VISUALS AND SALIENT IDENTITIES
The Construction of “Gezi Spirit” as a Multifaceted Identity through Images

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The Gezi Movement started as a sit-in protest at the end of May 2013. The goal was to prevent trees in Istanbul’s Gezi Park from being cut down for the construction of a shopping mall. The protests grew, becoming one of the biggest social movements in modern Turkish political history. Besides its intensive use of digital platforms, Gezi witnessed the circulation of a number of images, including photographs, designs, and symbols. These visual elements had a direct impact and helped (de)construct multi-lateral relationships among people each time they were encountered. This essay argues that various images produced and circulated within the context of Gezi, and particularly those in social media channels, contribute to building the collective identity of the movement. I propose a visual reading of the Gezi Movement in relation to its collective identity. Sheldon Stryker’s identity salience theory offers profound perspectives that support interpretation of how visual artifacts opened possibilities for engagement with the fluid identity of the movement. Following this line, this study attempts to understand how online visual elements facilitate the construction of salient movement identities.

Keywords: Gezi Movement, Turkey, collective identity, visual studies, social movements

For Turkey, 2013 was a landmark year. Starting at the end of May as a sit-in to protect a few trees in Istanbul’s Gezi Park from being cut down, and to prevent the construction of a shopping mall, these protests, known as the “Gezi Movement”, “Gezi Park Protests” or simply as “Gezi,” grew to be one of the biggest social movements in modern Turkish political history. More than 3.6 million people took to the streets in 80 provinces, participating in 5,532 protest actions within the first 112 days. While these numbers reflect police reports (Sardan 2013) unofficial estimations were much higher. Clashes with the police left more than 10 people dead and thousands injured. Years after the protests, the Gezi Movement, in all of its legal, social, and political aspects, continues to occupy a considerable place in public discussions.

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Gezi emerged in a period that a series of uprisings around the world challenged the existing ways of organization and participation. Protests after 2009 elections both in Romania and Iran saw rapid mobilization of people through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, which was followed by other movements such as the Arab Spring (Tunisia and Egypt in particular), Occupy Wall Street of the USA, Euromaidan of Ukraine, Umbrella Revolution of Hong Kong, Anti-austerity movements of Spain and Greece, Electric Yerevan and other protests in Armenia in 2011, 2013 and 2018. Each of these movements had different aims and claims, varying from demands for electoral change to betterment of financial distribution. However, as like as Gezi, they succeeded in bringing a vast range of people together while largely relying on alternative networks of communication, both internally and externally. Several studies focused on the digitalization of network communication et al. 2013; Buettner and Buettner 2016; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Gerbaudo 2012), and the impact and contribution of digital-born affordances such as hashtags on the state of collectivity (Transfeld and Werenfels 2016; Kavada 2015; Papacharissi 2015). Most of these studies use textual data and regard visual materials as expressive mediums or elements that trigger an initial anger and excitement, such as the pepper-spray officer and the mask of Guy Fawkes of the Occupy Wall Street, Mohamed Bouazizi of Tunisian Revolution, and the blue-bra woman of Tahrir Square. However, as the Internet become increasingly visual and image production and circulation technologies become popular, those materials go beyond those categories of being a mere communication medium or stimulant, and take greater part in contemporary social movements. Today, visuals are much more mobile, pervasive, and involved in collectivity-building practices within political struggle.

Aside from joining the digital flow of its contemporary movements, Gezi was primarily a visual-dominant movement, with photographs, satirical slogans and memes, combined with graphic arts that could be seen on street walls, banners, and social media. Public performances, creative expressions, and random moments were photographed and circulated on social media platforms. Some of the popular photographs were reframed as designs and were recirculated online. Some of these images gained national and international recognition as symbols of the Gezi Movement, depicting experiences and conceptualizations of oppression, hope, anger, freedom, and solidarity. These images helped construct a virtually leaderless resistance by influencing individuals from diverse social and political affiliations and bringing them together in an unprecedented way in Turkey context (Arda 2014). Gezi witnessed a coexistence and collaboration of extremely polarized identities, which are divided due to ethnic, religious, and social tensions. People from diverse (and also conflicting) backgrounds were comfortable with sharing similar symbols and practices, as far as it was within the present atmosphere of solidarity.
Visuals, representing such solidarity and understanding, suggested a collective identity that was flexible and fluid enough to be appealing to a wide range of Gezi participants. Analyzing the impact of images on the collective identity of Gezi offers an important lens through which to consider the power of the visual in social movements.

In this article, I examine still images, among other visual elements, and study their contribution to collective identity formation in the Gezi Movement. Still images were extremely popular within the visual culture of Gezi. Not only the photographs of the moment were shared instantly online, but also a number of amateur and professional redesigning based on these photographs were done and circulated later via social media platforms, along with text additions and comments. In the aftermath of Gezi, several social media users faced legal charges for supporting the protests. As a result, a number of social media accounts were also shut down. Due to continuing concerns regarding the safety of the activists, the user names of the social media accounts and the original versions of the online posts are not provided in this article.

