linked to the issue of what feminism is and how to pursue a feminist life. Feminist scholars, researchers, and activists have long argued for the diversity of feminism*s*. In other words, *the feminism does not exist, and therefore,* there is no single and unique way of being a feminist woman. On the contrary, depending on their feminist views, they make different decisions, preferences, and choices, which also inform their agencies. In this regard, Rosalind Delmar critically questions the existence of "true and authentic feminism" and

therefore, “a proper way to be a feminist” (2001, p. 6). From a similar perspective, Curtin and Devere argue for the “diversity of feminisms” with significant differences among each other for more than two centuries (1993, p. 7). In the context of Turkey, Baytok and her colleagues (2018) also draw attention to the outdatedness of such restrictive feminism, which sets the limits for women. Instead, they argue that feminists need to be critically aware of and reflect on the contradictions in their practices and preferences (Baytok et al., 2018). The diversity of feminisms well explains why Esra, Yasemin, and Hazal have different attitudes regarding the use of vulgar, obscene language in daily life and sexting. It also elucidates why their agencies differ from each other: Because, based on their political views, they have different preferences regarding the use of vulgar, obscene language.

Considering these three different attitudes toward the use of vulgar, obscene language in daily life, it is apparent that what kind of feminist thought and movement my women interlocutors are affiliated with is very diverse. The variations in their familial upbringings, socio-economic backgrounds, and the broader structural norms surrounding them have made them choose different feminisms for themselves. Their decisions to connect to different feminisms highlight their socio-culturally nuanced agencies. Despite the variations among them, as I will be discussing in the pages to come, I have observed a significant tendency that some of my feminist women interlocutors, except Esra, find (violent) vulgar, obscene language sexually pleasurable and arousing during sexting with certain reservations. For this reason, I ask why these notions, but not their Latin versions, are registered with erotic power during sexting. What does the pleasurability of vulgar, obscene language during sexting tell us about the contextuality of sexting regarding the offline gendered norms around the use of vulgar, obscene language and agencies of the women I study?

6.3. De/Contextuality of Vulgar Obscene Language and Sexting

> I shall tell you directly. Let's say we are sitting at a cafe and drinking coffee. If my boyfriend tells me, *"Come, I shall fuck you" (Gel seni bir sikeyim),* I would be incredibly disturbed. In fact, I would pick a fight against him. However, I won't be disturbed at all if he uses the exact phrase during sexting. On the contrary, I would enjoy it. (Interview with Dilara, 2021)

> I never use swear words in my daily life. I don't tolerate it. I mean, I can't. However, during sexting, … It is those notions that I find pleasurable during sexting. I am a feminist woman. … well, using these swear words gives me pleasure in sexting, but as I said, I would never allow anyone to use them in my daily life. (Interview with Yasemin, 2021)

Despite the general dislike and disapproval of the use of vulgar, obscene language in daily life communication among most of my research participants, this language becomes sexually pleasurable and arousing during sexting for the majority of my research participants. Dilara and Yasemin clearly state that what they find intolerable in their daily life communication becomes sexually arousing for them in the context of sexting. Similarly, Ziya's rejection of verbalizing certain sex-related notions during our interview supports my argument for the significance of contextuality in terms of what kind of feelings vulgar, obscene language generates. Ziya, a man research participant studying at a reputable public university, abstained from verbalizing certain sex-related notions when I asked about his ideas and preferences regarding dirty talk during offline sex and the use of language in sexting. He was born and grew up in a religiously conservative, low socio-economic environment in one of Turkey's most secular and metropolitan cities. His parents were also religiously conservative and were not open to discussing romantic relations and sexuality-related issues, including bodily changes during pubescence. He moved to Ankara after high school for his university education when he was 18, where he had his first sexual relationship. He does not enjoy and does not prefer talking

during offline sex; instead, he likes expressing sexual desires, preferences, and pleasures through bodily language, moaning, and murmuring. Below is an excerpt from my interview with Ziya.

> Ziya: I like soft dirty talk, but not with swear words. It is problematic for a woman to use swear words in Turkish. But this is not the case in English. … In Turkish, it is as if you are swearing at each other rather than making love. So, when I hear these words during sex, I get totally disturbed.
>
> Didem: Can you give examples of the notions you don't like?
>
> Ziya: Well, *now*. If I use these notions *now*, I will feel like I am swearing at you. It is tough for me. I prefer not to tell them.

The above excerpt from my interview with Ziya demonstrates his gendered position regarding the use of swear words formulated through vulgar, obscene phrases both in sex life and daily communication. Ziya did not want to use swear words while talking to me, as a woman, even when I asked him to provide examples during our interview, which was not a sexual and erotic context. His rejection of giving examples is linked to the negative connotations that are socio-culturally attached to these words. As mentioned earlier, most of the sex-related Turkish swearing phrases indicate a sexual attack and sexual violence toward women and their bodies, at least in their daily and non-sexual contexts (Doğan, 2014; Femihat, 2021; Murnen, 2000; Zengin, 2015). In this sense, all of my research participants agree that the use of swear words formed through vulgar, obscene language, especially toward women, is normatively outlawed in daily conversation in Turkey as these notions are thought to humiliate and degrade women by attacking their bodies, sexualities, and virtue. Nevertheless, they may prefer to use these phrases in specific contexts such as political protests, male homosocial gatherings, and sexting. In this regard, it is crucial to note that "sexuality shapes (and …is shaped by) what is not said, or cannot be said as well as what is actually put into words" (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 12).

