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Between Pending Narratives: Evaluation of COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories by University Students in Turkey

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With the high levels of uncertainty and vulnerability created in everyday activities, the COVID-19 outbreak has prompted a proliferation of narratives. Against the official narrative crosscutting the worlds of science, medicine, social measures, and personal responsibilities, many conspiracy theories have emerged. In this study, we examine both the official COVID-19 narrative and various conspiracy theories as conforming to a format called the pending narratives (Törrönen, 2021). Pending narratives are future-directed stories operating on three levels - story, discourse, and norm - to call their audience for a certain course of action. As such, they are inherently rhetorical, and their evaluation by audiences is informative of their rhetorical qualities. To examine the reception and evaluation of COVID-19 narratives by young people, we used 27 semi-structured online interviews conducted between June-October 2021 with freshmen university students across Turkey. While the official narrative was emergent throughout the interviews, we asked specifically about certain alternative stories (lab leak, population weapon, hidden elites). Our analysis shows that both the official and the conspiracy narratives have some purchase among the Turkish students. We thus divide the interview responses into three groups: adhering to the official narrative, adhering to the conspiracy theories, and those that are "in-between". Focusing specifically on the latter group, our analysis maps the reasons with which the interviewees criticize, debunk, and refute various narratives. We conclude by assessing the rhetorical qualities and appeal of the lab leak, population weapon, and hidden elites conspiracy theories.

Keywords: COVID-19 narratives; conspiracy theories, pending narratives, narrative evaluation, reception

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Introduction

After about one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, the cloud of dust that dimmed virtually all social relations and horizons was not yet completely settled. That the trusted institutions and authorities were not able to come up with a clear-cut solution exasperated the risks and uncertainties. While a new normal was being established, remaining uncertainties and mistakes had a trickle-down effect from the authorities on the millions who were already disenfranchised. Having lost their confidence in the voice of science and authorities, many young people performed a "big leap" (Mohammed and Rossi, 2022: 128) in adhering to conspiracy theories. With its enormous public health and social consequences - e.g., through subsequent vaccine scepticism - belief in conspiracy theories thus (re-)emerged as a priority for research, policy, and communication. This paper aims to contribute to this broad research agenda by focusing on scepticism towards the official COVID-19 narrative and the reception of various conspiracy narratives among young people in Turkey.

Once a particular series of relationships is established as a master narrative – as in the case of COVID-19 official narrative – counter-narratives contesting its authority follow suit, such as the COVID-19 conspiracies (Gabriel, 2016). Conspiracy theories perform a system-justifying function, namely by drawing attention away from the complexity of societal challenges and towards an easy-to-blame outgroup (Jolley Douglas and Sutton, 2018). Such simplification of the complex web of relations may relieve the social subject from confusion, endowing one with a past that is easy to count and a future to more readily participate. Recognizing this temporal dynamic is crucial to narratology. Indeed, it is one of the main functions of narratological discourse to reconstruct a view of the past that helps engage the present and shape the future, occasioning agency both at the level of experience and re-cognition of events (Bjorninen, 2020). Working with the narrative paradigm in the study of COVID-19 discourses thus means paying specific attention to the positioning of agents in the complex web of relations mediating their encounter with a contagious world.

With a variety of actors carrying out campaigns to persuade their target audiences, the pandemic world has witnessed a clash of narratives concerning the source, impact, and solutions of the COVID-19 crisis. The official narrative, sanctioned by the WHO, positions

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the public and the authorities as heroes fighting against the virus - the villain. The audience is invited to adapt to the new normal by applying preventive measures. Normatively, this represents a reproduction of the dominant technocratic and bio-political government trajectory by subjecting the individual to the measures imposed (Højme, 2022). In various conspiracy narratives, on the other hand, the villain is not the virus but a human entity behind it, steering the virus and other actors from outside the lifeworld. These narratives unfold in a way that invites the audience to an awakening, self-empowerment, and denial of the imposed bio-political measures. Normatively, this represents the official narrative as oppressive, the rejection of which is then offered as the only way to claim authenticity and freedom.