Besides the online ubiquity of images, I find a sense of versatility there, as it is also possible to transfer them to printed materials and make them available across various media. Considering the multifaceted profile of participants of Gezi, I discuss these images speak to identity salience theory (Stryker 2000), as they display moments of diversity and coexistence while retaining a culture of solidarity and unity. Identity salience theory might offer a lens to analyze how singular—and often conflicting—identities of various participant groups consolidated Gezi’s collective identity and how it is negotiated. Exploring popular images shared online during the very first days of the protests, I will analyze the visual content and discourse, while taking into consideration the reactions of Gezi participants to these images. My beginning question is as in the following: how did images help unite people from diverse ideologies in the Gezi Movement?

**Background and the First Days of the Gezi Movement**

It was May 27, 2013, when a few activists posted on Twitter, seeking help to stop the bulldozers of Kalyon Construction, the company that was commissioned by the municipality to build a shopping mall within Gezi Park area, from cutting down the trees. There was a quick reaction on social media and a group of environmentalists responded to this first call by hurrying to Gezi Park and setting up tents for overnight stay to protect the trees. A few deputies from oppositional parties visited the park the following day and supported the activists by standing between bulldozers and the trees, an action that prompted even more support and resulted in an increasing number of tents occupying the park. However, the real growth came after a brutal police attack the following morning. In this attack, protestors' tents were burned down. The
number of activists in the park reached the thousands within two days and intensive street clashes started in Istanbul and Ankara and then in other cities.

It is important to note that this massive mobilization as a reaction to the police violence (Amnesty International 2013), which seemed to trigger the first response, is something new for Turkey’s recent political history. Although the country often witnessed brutal police interventions to political mobility, such solid and united civic reaction hardly found any ground. Gezi Park is located in Taksim, a main square for the visibility of cultural and commercial activities but also for political gatherings. Taksim Square has been a contested space for demonstrations since 1977, when more than 30 people were killed during Mayday celebrations and use of the square for further political activity was banned. Attempting to demonstrate in Taksim Square each year, activists face police brutality, occupying headlines only for a day. Similarly, many initiatives against the construction of a nuclear power plant and other environment-threatening projects usually fail to gain support, even from the very immediate inhabitants of the related area. The Gezi Movement has been successful in uniting people from various social and political backgrounds under the banner of its particular cause, and creating a strong sense of solidarity.

From the very beginning, social media has been crucial for the Gezi Movement, as most of the mainstream TV and radio channels, and the printed media failed to deliver an unbiased coverage of the protests. Viral images on social media such as Twitter, an online news and social networking platform, and Facebook, an online social media and social networking platform, have been a crucial medium not only to give updates about the protests (Arda 2014) but also to communicate the claims and criticism of the movement and to build a movement discourse. Images of penguins, referring to CNN Turk’s broadcasting of nature documentaries while there were violent clashes on the streets, images of Erdem Gündüz performing “standing man,”¹ and Ceyda Sungur as “the woman in red” being pepper sprayed in the face became icons of the Movement.

“#standingman #womaninred and others. How many heroes did we have in these days? I love this country and its unique people. Indeed, a lot.” – tweeted on June 18, 2013.

¹Erdem Gündüz, who is a dancer and performer, started as a one-man silent protest in the middle of Taksim Square on June 17, shortly after the seizure of Gezi Park by the police. His intervention, known as Standing Man, influenced thousands of people and had a reinforcement impact for the movement. Some others joined him in the square, being arrested by the police due to blocking traffic. Overnight, there were numerous people on the streets all over Turkey, standing still for various periods of time. Arrests of those who stand still on the streets continued in the following days, ending up with immediate release, as there were no real grounds for accusation. For a report on the action’s political impact please see Verstraete 2013.
“#standingman #womaninred I love you. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder against fascism!” – tweeted on June 18, 2013.

Several people used such images on their social media profiles, wrote blog posts and articles on them, and posted comments about them on social media, creating a discourse of solidarity, unity and like-mindedness, which have been crucial contributions to the construction of Gezi’s collective identity. Among the hashtags and comments that accompanied these images there were expressions such as “Gezi Park is one heart”, “We are one”, “Turkey is united”, “All of us are standing men”, “All of us are women in red.” The euphoria emerged in social platforms around images (and texts), certainly was not independent from the language of the street. 27-year-old E.Ö depicts in an interview the atmosphere in the park and among the movement participants: “Gezi Park… is the last stronghold. It was a home; it was a nest [to us]. It was a place, where each breath that came from trees to hearts, filtered through lungs, and [eventually] made us ‘us’ once more” (Radikal 2013).