Studies suggest that the use of sexually degrading language is a form of intimidation of women through which women are likely to "feel unsafe and vulnerable" (Murnen, 2000, p. 326). Accordingly, Ziya did not spell any swear words or vulgar, obscene words during our interview because he wanted to avoid degrading, humiliating, offending me, being disrespectful, and implying any sexual attack/violence toward me, which is evident in his statement, *"I will feel like I am swearing at you."* The utterance of these words as speech acts are injurious words, at least in their use of non-sexual contexts. The very reason why Ziya abstained from uttering these words is the performative power of these injurious words. The utterance of these words in a non-sexual context would be injurious, at least in the understanding of Ziya, because they would be signifying "a prior context," and there would not be a "a gap between the originating context or intention by which an utterance is animated and the effect it produces" (Butler, 1997, pp. 14–15). In other words, because these words would be uttered in a non-sexual context, regardless of the intention, their performative power is likely to be efficacious. Notably, the above quote from Ziya points out the importance of where and when these words are uttered. His emphasis on *"now"* indicates that his utterance of such words in the context of our interview would or might be offensive, at least in his understanding. Regarding contextuality, as Culpeper states, the use of vulgar, obscene words as a taboo language is "a matter of … what should, or should not occur" in certain contexts (Culpeper, 2018, p. 22).

Further, Zuhal's explanation of her preference for using vulgar, obscene language during sexting well supports my argument for the particular contextuality of sexting in terms of vulgar, obscene language's capacity to produce erotic feelings and sexual subjects. Zuhal is a young, veiled woman studying theology at a university level. She was born and grew up in a religiously conservative family with Islamic values in a small town located in Northern Turkey. Like most of my research participants, Zuhal hides her romantic and sexual affairs from her parents and siblings, thinking they would judge her and put extra pressure on her. Zuhal abstains from

offline penile-vaginal sexual intercourse to protect her virginity because of her Islamic values; however, she practices sexting with her partners, whom she mostly meets on online dating platforms. As I discuss in Chapter 5, Zuhal agrees that Islam strictly forbids pre-marital sexual relationships because, in her understanding, pre-marital sex causes the transmission of sexual diseases, the birth of extra-marital children, and the occurrence of confusion in the family linkage. For this reason, she excludes penile-vaginal intercourse in her offline sexual relationships. By doing so, she also protects her virginity and partially aligns herself with the official religious and political discourses, which require unmarried women to remain virgins until their wedding night. Zuhal is in favor of and prefers using sex-related swear words and rough speaking in sexting as she thinks only these words produce erotic feelings and give sexual pleasure.

> I am in favor of speaking openly. Generally, men use softer and more polite phrases, thinking I would be offended because of my modest lifestyle, but I immediately tell them not to censor themselves. … Polite concepts do not create any feelings for me; on the contrary, I feel weird. However, I can never and ever tolerate if he uses the exact phrases in our daily non-erotic talks or while fighting. Please forgive me; I will give an example: the expression of *amına koymak* (to fiercely put a penis in a woman's pussy). You can use this statement for swearing. I will never say hi to or greet a man if he says this to me while fighting. But, if he says this exact phrase with sexual intent in the moments when we do not speak through our minds, I wouldn't mind it. In fact, I would like it. What I mean is it depends on the context. (Interview with Zuhal, 2021)[79]

Embedded in the quote is a critical point to be stressed upon. Zuhal's *"modest lifestyle,"* implying her Islamic piety revealed through her veil and clothing, made her sexting partners think that she *"would be offended"* if they used vulgar, obscene language. There is an implicit

[79] When Esra told, *"when we do not speak through our minds, …",* she refers to the moments in which she was captured by her (sex(t)ual) emotions and feelings.

bias that pious Muslim women would not enjoy vulgar, obscene language in sexting. I think this bias might have originated from the assumption that Muslim women are sexually oppressed and do not (or cannot) speak sexually explicit ways. However, Zuhal's attitude proves it to be invalid, showing she, as a pious Muslim woman, indeed enjoys vulgar, obscene language in sexting. Yet, she, just like many others, certainly disapproves of the use of such language in daily communication. This is also evidenced when she said, "*Please forgive me*" to me before she exemplified the vulgar, obscene phrases that she enjoys in sexting but cannot tolerate in mundane communication. Accordingly, Zuhal's narrative explicitly highlights the context of using vulgar, obscene words and rough language. In fact, it is apparent in the quote that what is inappropriate and outlawed in daily life communication might be sex(t)ually desirable in the context of sexting due to its capacity to register erotic feelings. To exemplify, *"amına koymak"* (to fiercely put a penis in a woman's pussy), a vulgar, obscene phrase that is mainly used for swearing, produces the feeling of being sexually attacked in its daily non-sex(t)ual usage. However, as Zuhal states, the exact phrase generates erotic feelings, leading to sex(t)ual stimulation on both sides in sexting.