In our study of how freshmen university students in Turkey evaluate - i.e., critically assess the values and reasoning in – the narratives over COVID-19, we employ the notion of pending narratives (Törrönen, 2010, 2021). Pending narrative is a rhetorical format that aims to persuade social actors to take action, by placing them in a trajectory of events where salvation requires their contribution. The official COVID-19 narrative and various conspiracy theories are thus examined as pending narratives striving to captivate and persuade their respective audiences for the acceptance of the imposed (social distancing and vaccination) measures, or their rejection. The reasons and criticisms recorded in the interviews are examined across the three levels - story, discourse, and norm - of narrative positioning (Bamberg, 2020), and by paying special attention to the central tenets - coherence and fidelity - of the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1987). We report that most of interview evaluations swing between the two pending narratives - the official and what can be summarized as "hidden elites". We identify the latter key villain with a confusing set of motives, distinguished geographically across the national borders, structuring the narrative context and mediating the appeal of both pending narratives.

To report how the university youth in Turkey, as their key recipients, take up the official and conspiratorial COVID-19 stories, we first start by introducing pending narratives. Then we shortly introduce the narrative reception paradigm we draw on and our methodological choices. After the exemplary analysis of the reasons with which our interviewees critically assess and rebut the narratives circulating at the time of the study, we discuss both the salient

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reasons in the interview evaluations and the implications of (not) participating in pending narratives.

COVID-19 conspiracies from the narrative perspective

Recent scholarship in narratology accentuates the rhetorical dimension implicated in most narratives (e.g. Björninen et al, 2020; Flottum and Gjerstad, 2017). Likewise, there is a recent move in argumentation theory that explores the argumentative potential of various narrative formats (Olmos, 2015, 2017; Tindale, 2017). As both literatures agree, the narrative and the argumentative are coexistent features of daily talk, rather than being mutually exclusive (Üzelgün et al., 2022).

A paradigm case of rhetorical narrative formats is called the pending narrative (Törrönen, 2010, 2021). Pending narratives operate in transforming the unknown and uncanny future pathways into more predictable and controllable ones, simultaneously inviting their audience to take part in the relations of definition and control. The invitation constituted through a pending narrative hinges on a particular rendition of the state of affairs, which culminates in and depends on a decision to be taken by the audience. In Törrönen's words, pending narratives have "a *cogency* that comes from the threat that if we do not act in the right way now, the continuity of life will be jeopardized" (Törrönen, 2021:1, our emphasis). In short, pending narrative is a discourse format that is intended to persuade social actors to take action, and thus be a character in a specific historical setting that is not yet fully closed.

Through the lens of Positioning Theory (Bamberg, 2020) pending narratives can be examined as operating at three levels: story, discourse, and norm. On the story level, characters are positioned vis-a-vis each other such as heroes and villains in a timeline that is open and inclusive. On the discourse level, the audience is positioned as agents called for action into that timeline. On the third level of norms, the agents are positioned vis-a-vis the state of affairs in an ideological trajectory, reproducing or challenging the dominant narratives and practices. Evidently, the boundaries among the three narratological levels of the story, discourse, and norms are sometimes not as clearly set in everyday discourse as the above.

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As just mentioned, pending narratives are a tool to persuade people to take action, namely by calling one into a *de te fabula narratur* - "of you the tale is told". That is, a story is pending as much as its audience is assumed as simultaneously a character in the story. In this sense, the three levels mentioned above are fused or subsumed in a narrative format that exceeds its interactional limits. Thus, in our examination of the evaluations of the interview participants, we assume them simultaneously as the characters in their COVID-19 stories and the critical audience of various pending narratives - both official and conspiratorial.

This does not mean to confound, in the study of the reception and evaluation of pending narratives, the internal and external checks of coherence (Fisher, 1987, 1994). A pending narrative is influential as much as the elements, positions, and conclusions distributed across the three levels are successfully coordinated.

Reception of COVID (conspiracy) narratives

"…any discourse is as good as it stands with or against other stories. There is, in other words, no story that is not embedded in other stories." (Fisher, 1994: 24)

This study draws on the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1987) in examining the reception and evaluation of narratives associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paradigm, narratives are evaluated with regard to their probability and fidelity. These two core aspects are assessed as the *coherence* of a story, and its *reliability* for an audience.

The coherence assessment has three components, internal, external, and characterological. The function of internal or structural coherence assessment is to check whether the elements in the story level hang together. The function of external or material coherence assessment is to check whether the external elements (situations, events, motives in the world known to the audience) are accounted for and exhausted. Conceiving character as "an organized set of actional tendencies", Fisher (1987: 47) views characterological coherence within a generalized perception of a person's fundamental value orientation. This means its assessment is central to building trust, identification, and community.