Voiced for the first time by the academician Mehmet Karlı at an improvisational protest during a live television program on June 7, Gezi Spirit (“Gezi Ruhu” in Turkish) provided an excellent catchphrase for the movement. Before the left the program, he protested the media censorship in the first days of the movement and suggested to support the journalists who face difficulties while trying to cover the events. The term was quickly adopted by many people to define various characteristics of the Gezi Movement. Accordingly, Gezi Spirit referred to a broad understanding of solidarity and diversity, framed the basics of open communication and respectful behavior among the participants of the movement. The same catchphrase is also meant to resist shoulder-to-shoulder with those who are of different social and political backgrounds, against the bio-power that recruits various oppressive methods to homogenize the everyday life (Yeğenoğlu 2013). Gezi Spirit suggested an atmosphere and state of understanding that would enable the co-existence of several identities, by conceptualizing a multidimensional and multilayered “we” for the Gezi Movement. As like as Gezi’s unprecedented physical and discursive response to the police brutality, such approach to building a fluid and multifaceted collective identity was also novel to Turkey.

Identity in Action

Looking at the history of social movement studies, the discussions on identity are rather new. Social movements reflect a society’s dynamics and are shaped according to its socio-political, context. Strain and breakdown theories were the main perspective to analyze social movements until the 1960s (Le Bon 2002; Smelser 1965). The protesters were assumed to act on
irrational drives, based on negative emotions, rather than positive. This was understood to be a sign of a society-wide psychological problem. The "new" social movements, which have followed since the 1960s, introduced significant changes to the understanding of collective behavior (Buechler 2004). The time period saw an increased tendency to develop sociological theories, drawing on the shortcomings of previous ones that focused on irrational anomalies. While resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1977) recognized that the rational factors in the process, framing theory (Benford and Snow 2000) focused on communication structures, and political opportunity theory (Tarrow 2011) suggested that a primary influence for social movements is the political conjuncture. On the other hand, collective identity theory emphasized shared values, affective bonds, and emotional benefit among the movement participants (Melucci 1989). A number of other sociological theories and approaches contributed to social movement studies within the following decades, analyzing various aspects of movements, such as social structures, organization, participation, and action models, technological advancements etc. (For a detailed coverage of these theories and other contributions please see Porta and Diani 2006).

It is possible to study the Gezi Movement in the light of all these theories, and each of them would enable us to provide unique insights to the protest dynamics of the movement. However, in this paper, I will mobilize the collective identity paradigm, which became popular especially in the 1990s, due to its dynamic approach to interpret structures and motivations of collective action. Within the Gezi Movement as a discourse of multifaceted identity stayed at the core of the movement. The coexistence of diverse affiliations and collaboration of eternal foes were essential and prominent for how the Gezi movement described itself. According to Polletta and Jasper (2001) collective identity is “an individual’s cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution.” Although not completely separate from personal identities, collective identity has a “shared status or relation” with a larger entity and might have an imaginary character (p. 285).

Following this definition, it can be said that Turkey have always had tormented discussions about identity issues, particularly those related to religion, ethnicity, and nationality, since its foundation in 1923 on the legacy of Ottoman Empire (Ahmad 2014). The last period before Gezi Movement emerged saw increasing tension around the topics that would directly concern a variety of groups, such as seculars, unorthodox Muslims and non-Muslims, feminists and LGBTQ communities, Kurds, Armenians and other ethnic non-Turks. From the introduction of a series of regulations to alcohol consumption and entertainment outdoors to removal of Turkish flag from the Grand National Assembly’s logo, from refusing the responsibility in the death of citizens in a number of incidents such as the bomb attack in
Reyhanlı and airstrike in Uludere to undertaking massive gentrification and urban transformation projects that put thousands of people into trouble, a number of government policies gained the antipathy of several divisions of the society that may not always fall under the same category of interests when it comes to politics. Whether taken-for-granted or critically self-determined, recognized or not, the multifacetedness of the collective identity of Gezi provided grounds for the coexistence of several identities.

Through the Gezi Spirit catchphrase, a greater common good instead of personal concerns and benefits was often addressed. Gezi Spirit, a reference to almost a utopic state of understanding, empathy, and interaction was often used in online discussions, as well as in offline situations (Koç and Aksu 2015; Karakayali and Yaka 2014; Arda 2015; Özkırımlı 2014). Online stories of taxi drivers giving free-of-charge lifts to people heading to Gezi Park, of local residents that open their doors to whom affected by pepper gas, or of people who share the wireless Internet password of their apartment for the activists on the street usually included a mention to Gezi Spirit or at least received commentary as such. Aside from the political agenda of the movement, this sense of collectivity, solidarity, and connectivity was an essential experience itself for building mutual understanding and trust across interrupted segments of a highly polarized society. Collective identity concept encompasses important elements, such as cognitive definitions of means, ends and field of action; active relationships between movement participants; and emotional investment through which movement participants feel some sort of common unity (Melucci 1996).

Gezi Spirit was often used to refer to the collective identity of the movement, while its participants called themselves çapulcu (looter) or used the Anglicified version chapuller, appropriating (by then) Prime Minister Erdoğan’s labeling of activists and wearing it like a badge of honor. Mocking with such denunciation, several participants of Gezi Movement created a satirical language around the word. Conjugations of fictitious verb to chapul were quickly made up through various languages such as I am chappuling, ich chapulle, io chapulero etc. Boğaziçi University Jazz Choir composed “Are You a Chapuller?” piece, which became one of the favorite songs for many. Both Gezi Spirit and çapulcu wordings created an agreed upon profile for people that opposed the government for various reasons, even they might have essential political disagreements among themselves. Given Turkey’s political conditions and the criminalization of participation in Gezi by pro-government parties, it is important to note that defining the collective identity of Gezi is dependent on where one stands on the political kaleidoscope.