In my understanding, the capacity of vulgar, obscene language to produce and register erotic feelings lies in the working of speech act. In this chapter, I have argued that vulgar, obscene words are performative utterances as they produce particular feelings and ideas in the audience (Austin, 1975). Sexting messages are actually *performative utterances* rather than constative sentences simply because these sexually explicit messages produce certain feelings and enactments on both parties of sexting. While one party is typing (read as saying) their imagined acts and sexual desires, the other party imagines this scene and replies by typing how they are feeling and what they are willing to do. Therefore, typing (saying) the fantasied sexual acts, rather than acting (read as "doing"), affectively mobilizes certain feelings, emotions, and sexual desires and enacts arousal and imagination of the sex scene. It is the power of the

message (utterance), which is written/told by one party and heard/read by the other party, to enact certain feelings on each party at this specific condition. I find this crucially significant as it signals the socio-culturally and historically nuanced agency of my research participants. By utilizing sexting, my research participants speak up for their sexual desires and fantasies in a socio-cultural and political atmosphere in which gender and sexuality dynamics are strictly monitored and regulated for the political aim of aligning them into religiously informed obedient objects. Ahmet explains well what is happening during sexting, while talking about the significance of sexting.

> When I read the message that my partner sends during the sexting, I directly visualize it, and it makes me imagine what I am doing next and how and which part of her body I am touching/kissing. And those moments, the swear words spice up the feelings. (Interview with Ahmet, 2021)

The way Ahmet is practicing sexting indicates the *here-and-now* traits of sexting: making love and the co-construction of sexual scenes through words. Since sex-related terms adopted from Latin are not loaded with sex connotations, they cannot do the work that vulgar, obscene language achieves during sexting: the work of producing erotic feelings.

Further, Gözde, a self-identified feminist woman interlocutor, is among those who prefer using vulgar, obscene language during sexting. Gözde was born and grew up in a very cosmopolitan and metropolitan city in Turkey. Her parents were atheists; therefore, she was not socialized with religious values, and Islamic norms were not a reference point for her behaviors, including her romantic and sexual practices. Her parents were very open to discussing romantic and sexual affairs with her, which, she thinks, has made her strong enough to stand up/defend her sexual dis/likes and preferences. In this sense, she stands as a distinct case because neither her familial upbringing nor her ability to openly speak up for her sex(t)ual desires aligns with the heteronormative woman figure in Turkey. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the ideal unmarried

woman figure imposed by AKP is a selfless, virgin, faithful, religious, and pious subject. Further, Gözde had a monogamous heterosexual relationship at the time I interviewed her, and she was sexting with her partner almost every day. Gözde was aware of the negative and humiliating connotations of vulgar, obscene language and sex-related swear words; however, she stated that using these notions during sexting does not create negative feelings for her.

> It does not make me feel something different. The name of this organ is an *am* (cunt, pussy). If I do not form a sentence that would put me in a bad position, I can refer to it as *am* (cunt, pussy) or *vajina* (vagina). But it is really very weird to say *vajina* (vagina) during sexting. The notion of *am* (cunt, pussy) has much more sex connotation. *Vajina* (vagina) doesn't have this connotation. I have never said *vajina* (vagina) so far. If he says *penisimi sokuyorum* (I'm putting my penis inside), it will sound funny. But, if he says *yarrarğımı sokuyorum* (I'm putting my cock inside), it is more … I don't know whether it attains more power to it, but I find it more arousing and stimulating. (Interview with Gözden, 2021)

Gözde does not find Turkicized Latin sex-related notions such as *vajina* (vagina) and *penis* sexually arousing and pleasurable; on the contrary, she prefers using vulgar, obscene words during sexting, because as mentioned earlier, these words, at least in the account of my research participants, are not loaded with sex connotations. She thinks that she has control over the meanings created by the vulgar, obscene words during sexting as she abstains from using sentences that would *"put me in a bad position."* In my reading, "*A Bad Position,"* points at the objectification of women, their bodies, and their sexualities.

As explained earlier, sex-related swear words formulated through vulgar, obscene language are understood to objectify and passivize women, their bodies, and sexualities, at least in their daily usage (Doğan, 2014; Femihat, 2021; Zengin, 2015). In the context of Turkey, women's bodies and sexualities are used in swear words as a means of humiliating and degrading. This dynamic is especially visible in the current Turkish context, where feminist

voices and movements challenge these conservative norms and advocate for sexual autonomy and freedom of expression, pushing back against the restrictive and traditionalist discourse propagated by the government and mainstream media. In this regard, Gözde claims authority over the meanings and feelings created through the performative utterance of vulgar, obscene words during sexting. However, following Butler, I would suggest that it is not the intention of Gözde but instead the context of the communication that allows a break or a rupture from prior meanings and citationality of vulgar, obscene languages in non-injurious ways (Butler, 1997, p. 51). In this way, rather than being objectified, she becomes a desiring and desired subject through the use of vulgar, obscene language in the particular context of sexting: decontextualization of vulgar, obscene language. Therefore, vulgar, obscene words, as *performative utterances* (Austin, 1975) in sexting, produce certain sex(t)ual subjects as opposed to their utterance in non-sex(t)ual daily communication. Gözde becomes a desirable and desiring speaking subject at the moment when she is addressed through the use of vulgar, obscene language in the context of sexting, a sexual context: a decontextualized context where vulgar, obscene language is cited. The permissibility of becoming, and therefore a construction of, a desiring and desirable subject through the use of vulgar, obscene language in sexting is realized through the citation of gendered norms (Butler, 1993). For this very reason, this subject is not an enduring subject but a temporal one. As Butler states, "construction not only takes place in time, but itself a temporal process" (1993, p. 10). That is to say that the use of vulgar, obscene language does the work of producing sexually desiring and desirable subjects in the moment of sexting, a decontextualized context, but not in daily life communication where it would injure rather than please.