That being said, this analysis would be an incomplete if we neglect the discrepancies within the unity and solidarity atmosphere of Gezi. It was not easy to free from existing
prejudices and hostilities among various participant groups, particularly across political connections (Porta 2017). Despite the prevailing inclusive approach, there were also cases of antipathy between Gezi activists, where their participation was questioned on the grounds of group affiliation. This also comes forward in the images, as some of the images were found as symbols of solidarity and an evidence of abuse of it at the same time.

Yet, drawing on the personal observations and the public accounts of Gezi participants, I emphasize a few significant elements of the movement’s collective identity: (1) Appreciation of political and cultural diversity, (2) solidarity even among eternal enemies, (3) creative use of humor, irony, and satire, (4) commitment to leaderlessness and anonymity. While this list is not comprehensive, these elements can be understood as a few of the important components of Gezi’s collective identity.

Importantly, many of the social movement scholars took collective identity for granted, evaluating based on pre-defined categories such as religion, ethnicity, social and economic class and rarely offering nuanced conceptualizations of them (Stryker 2000). Gezi Movement attracted people affiliated to various established identities. As mentioned above, it encompassed groups and communities of a wide spectrum: LGBTQ community, “Anti-capitalist Muslims” group, feminists, Armenians, and Kurds are few examples to the diversity of presence in Gezi Park throughout the sit-in period. The participants of Gezi, although they had one or more of these affiliations in the background, avoided exclusive public statements and behavior, and preferred more inclusive wording such as “we” or Gezi Spirit and çapulu, while interacting constantly across these groups (Y. G. Acar and Uluğ 2015). In addition, because of its strong association with emotions and psychological processes, collective identity theory became useful to explain anything that “happens outside structures, state, and rational action” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, p.285). A similar attempt can be seen in many scholarly and popular accounts of the Gezi Movement that praises Gezi Spirit as a constant stage of awareness and behavior among activists that stems from conceptualizations of the park as an ecology, where solidarity, diversity and unity are experienced in their ultimate form. These accounts most often refer to Bakhtinian carnivalesque moments in the Gezi Movement, when creativity, humor, and joy composed a utopian atmosphere (Akay 2013; Yeğenoğlu 2013). The government’s authoritarian actions prior to and during that time, the police’s brutal interventions, and pro-government media’s various attempts to distort the claims of the movement were ridiculed and presented satirically to the public. This is similar to successful case of çapulu’s alteration and adoption by movement participants. Although terms like carnivalesque can be a perfect fit to define some moments in the
park, on the streets and on social media, they refer to immediate emotions and affects during
time-specific interactions.

As mentioned above, the production and circulation of images on social media helped
participants in the movement to create a collective identity. In the following section, I treat the
collective identities that emerged through these images as dynamic rather than static. To that
end, I draw upon identity salience theory in my analysis. Stryker and Burke explain identity
salience as “the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or
alternatively across persons in a given situation” (Stryker and Burke 2000, p. 286). According to
this, the collective identity of a movement is shaped by several “self-composed identities and
internalized role designations” (Stryker 2000, p. 28). The individual or group identities that
compose the collective identity do not necessarily vanish or melt in the collectiveness of the
movement. As discussed above and can be seen through the examples in the following part of
this essay, Gezi Spirit offers rather a common ground, a floating domain, where various identities
pertain to movement participants appear in a salience hierarchy.

The images provided below were chosen from a study archive that was developed during
the protests, through a research made on the social media, personal blogs and archives, and news
portals. A retrospective research is also made, to make sure that these images kept their online
popularity during and in the aftermath of the protest events. Although all of them were
circulated on Twitter and/or Facebook, which are highly popular social media platforms in
Turkey (Dogramaci and Radcliffe 2015), particularly during the protests as the media coverage of
the protests proved to be distorted (Tufekci 2013). A number of Gezi images speak to a greater
frame of unity. The ones taken into analysis are intended to provide a wider variety in terms of
visual content and facilitate a richer understanding of the protest environment. I will treat these
images as attempts to meaning-making practice in relation to Gezi Spirit, while drawing lines
from visual social semiotics (Jewitt and Oyama 2001); thus, taking into account the
representation, interactive, and compositional meanings.

Images and Collective Identity

The censorship of the mainstream media was an important issue during Gezi, as
photography –along with videography– made a great contribution to documenting police
violence. Censorship appeared to be a primary trigger for circulating an impressive amount of
visual material and a considerable increase in the number of social networking site users from the
area. Once the censorship was evident to public, active Twitter users in Turkey rocketed from
1.8 million to 9.5 million. This massive increase took place in the first 10 days of the protests
The image below (image 1) was taken by Reuters photojournalist Osman Örsal at Gezi Park on May 28, 2013, in the earliest stage of the sit-in.

![Image 1 A police officer spraying pepper gas in the face of a protester at Gezi Park.](image)

In the photo, Ceyda Sungur, a research assistant at Istanbul Technical University, is being gassed in her face by the riot police. She later became an icon as “the woman in red.” Carrying a cloth bag and being dressed casually without any apparent fear of violent confrontation, she is neither a celebrity nor an outstanding figure for the protesters. She is alone and standing right in front of a fully-equipped group of police officers. Unprepared to handle such an attack, it looks as if she was just a passerby, which was the case for some of the people in the park at that moment. This gives the impression that anyone could be in her shoes. At the front of the image, there are other people affected by pepper gas, one of whom appears to be a journalist (note the professional camera that is hanging from her shoulder). Sungur neither runs away like the others seen in the front side of the image nor does anything to avoid the pepper gas, apart from closing her eyes and turning her head away slightly. She stays there in front of the man that attacks her, without even using her hands to defend herself. It is a fearless stance against an unequaled force.

As the photograph gained international recognition, the government insisted that the people gathered in the park were only marginal groups and not to be taken as a sample to represent a wider section of the society. Together with its various re-designed forms, this image was circulated endlessly on social media becoming a symbol of police brutality targeting regular
citizens indiscriminately. Those designs took the original version of the photograph and reframed the woman in red in different contexts.

In image 2 (above), the woman in red appears as the goddess Aphrodite (Venus). Her body, hair, and positions of hands are obviously inspired by the mythological artwork. However, she wears a gas mask and carries a personal bag in one hand and a string bag with vegetables in the other. Far away from being aggressive, it underlines the casualness of peaceful protest. Image 3 (below) shows Marylyn Monroe replacing the woman in red with her famous subway scene pose, where her skirt is ventilated upwards, but this time because of the pepper spray.
Below, in image 4, both the woman in red and the police officer are depicted as an ancient terracotta drawing of a war scene. The last image (5) was cropped from the cover of a Brazilian magazine, where the woman in red is seen carrying a Brazilian flag, in solidarity with the protests concurrently took place in Brazil. Both of the last two images stress her spontaneous presence in the incident, as she carries a random bag and show no means of self-defense. In all these designs, the woman in red is brought forward, to the center of attention, unlike in the original photograph, where other people in the front may grab the first attention. Reframing the photograph of the woman in red helped it transform into an icon of the Gezi Movement.

Although the visual documentation and image sharing en masse began with the intention to demonstrate what is “really” going on in Gezi Park and in the streets, it continued in the following days extending to other motivations, such as humor and satire, delivering a message, increasing the visibility of the movement, building transnational solidarity bonds. It also gave birth to creative slogans and memes along with various designs such as “We are growing up by spraying!”, showing the woman in red larger than the policeman in drawings, and “Chemical Tayyip”, referring humorously to the middle name of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey’s prime minister at that time. These words were written on street walls and placards, while they were also photographed and redesigned before being circulated online. Although identified as a university professor, the “woman in red” preferred anonymity and never shared a word about the incident. However, the image, along with the discourse created around it, initially served to recruit more activists. Many people felt the urge to respond to such violence and to resist against the authoritarian practices of the government, starting from preventing the transformation of the Gezi Park into a shopping mall.
Although police have long used pepper spray in demonstrations, the amount deployed during the protests for Gezi Park was excessive. The gas mask above that reads “Chemical Tayyip,” refers to the middle name of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. A number of demonstrators were caught unprepared for the detrimental effects of pepper spray on health. As a result, activists ended up purchasing gas masks, ultimately contributing to an increasing market of both pepper spray and gas masks. Several visuals and graffiti mocked about this situation, making them icons of Gezi Movement (Gruber 2013). The pepper spray was often named as an element that brought in joy and tipsiness, as well as a social glue that unified people.

Another popular symbol appeared after a professional dancer, Ziya Azazi, performed Sufi whirling dervish dance in a gas mask at Gezi Park on June 2, 2013. Azazi named his performance “Sen de Gel” (Come, you too), borrowing the famous phrase of Sufi dervishes, dating back to the 13th century. Embodied within this phrase, Sufism (in theory) is known for its heterodoxy and inclusiveness toward all sorts of social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, and its acceptance of every individual independent of their past and future intentions.
The photograph of the whirling dervish along with the video of the performance immediately found interest on social media. “Sen de Gel” was used as a slogan or, better yet, as a call for participation regardless of political affiliation, while dervish designs became avatars on social networking sites and decorated the streets as paintings and stencil work. Although his initial appearance in the park was in a black dervish costume that covers his entire body, Azazi also did a performance in a pink skirt and leave his upper body naked.² Azazi preferred to stay anonymous and gave an interview much later, where he expressed his contentedness for being able to contribute to the pluralistic identity of Gezi (Acar 2013).

Consolidating Solidarity

During the protests, an unusual convergence was seen among rival football clubs like Fenerbahçe, Galatasaray, and Beşiktaş. The photograph below is from the very first days of Gezi Movement, and captured the supporters of three sworn-enemy football clubs side by side. Several other designs under the name “Istanbul United” were created and circulated along with this photograph.