Further, Gözde highlights her free agency regarding her preference of what kind of notions she wants to use during sexting: *"I can refer to it as am (cunt, pussy) or vajina (vagina)."* By making preferences regarding the use of sexual language in sexting, Gözde

highlights her sexual agency, which positions herself as a sexual subject rather than a sexual object in the symbolic order of vulgar, obscene language. Likewise, Gözde also prefers her sexting partner to use these notions as she is not sexually aroused by hearing or reading Turkicized sex-related Latin concepts such as *vajina* (vajina) and *penis* (penis). I think through preferring to use vulgar, obscene language, she discursively constructs herself as a desiring and desirable subject because it is these notions, but not Latin alternatives, that have sex connotations and erotic power. Accordingly, in the particular context of sexting, vulgar, obscene language as a *performative utterance* not only creates erotic feelings but also contributes to the formation of desiring and desired sexual bodies and subjects. The emergence of women as sexual subjects but not objects in the utterance of vulgar, obscene language during sexting deeply challenges one of the commonly accepted scholarly (and also activist) arguments that vulgar, obscene language and sexual slang erases women's sexual subjectivities, rendering them into sexual objects of men's sexual desires (Bass, 2015; Femihat, 2021; Murnen, 2000; Özçalişkan, 1994). This, in my understanding, pinpoints the particular contextuality of sexting in which meanings and feelings attached to vulgar, obscene language in offline life are very likely to be obscured. In this regard, I find it essential to refer to Butler to highlight the importance of

> the possibility of decontextualizing and recontextualizing such terms through radical acts of public misappropriation constitutes the basis of an ironic hopefulness that the conventional relation between word and wound might become tenuous and even broken over time. (1997, p. 100)

The importance of women's assertion of their sexual agency, primarily through the use of vulgar, obscene language during sexting, lies in the challenging nature of the patriarchal and conservative values promoted by the current Turkish government. The promotion of traditional gender roles becomes highly challenged with women's expression of sexual authority and freedom. Gözde's choices described above confront the conservative and traditional

understanding of gender and women in particular. This actually subverts the notion that women should be passive objects of male desire, instead positioning them as active subjects of their own sexual experiences. This kind of agency is a form of resistance that paves the way for women to reclaim their sexual subjectivity. In this context, Gözde, as a self-identified feminist woman, and her sexual agency underscore and stand as an example of the broader feminist struggle for autonomy in Turkey. Gözde's stance highlights the importance of creating spaces where women can freely express their desires and preferences without fear of judgment or repression. This act of agency, therefore, is not just about personal preference but is deeply political. It signifies a break from traditional norms and the assertion of a new identity that embraces sexual freedom and empowerment.

6.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the peculiarities of the Turkish language in sexting practices. I have shown that Turkish is a minimal language for talking about sex and sexuality. The existing vocabularies for sex and sexuality-related topics, except vulgar, obscene language mainly used for sexual swearing, is understood as too scientific to arouse erotic feelings during sexting, at least for my research participants. Therefore, these sex-related scientific Latin terms, such as *vajina* (vagina), *penis* (penis), *testis* (testicle), and so on, fail to generate erotic feelings and sexual arousal during sexting. On the other hand, sex-related Turkish vulgar, obscene language, another (rather unpolite) alternative for sex talk and talking about sex, has conflictual properties and dimensions. The use of Turkish vulgar, obscene words in everyday life is considered rude, rough, unrespectful, and immoral, as these notions carry the meaning of sexual violence against women (Çiçek & Yağbasan, 2019; Zengin, 2015). For this reason, as was witnessed during the Gezi Park Protests, a group of feminist women strictly rejected the use of this kind of language, at least in daily life communication. Nevertheless, some feminist women are not against, if not embrace, women's use of vulgar, obscene language simply because this

language challenges the idealized heterosexual femininity roles. The idealized heterosexual woman is expected not to utter such vulgar, obscene words, let alone enjoy this language because this language is understood to break the norms of morality in Turkey. As I have debated throughout this chapter, most of my research participants, even those who identify themselves as feminists, find these vulgar, obscene words and phrases sex(t)ually pleasurable, stimulating, and arousing during sexting. In other words, this kind of sexual vocabulary has the capacity to produce and register erotic feelings on the parties of sexting practice, even though they are normatively outlawed in non-sexual everyday communications. In this regard, I suggest that the sex(t)ual pleasurability of vulgar, obscene language in sexting challenges the offline gender norms.