²This performance was in order to criticize the government’s policies on body (particularly female and queer) and show sympathy and support to the LGBTQ community. The image was later used for the promotion of the Pride Week and the Parade that took place in Istanbul on June 30.
Gezi Spirit paved the way for such encounter between Fenerbahçe (in yellow and dark blue), Galatasaray (in yellow and red), and Beşiktaş (in black and white) supporters that would hardly come together while wearing club jerseys. Images of football clubs acting together received much sympathy as many people associated the moments of collective effervescence in football culture with the Gezi’s carnivalesque atmosphere. Through these images and street activism practices, many slogans and songs were produced that boosted the enthusiastic discourse around the fact that rival football clubs were united.
Recently, a documentary with “Istanbul United” title on the solidarity of these football clubs during Gezi Movement has also been produced. Directed by Farid Eslam and Olli Waldhauer, documentary storyline includes interviews with ultras of these clubs, who underline their love and dedication to their club and hate towards others. Both the documentary and the images show a renegotiation of ultras role. While the commitment and dedication to own football club remains, represented with the presence of particular symbols such as jersey, scarf, slogans, the negative elements in the identity, such as the “hated” other football clubs, are replaced with the governing party and the police. Being an Istanbul inhabitant, a citizen of Turkey or simply, being part of a dissident group standing against police brutality and oppressive policies become salient.

However, when we look at the later interviews, comments, and evaluations, we see no presence of an absolute and continuous unity between these clubs. Özgür, an engaged fan of Beşiktaş explained that it was only the context that brought these football fans together. Acknowledging the impact of images that captured the three football teams together on public perception, he claimed that there was no deeper understanding or feeling of solidarity among them before, during, or after Gezi. It was only a momentary togetherness (Dinçtürk 2014), which makes it a strong and fragile bond at the same time. More examples on this can be seen in the next part of this essay.

Stryker (2000) tells us that it is the group relations that determines our commitment and role-choice in social movement participation. The presence of football clubs in Gezi was quite appreciated within the movement, as they were acting on a high team spirit, were ready to take physical risk while clashing with the police, and undertook some spectacular events, such as capturing a bulldozer and chasing a water cannon, and encouraging police to join them chanting slogan together by responding “white” to shouting “red”, which are the colors of Turkish flag. Visuals of their activity found much humorous response on social media and increased sympathy towards the fan groups among movement participants. The collaboration among football clubs, their active engagement in the street protests, and their online presence through Facebook and Twitter accounts increased their reliability within Gezi. Social media messages suggested to stay around the football club groups as they would be the ones to rescue the others in case of a police attack. Meanwhile, all three clubs were cautious about the politics of language they use, while claiming political neutrality and a protector role for environment, urban sites, and people in need. Referring often to Gezi Spirit, they welcomed to be seen together with the symbols of other clubs and even supported each other when some of their members faced legal charges.
A Fragile Coexistence

Production, circulation, and popularization of each visual element in Gezi created a discourse around it. Considering the pace of communication and interaction on social media, the reactions given to these images were rather quick, extending to a few days and, rarely, a few weeks. As mentioned above, such quick but intensive interaction contributed to the development of collective identity, creating joyful moments of togetherness and we-feeling. However, the participants of Gezi were constantly in and out of this interaction due to its temporality, which means the moments of solidarity were quite real but not durable. From the park location itself to streets and social media, the participants of Gezi Movement never refrained from mentioning their pre-existing identities, sometimes using symbols and chanting slogans that might be in perfect contrast with other participants. When one crossed the bounds of acceptable conduct within the movement (e.g. by using patriarchal language or bad connotation of a religion/ethnicity), the offender(s) were either individually or collectively warned by concerned participants one must show empathy and stay in solidarity with others. As can be read in Azazi’s interview (Acar 2013), he had to reaffirm the plurality, tolerance, and understanding among Gezi participants, as there were moments when such values of the movement’s collective identity were neglected or forgotten for a time.

Underlining the complex interaction between self and society, Sheldon Stryker (2000) argues that we should consider identity multifaceted and dynamic. According to this, participants of social movements have complex and fluid identities that contain a salience hierarchy. The symbolic interactionist approach that Stryker’s theory is built on allows us to claim that these intra-movement identities become salient, depending on the triggering factors. Due to their societal roles, commitments, circumstances, and motivations, identities become dominant and visible in a movement participants’ actions (Stryker 2000). Looking at the Gezi case through images, we can see several examples of this phenomenon. Some of the major societal tension topics of Turkey, such as disputes on religion and ethnicity, transformed into bridges connecting people to each other during Gezi. They were either completely skipped or deliberately made part of the solidarity narrative and underlined.
Gezi Park made it possible for a non-believer, who was indifferent toward Muslims, join activities hand-in-hand with them (D’Orsi 2015). The watch for anti-capitalist Muslim protesters who were performing Friday prayer in the park was one of them as well. Although this may not have made a substantial change in their thoughts and attitude regarding Muslims, it was time for such unusual shoulder brushes to take place. The photographs of the protesters performing prayer while being guarded by others were very popular. The reactions to these photographs often included messages for solidarity, friendship, and unity, claiming that these were true signs of Gezi Spirit. However, some of the owners of such comments were explicitly against the visibility of religious signs and practices in the public sphere and much later objected to the new law granting off-time to employees in the private and public sectors on Fridays at noon time so they could perform their prayers. A number of people, some of which are the users of collaborative hypertext website Eksi Sozluk, commented that it was a mere staged show and an imitation of Tahrir Square (Eksi Sozluk 2013).