In the contemporary Turkish context, where the socio-political atmosphere is heavily pushed towards traditional gender norms and where modesty is praised, the use of vulgar and obscene language during sexting stands out as an act of resistance, rebellion, defiance, and self-empowerment. This practice starts carrying another role since it directly challenges and confronts the patriarchal expectations and rules, which aim to regulate and control women's sexuality. By using vulgar, obscene language, women actually reclaim their sexual agency and their right to sexual expression, which has attempted, especially for the past 20 years, to be silenced and suppressed not only in public but also in private spheres. This articulation, therefore, operates as a spatial opportunity for women to articulate their desires and pleasures on their terms and also as an operational field for the broader struggle for sexual liberation.

Further, I have emphasized the ambivalent character of the Turkish vulgar, obscene language, which is mainly used for swearing –sexist connotations on the one hand and erotic power on the other hand– through the particular contextuality of sexting. Vulgar, obscene speech, as a speech act, creates different feelings depending on the context in which they are uttered. In the context of sexting, their use is very likely to gain erotic power and stimulate

sexual arousal in the parties. However, their use in daily life communication or during a fight is not socio-culturally appropriate as they imply a sexual attack on and humiliation of the women. Borrowing from Butler's argumentation, I suggest that the erotic power of vulgar, obscene language may come from its rupture or disassociation from its originating context in which it is used as a way of humiliation. Hence, a particular contextuality of sexting, in which words are *doing* things, reconfigures the meanings generated by the sex-related Turkish vulgar, obscene words. Much like Butler's argument of performative acts shaping gender and sexual identity, sexting messages as a performative act produce sexual desires circulating between the parties involved in sexting. Accordingly, the sender and the receiver performatively become sex(t)ually desiring, desired, and desirable subjects.

In addition to their capacity to create erotic feelings, I have also argued that the use of vulgar, obscene language as a speech act re/configures women as sexual subjects who sexually desire and are desirable. Women's appearance as sexual subjects in the vulgar, obscene language during sexting does not compile with the offline norms and meaning around the use of vulgar, obscene language, which is understood to be a violent sexual attack on women and their bodies. Linking to my dissertation's main research question, which is how sexting practices and offline norms regulating gender and sexuality shape and are shaped by each other, I argue that the negative meanings attached to vulgar, obscene language in its daily life fade away in sexting. What is socio-culturally and politically unacceptable becomes sex(t)ually arousing and stimulating, which performatively produces sexual emotions and desiring subjects.

Lastly, the question of vulgar, obscene language is vital in understanding sexting, sex(t)uality, sexual subjectivity, and agency of the individuals I study. Through gaining an insight into what kind of vulgar, obscene language my research participants use and how they feel and think about it, I better understand and analyze what kind of sex(t)ual subjectivity and agency they perform in their sexting practices because sexting, different from other sexual

activities, is almost exclusively based on language. Accordingly, this chapter is closely related to other analytical chapters in terms of knowing my interviewees and their sex(t)ual subjectivities which have significantly contributed to my analysis.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have shown that in the context of Turkey, where Islamic authoritarianism and conservatism have been increasing since 2011, broader structural offline norms, such as national political discourses and policies, religious norms, socio-cultural moral codes, and feminist politics, shape and reshape my research participants' sexting practices: what kind of language they use, whether and what kind of self-images they share, with whom they practice sexting, and how they sex(t)ually position and present themselves in their sexting practices. At the same time, I have also argued that my research participants negotiate with these broader structural offline norms, as I have shown in women's sex(t)ual subjectivities (Chapter 4), in the case of Islamic religiosity (Chapter 5), and women's use of vulgar, obscene language in sexting (Chapter 6). By doing so, I have claimed that my research participants perform a socio-culturally nuanced and historically specific sex(t)ual subjectivity and agency that cannot be explained through the binary categories of resistance versus submission but through Mahmood's theorization of agency, which she defines "as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (2009, p. 15).

Following a poststructuralist feminist approach, I have engaged with different theoretical fields to which I believe my dissertation has contributed. Sexuality studies is one of the central axes of the theoretical scaffold of my dissertation. Although each analytical chapter of my dissertation is closely linked to sexuality studies, my discussion on women's sex(t)ual subjectivities and sexting in Chapter 4 makes the most meaningful theoretical contribution to sexuality studies. Following the very limited number of academic studies, I go beyond the binary discussion of sexting as objectifying versus liberating and focus on how my women research participants sex(t)ually position and present themselves in their sexting practices (García-Gómez, 2017; Hasinoff, 2013; Liong & Cheng, 2019; Rice & Watson, 2016). I have argued that depending on how and to what extent the broader structural offline norms impact

them, my women research participants may play with gendered roles, negotiate with male dominance, challenge heteronormative sexual scripts, or be more timid, withdrawn, and cautious in their sexting practices. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 4, İlkay told me that she enjoys mocking and ridiculing some of her sexting partners, especially those she meets on online gambling platforms. Similarly, she gives sexual commands in a very sexually assertive manner and uses vulgar, obscene language while sexting with her *"fuck buddies"*. However, she was more cautious about what kind of language she was using and at what time she was sending messages while she was sexting one of her ex-partners, who she considered socio-economically and intellectually superior to herself. Therefore, she was more timid in expressing her sexual desires and teasing her ex-partner during sexting.

I have shown that the subjectivities and agencies of the women I studied do not correspond with the socio-culturally and politically endorsed heterosexual femininity figure that is associated with sexual passivity, submissiveness, and obedience in the context of Turkey. On the contrary, these women consciously and purposefully subvert and challenge heteronormative sexual scripts in their sexting practices. For instance, İlkay, from time to time, consciously mocks some of her sexting partners to ridicule them but not to receive sex(t)ual pleasure. In her understanding, she is *"playing with the classical and traditional gender roles"* by consciously and purposefully challenging men's sexual authority and supremacy. By doing so, she resists the traditional and conservative feminine figure that the AKP and Erdoğan Regime have been imposing on society because their imagined woman figure is docile, obedient, and submissive to men's (sexual) authority both in the private and public sphere. Accordingly, these women perform a heterosexual feminine sexual agency that is defined as "a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power" (Gill, 2008, p. 41).

However, as I have argued throughout Chapter 4, this sex(t)ually assertive and empowered form of sex(t)ual subjectivity and agency cannot be generalized because the women I studied perform a wide range of sex(t)ual subjectivities. To enunciate, there are times when the women I study perform ambivalent sex(t)ual subjectivity and agency. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 4, although Dilara was disturbed by the *"toxic possessive"* language that her partner used during sexting, she preferred not to raise her voice and to interrupt or end their sexting. I find her sex(t)ual subjectivity ambivalent because it cannot be analyzed through either resistance or submissive categories, as it contains both a critical (feminist) awareness of male domination and traditional femininity. The theoretical significance and contribution of this ambivalent subjectivity are connected to my argument that women's sex(t)ual subjectivities are unstable, complex, multifaced, and occupy changing positions in a broader spectrum. Followingly, I also argue that the sex(t)ual agency of the women I study in Turkey, as exemplified in Dilara's case, is best understood through Mahmood's theorization of the agency. Instead of either resistance or submissive, I claim that women's sex(t)ual agencies should be taken into account "as a modality of action" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 157) under different socio-cultural circumstances. That means that these women make decisions and take actions within the power relations that not only subordinate them but also enable them to make these decisions and take actions. However, this does not mean that these women always resist these norms. Likewise, they do not always correspond to them.

In my dissertation, I have given place to the voices of devoted Muslims who practice sexting while trying to maintain their Islamic selves (See Chapter 6). I have shown that whether sexting is *zina* or not is a vexed debate on which there is no consensus among the people I study. Nevertheless, I have also argued that, by benefitting from the digitally mediated materiality of sexting, my Muslim research participants constantly negotiate with both Islamic norms regulating pre-marital sexual behaviors (outlawing *zina*) and their sexual desires. In this regard,

as discussed in Chapter 6, sharing or not sharing self-images and videos during sexting is one of the ways in which my devoted Muslim informants negotiate with Islamic norms regulating pre-marital sexual practices, in essence, outlawing *zina.* I suggest that there is a strong link between Muslim veiling and (not) sharing self-images and videos during sexting. Through veiling, Muslim women not only cultivate their Islamic faith and piety but also conceal their bodies, which is closely linked to the notion of *mahrem* (Najmabadi, 2000; Scott, 2009). Göle states that *mahrem* "signifies the interior, sacred, gendered space, forbidden to exterior and stranger masculine gaze" (2015, p. 47). In other words, through veiling, Muslim women preserve their bodies from men who are not their nuclear family members or who are not *halal* to them. Notably, the AKP and the Erdoğan Regime have reminded women of the importance of veiling and modest clothing for a good Muslim woman in the last decade. In fact, they intervened in women's clothing on several occasions. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 4, Hüseyin Çelik, one of the important figures of AKP, commented on a woman TV representative's clothing and stated that her clothing was very inappropriate and unacceptable due to her cleavages in 2013.[80] In the following days, she was fired. For this reason, my devoted women Muslim research participants prefer not to share their self-made body images and videos while sexting with their sexting partners. Because, by doing so, their *mahrem* bodies remain unseen and unknown by the "stranger masculine gaze" (Göle, 2015, p. 47). Nevertheless, they still engage in some sort of sex(t)ual activity through which they receive sexual pleasure. This implies that by utilizing the digitally mediated materiality of sexting, the devoted Muslim women I study *re*interpret and adjust the Islamic norms regulating pre-marital sexual behaviors. The theoretical significance of their particular use of sexting is that it proves that Islam has an adaptable, flexible, and *re*interpretable feature, at least in its interconnection with sexuality. At

[80] https://t24.com.tr/haber/huseyin-celikin-elestirdigi-dekolteli-sunucu-isten-cikarildi,241453

the same time, it highlights my Muslim research participants' agencies, which can only be understood beyond the binary category of resistance versus submissive.