Stryker (2000) reminds us that “if a movement’s collective identity can be expressed outside movement settings, so identities external to movements can be expressed inside them, in ways not necessarily benign or reinforcing with respect to movement identities and ideology” (p.29). This means that welcoming a representative component of an identity among social movement participants, such as a symbol or practice, does not automatically extend to a wider context. The culture of solidarity and understanding, which stays at the core of Gezi for many participants, set a framework of codes and behavior, rather than constituting full endorsement

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3 Friday prayer is a binding duty in Islam unless there is a certain obstacle to fulfill it. Interpretations of abstinence from practicing prayer (especially Friday noon) vary from indifference to stigmatizing the person as infidel, depending on the country, context, and sect as well as individual and social indulgence. We can assume that those who didn’t perform it at Gezi at that time were either non-Muslims or at least non-practicing Muslims. The scene itself is familiar to us from Tahrir, where Christians joined hands and stood together to protect their praying Muslim fellows in 2011.
among participants. While the Friday prayer was an important encounter and provided ground for different identity groups to come together, and indeed its photographs contributed to the collective identity of Gezi, the temporality of the moment should not be neglected. Heartwarming reactions to such incident may have been intense and hailed the multifaceted identity of a social movement that was known for its leaderlessness and pluralism. However, we should also take into account that fluidity and impermanence were also substantial aspects of the collective identity.

It is also usual to see intra-movement rivalry in social movements like Gezi, as “social movements may exhibit varying degrees of groupness, or degrees of groupness may vary across a movement’s life cycle” (Stryker 2000, p.30). This kind of rivalry can be understood in terms of traditional contention axes, such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and secularism. The examples that follow help us explore what this kind of conflict looks like.

In the above image, we see two protesters hand in hand, escaping from the blast of water cannon. One carries the banner of BDP, the pro-Kurdish party by then, while the other holds a Turkish flag with Atatürk’s picture, which is predominantly used by CHP, the pro-Turkish Republican party. There is even a third person in the photograph who makes the sign of wolf head, meaning that he is a supporter of MHP, the Turkish nationalist party. Seeing these signs in the same photograph is somewhat extra-ordinary when put in the context of Turkey. One would hardly imagine seeing signs or supporters of these three parties, shown in solidarity in the same photograph. The pro-Kurdish party, BDP, has been often accused of following separatist agenda and making alliance behind the doors with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), which is the armed guerilla organization active in Turkey since late 1970s. CHP is a party that has roots back
in the final period of Ottoman Empire and claims its role in establishing a modern and secular democracy that survived until today. MHP, on the other hand, follows an agenda that can identified as far-right, although it moderated its approach in the last years and became closer to the center. Nevertheless, it still maintains a strong vein in Turkish ultranationalist perspective, which rarely coincides with CHP and in absolute contrast with pro-Kurdish MHP. Ali Şahin, who carries the BDP banner in the image said in an interview that the photograph had a groundbreaking affect for many people, mentioning that it was a quick and personal decision to help a 55-year-old man to get away from the water cannon (Emen 2015). Şahin was surprised to discover that this moment was captured and became one of the icons of Gezi Spirit. This photograph, like several others displaying activists carrying the symbols of eternal-foe political parties and dancing together, collected many positive and enthusiastic comments. There were also negative comments there, as Şahin mentions in the interview (Emen 2015).

![Image 15 Protesters making signs affiliated to various political ideologies.](image)

In the photograph above, the wolf-head sign on the left stands for MHP. The clenched fist and the victory signs are mostly used by leftist movements in Turkey, although the latter can be also seen often during protests and actions for Kurdish rights. The photograph marks another unusual moment of being side-by-side, as the usual case would be to see these signs on conflicting sides.
The fragility of coexistence, solidarity, and unity was especially noticeable when the banners of Öcalan’s picture appeared with Atatürk’s in the same photograph on social media. Abdullah Öcalan (b. 1946-1948), who is on the left banner with yellow background, is the incarcerated leader of PKK, who has been held accountable for directing the guerilla warfare since the foundation of the organization, as well as for several bombings and deaths in a period of roughly thirty years. Considered as the mastermind behind separatist movements, his image is considered a taboo for public spaces, although it is possible to see it in some demonstrations, which would earn the protest antipathy in most cases. The other person seen on the Turkish flag is Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), who is the founding president of the modern Republic of Turkey. Considered more than a mere national hero, public and private efforts in the decades following his death secured a constant exposure to his legacy in almost every corner of daily life. It is ultimately absurd to see both of these figures in the same photograph, particularly in a friendly political context. Although we may not really know the political affiliations of the people holding the banners, they seem to be undisturbed by this powerful contrast. Just as like as in the previous examples, some comments hailed with their comments online:

“… the flags of Kurdistan, LGBT, Öcalan and Atatürk are side-by-side in Bakırköy! Oh, this is definitely Gezi! #wewon” — tweeted on June 8, 2013.