Related to the above discussion, I have also shown that my devoted Muslim respondents avoid sexual intercourse in their offline (real) sexual relationships due to their Islamic values. They consciously prefer to exclude sexual intercourse in their "real" sexual relationships because, as discussed in Chapter 5, they think by prohibiting *zina,* Allah means to prevent the dissemination of sexual diseases and pregnancy and childbirth out of wedlock. However, their sexting practices contain scenarios of sex(t)ual intercourse. (See Chapter 5) As discussed in Chapter 5, Erman, a devoted Muslim man, stated that he receives peculiar sexual pleasure and satisfaction compared to his offline sexual relationships, as he imagines having sexual intercourse in his sexting practices. Their exclusion and inclusion of sex(t)ual intercourse in their sex(t)ual relationships shows that they actively negotiate with Islamic norms that subordinate them. Through this negotiation, they manifest a particular agency, which opens a way for me to further question the idea of sexting, cybersex in general, as an immaterial experience. As against this idea, I have argued that materiality appears in thought and acts as "thoughtlike" (Küchler, 2005, p. 225). In other words, although their sexting practices lack the exchange of bodily liquids, smells, and touches, they experience the sexual pleasure of having sex(t)ual intercourse through imagining and thinking about it through the digitally mediated materiality of sexting. I find this discussion theoretically significant as it first refutes the commonly accepted normative view that sexting is beyond material life and supports my argument that sexting has a digitally mediated materiality. Second, it complicates and contributes to the discussion of what counts as sex.

In my understanding, the above discussion also has socio-cultural and political significance. It shows that some pious Muslims turn to im/material or "virtual" spaces to further explore and experience their sexual desires beyond the bodily limits that are put by Islamic

norms regulating pre-marital sexual behaviors. In this regard, Erman's narrative is a telling case as he transgresses the Islamic norms by engaging in sex(t)ual intercourse in sexting which he avoids in "real" sex. From this perspective, sexting, digitally mediated sexualities in general, can be interpreted as alternative spaces that provide certain people with imaginings and practices free from the structural norms in the gender and sexuality repressive context of Turkey. I think it is also vital to pay attention to how the subjectivities of these people may vary in im/material spaces and across "real" and digitally mediated spaces.

Further, theories of language is another field that I utilized in my dissertation. As discussed in Chapter 6, I have shown that the Turkish language has a minimal vocabulary to talk about sex and sex talking and that the use of vulgar, obscene language is two-sided. On the one hand, it carries highly gendered sexist connotations that imply a sexual attack on and humiliation of women's bodies and sexualities (Çiçek & Yağbasan, 2019; Zengin, 2015). For this reason, many (feminist) women in Turkey strictly disapprove and fight against the use of this language. On the other hand, it is this language that has the erotic power to generate and stimulate sexual arousal during sexting, at least in the account of most of my research participants. Having this said, I have suggested taking the use of vulgar, obscene language in sexting into account as a speech act (Austin, 1975; Butler, 1997) and argued that vulgar, obscene words are performative utterances as they produce particular sexual feelings and ideas in the audience (Austin, 1975).

The first theoretical significance of this discussion is linked to the ways in which subjects are constituted. The women involved in the sexting practices become a sex(t)ually desiring and desirable subject through the use of vulgar, obscene language in the particular contextuality of sexting because the temporal contextuality of sexting allows a break or a rupture from its prior meanings and citationality in a non-injurious way (Butler, 1997, p. 51). Notably, despite the negative meanings attached to this language, the women I study prefer to

use this language to sexually please and arouse themselves and their partners. At first glance, their preference for using this language might seem like a submission to patriarchal and sexist language. However, by using this language, these women become sex(t)ually desiring and desirable subjects instead of sexual objects.

Another theoretical contribution of this discussion originates from women's claim of authority over the meanings they attach to the words they use during sexting. By using this language, they first actively challenge the idealized traditional heterosexual feminine figure who is socio-culturally and normatively expected not to use this language in Turkey. Hence, they perform an active sexual agency that obscures the gendered sexual norms subordinating women in Turkey. Further, their sexual preferences for and expressions through this language highlight a break from traditional norms and the assertion of a new identity that embraces sexual freedom and empowerment.

Last but not least, this dissertation both contributes to and challenges the growing number of studies on urbanite-educated young adults' sexual behaviors in Turkey. In line with Özyeğin's (2015) research, I have shown that the women and men I interviewed experience and explore their sexual desires against and despite the broader structural norms such as national politics, familial and societal expectations, and cultural and religious codes of pre-marital sexuality. Significantly, different from her research, I was able to give voice to devoted Muslim research participants' sex(t)ual experiences and narratives in which they told how they were caught between their sexual desires and their Islamic faith.

The increasing Islamic conservatism and authoritarianism under the rule of the AKP and Erdoğan Regime has brought along more conservative gender and sexuality discourses and policies appealing to Islamic norms. AKP and the Erdoğan Regime have tried to impose religiously informed gender and sexuality norms on individuals, especially unmarried young adults, through surveillance, intervention, and prohibitions. For instance, Erdoğan revived

discursive discrimination between virgin and non-virgin unmarried women in one of his mass public gatherings in 2011.[81] I have argued that the women and men I studied are impacted by these broader national politics and policies differently and to different extents. Notably, how they are affected has an influence on their sexting practice. However, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, they do not always correspond to these power relations as docile bodies; on the contrary, from time to time, they also resist and negotiate with these power relations.

This dissertation also contributes to and challenges the scholarship on sexting in Turkey. There are few scholarly works on sexting that generally debate sexting in terms of its negative aspects, such as risky behaviors (Durmuş & Solak, 2024) and victimization and cybercrimes (Ergül, 2021; Ergül & Ziyalar, 2022). These studies do not consider sexting as a part of individuals' sexual practices. On the contrary, they approach sexting as a behavior that is likely to threaten individuals' well-being. In this regard, their works are in line with the international view framing sexting as a risky behavior (Dir & Cyders, 2015; Döring, 2014; Ferguson, 2011).

However, in my dissertation, I go beyond this normative discussion and consider sexting a chat-based form of sexual activity, which is part of a broad spectrum of sexual behaviors. It may or may not be risky, just like all other sexual practices, depending on how and under what circumstances it is performed. Rather than questioning its potentially dangerous consequences, I have explored sexting in its mediated relationship with offline norms regulating pre-marital sexual behaviors by focusing on women's sex(t)ual subjectivities, Islamic religiosity, and the use of vulgar, obscene language. By doing so, I have shown that there is a mutual, complex, and dynamic relationship between offline sexuality norms and sexting: they are open to shape and are shaped by each other. At the same time, I have argued that my research participants

[81] https://www.cnnturk.com/yazarlar/basbakan-o-kadin-kiz-midir-kadin-midir-113750

actively and constantly negotiate with their sexual desires and these offline norms while engaging in sexting, which highlights their socio-culturally nuanced and historically specific agencies. I must note that having the opportunity to produce knowledge at an academic institution outside Turkey has given me a free space and courage to speak openly without feeling the pressure of AKP and Erdoğan and enabled me to go beyond the (political) boundaries, engaging with more critical theories.

Limitations of the Research

The most significant limitation of my research has been its own topic and context: sex(t)uality in Turkey. Throughout this dissertation, I have repeatedly stressed that although there are numerous implicit references to it, sexuality has an unspeakable nature in the context of Turkey. I have shown that all of my interviewees, except Gözde, were unable to and abstained from talking to their parents about their sexual experiences, including their physical and biological changes as an outcome of pubescence. Only Gözde was open to talking to her parents regarding her sexual relationships; however, she preferred not to disclose her one-night stands and casual sex, but only that she has a sexual life. Özbay and his colleagues' research (2023) supports my claim that young adults do not openly talk about their sexual experiences. Further, as mentioned in Chapter 1, one of my man interviewees sent me a message on Facebook after our interview to thank me as our interview showed him that it was possible to talk about sexuality in a non-sexual and non-erotic way.

The increasing Islamic authoritarianism and conservatism during the rule of the AKP and Erdoğan government in Turkey have escalated the surveillance on sexuality matters. Individuals have become more timid and more cautious about revealing their "non-conforming" sexual desires and practices. In other words, those individuals who experience their sexual desires beyond the hetero-norms framed by national, religious, and cultural codes may often prefer to remain hidden. For this reason, as discussed in Chapter 1, I could access a small

number of people (24 in-depth interviews in total) who were willing to share their sexting experiences. Being unable to access a limited number of people has limited my research.

Moreover, while designing this research, I had planned to anonymously collect sexting scripts from my research participants by creating an online pool. I thought and still think that this would enrich my analysis in different layers. For instance, I would be able to better understand and analyze how vulgar, obscene language works as a performative utterance and constitutes sexually desiring and desirable subjects. It would also provide me with a better insight into understanding the ways in which my women research participants sex(t)ually position themselves in their sexting practices. However, I could not gather this data. Only three of my research participants agreed to send their sexting scripts, which did not form meaningful data to analyze. For this reason, I had to exclude them from my analysis.

Further Research Avenues

There is a growing number of studies on young adults' romantic and sexual perceptions and relationships in Turkey. Most of these studies are conducted with university students and on university campuses, especially in big cities (Boratav & Çavdar, 2012; Eşsizoğlu et al., 2011; Kukulu et al., 2009; Nazik et al., 2021; Özbay et al., 2023; Özyeğin, 2015). Following this line of literature, I have conducted my dissertation research on university students in Ankara. University campuses in Turkey provide a multi-cultural environment where individuals with diverse religious (Islamic and non-Islamic), socio-economic, political, and familial backgrounds come together. The campuses are likely to offer secular and open spaces for students to discuss and meet alternative political views and lifestyles. Accordingly, university students are identified as educated, urbanite, upwardly mobile individuals who are familiar with or have heard about alternative lifestyles, including liberal sexual practices. However, I assume that this population significantly disassociates from the young adults living in the country or small towns in Turkey not only because they access less multicultural, less liberal, but more

restrictive environments. But more importantly, as discussed in Chapter 3, uneven westernization and modernization processes in Turkey have created a gap between metropolitan cities and small town/rural parts, which gradually resulted in the underdevelopment of the latter in terms of socio-cultural and economic spheres, including gender and sexuality dynamics. Besides, AKP received the majority of its votes from the voters living in rural areas where Kurdish citizens do not inhabit.[82] Having this said, further research concentrating on young adults living in the country, small towns, or more rural areas would complement the literature. I foresee that conducting this research would be difficult in terms of accessing research participants. Nevertheless, such research would make an invaluable theoretical and methodological contribution.

[82] https://secim.hurriyet.com.tr/14-mayis-2023-secimleri/secim-sonuclari/

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