The photograph, however, could not escape harsh criticism by many, who thought that Öcalan sympathizers were abusing the solidarity and unity atmosphere, even two years later:
“we didn’t forget those who held hands [while holding] Atatürk and murderer Öcalan banners side-by-side in Gezi #wedidntforget” – tweeted July 22, 2015

The photograph received so much criticism that a number of social media accounts that promoted the circulation seem to have either removed the post or are completely shut down. Stryker (2000) reminds us that the category-based movements, mostly the ethnic-based ones, are particularly prone to intra-movement rivalry and conflict. Composed of multiple ethnic groups, and some with a particular political agenda and involvement in other movements that may not match with others, Gezi Movement was no immune to this type of conflicts. Although seeing this photograph signaled a hope for reconciliation to some people, it meant else to others. The pro-government and anti-Gezi groups active on social media platforms kept using such photographs in order to support their claims to criminalize Gezi Movement and discredit its legacy. Having seen the importance and power of Internet and social media, Erdoğan’s government hired “a troll army” to be engaged in online campaigning and propaganda (Saka 2018, p. 161).

Conclusion

Today, it is almost impossible to think of a protest event without also thinking about the images that display vivid moments of activism in all its forms, be it a joyful group dance or a violent clash with riot police. Books and catalogs dedicated to visual material of social movements find their places on shelves while viral images are rapidly circulated on social media and collected and archived on Internet blogs. Social media has become an indispensable tool of social movements, and the popular catchphrase, “pics or it didn’t happen,” certainly reinforces the attendance to visual materials and share them.

The Gezi Movement, which emerged by the end of May 2013, has been a prominent example of the contribution of visual materials to the collective identity construction in social movements (Depeli 2013; Arda 2014; Savacı 2014; Onursoy 2015; Kluitenberg 2015). With the help of social media, the still images from protest actions inspired reactions and helped create a discourse of solidarity, diversity, and pluralism within the movement. Although the participants of Gezi enjoyed being associated with this discourse (Yegenoglu 2013; Gruber 2013), the conditions were quite inconsistent for them to fulfil these terms that were key to the movement’s collective identity, due to, among other things, their gender roles, political affiliations, ethnic and religious backgrounds.
An important dimension of identity salience is temporality. We should recognize that the utopian atmosphere, feelings of unity in diversity and solidarity were constituent in Gezi Movement’s collective identity. However, we should also acknowledge that these were not permanent factors and there were several incidents where such discourse was undermined. The responses that the images earned when appearing in public and circulating online can be a reference point regarding the salient identities within a movement. Due to this, we see that the collective identity of a movement shows variability throughout the timeline of the protests. I believe, such versatile approach to the fluidity and multifaceted nature of collective identity may help us better understand the bonds of solidarity among so diverse group of participants in Gezi Movement.

Studying visuals in regard to identity salience theory can be useful in understanding the inconsistency and temporality of these artifacts that can be seen as asserting a movement’s collective identity. The identity salience theory considers collective identity as multifaceted, fluid and dynamic. Personal and social relationships, ethnicity, political affiliations, social and cultural backgrounds and commitments play a key role in identity salience. Such aspects might be in contrast with each other and create inconsistency in the movement’s collective identity. In such heterogeneous environment, some participants might find disturbing or even feel threatened when certain identities become salient, just like in the example of Ocalan’s photograph being displayed along with a Turkish flag with Atatürk on it. Such cases may cause intra-movement rivalry and groupness as a result, and not be coherent with the solidarity and we-feeling, like in the case of Gezi. Contributing to the construction of the collective identity, images that are produced and circulated within the context of social movements can be a resourceful medium to help us follow and understand identity salience within a movement.

By the date of this publication, it would be 5 years over since Gezi Movement has started. Within this time, CHP kept its title as the main opposition party and its political line, while MHP became a close ally of Erdoğan’s AKP. The pro-Kurdish BDP changed its focus to regional level, while changing its name to Democratic Regions Party. People’s Democratic Party (HDP) substituted most of BDP’s role, and went further by adopting a solidarity discourse and establishing itself as a popular left-wing party, which can be considered as a result of lessons learned from Gezi Movement. Several people and institutions has gone through legal processes in the meantime, due to their participation in the events. Mostly on anniversaries but also randomly, images related to Gezi are still shared online. On the other hand, some of those who were “friends” within the framework of the movement are back to their eternal-foes positions, while Gezi Spirit stays synonymous to a utopic level of reconciliation and harmony. 5 years after,
today, activist networks and grassroots initiatives that sprouted during the days of Gezi are still functional. For many, Gezi was a point of inception to build a collectivity where diversity and solidarity prevail. In a society like Turkey, where identity plays a central role to determine politics and policies, Gezi sets a distinct example to illustrate the relation between salient identities and mass mobilization.
Image Sources

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