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The reliability assessment centrally concerns reasons and values conveyed through the narrative. In the first, the recipient determines "whether the individuated forms of reasoning" in the story are sound, and "whether the key issues have been addressed" (Fisher, 1994: 25). Here, the assessment of reliability or fidelity of a story concerns the quality of its internal reasoning (Olmos, 2015). In the second, the recipient seeks to determine whether the values propagated in the story are "appropriate to the nature of the decision or beliefs that the story concerns" (Fisher, 1994: 26), whether they provide a reliable guide for action and decision in similar circumstances, and whether the self is ready to embrace the values conveyed through the storyline. Here, the assessment of reliability or fidelity concerns whether the values featured in the story constitute a reliable guide to the audience's belief and actions (Olmos, 2015).

Within this framework of story credibility (Olmos, 2015; Bubikova-Moan, 2021), our study seeks to answer the following research questions: How do university youth in Turkey, as their key recipients, take up the official and conspiratorial COVID-19 stories? What are the most salient reasons in the interviewees' negative evaluations of the official and conspiratorial COVID-19 stories? What reasons warrant the debunking of conspiratorial storylines or doubting the official narrative?

Method

We conducted N=27 semi-structured interviews with 1st year university students across Turkey. The interviewees were reached through a snowballing process that ensured diversity - across the participants' cities and universities - and gender balance. The interviewees were first contacted with a brief about the project and requested to participate in a two-person online session. All interviews we conducted online between June and October 2021- as the vaccines were deployed at the respective age group - and video-recorded via Zoom. The interviews were conducted in Turkish, and the mean interview duration is about 74 minutes.

The loosely structured interview protocol included questions about COVID-19 experiences and repercussions, as well as various conspiratorial storylines (lab leak, population weapon, micro-chipping). A typical question probing conspiracy narratives was:

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> "It is said that the virus has leaked from a lab at Wuhan, or that it is released. There are even claims about some countries developing various versions of such infections. What do you think? Is this virus natural, according to you?"

This study pays specific attention to those moments of the interviews where the interviewees responded to such questions. Wherever the interviewees speak about the causes or sources of COVID-19 without being asked were also included in the corpus (N=82 interview quotations). Working on such specific corpus, and paying attention also to the level of vaccine hesitancy, we first identified the general position in each interview: (a) adhering to the official narrative, (b) adhering to conspiracy narratives, (c) no clear adherence or "in-between". Next, we identified, in each interview, the negative evaluations towards the mentioned storylines, be them official or conspiratorial. Finally, we listed the negative evaluations, and discussed them to detect subtle differences and decide on meaningful variations. This included reorganizing and stacking the negative evaluations and distinguishing the storylines addressed in each. In what follows, we report these negative evaluations as organized according to the principles of narrative argumentation and reception frameworks introduced above.

Between pending narratives: reasons with which to rebut

To start with a schematic outline of the interview discussions, it is possible to say that half of our participants (N=13) manifested adherence to the official narrative on the source of COVID-19 and the measures taken. While a minority (N=5) of the interviewee responses were inclined to conspiracies about COVID-19's coming to being, exhibiting indications of vaccine-scepticism, nine interviews (N=9) were classified as "in-between", as they seemed to swing between the two positions. That is, the latter group exhibited different positions at different moments of the interview interaction, calling to mind the dialogicality inherent to human thinking and identity (Marková, 2006). Below we focus on the reasons with which these participants rebutted various storylines ensuing from the encounter with COVID-19, both the official narrative, and conspiracies.

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Interview 7. "Lots of such shady events…"

I don't think it's natural. I mean, maybe it is. I mean I don't know since I don't have certain knowledge I don't want to... I don't want to defend my idea without knowledge, but call it my opinion, my thought, whatever it is. For example, this... thing happens, like two weeks before the virus first appears, at the Wuhan hospital hmm as I remember, all of a sudden a change of eight or ten of the crew members. [Interviewer: Hmhm…] Like all of a sudden a big change… hmm after that some of those people become unavailable. Like, you cannot reach the doctors. I mean in China lots of such shady events take place. The government has a huge power over the people.

In the excerpt above, the interviewee refrains from taking an explicit position, but notes some loopholes in the official narrative. These are characterized as "shady events": how come that just two weeks before the emergence of the virus, the Wuhan Hospital is changing its crew members? How come those members suddenly become "unavailable"? Adding to these gaps, crucially, there is the consideration of the Chinese government's notorious authority over its people. Bringing this external evidence into play, Interviewee 7 entertains the idea that the change in the crew and their unavailability indicate that the official narrative lacks material or external coherence - coherence with the extra-diegetic events, which then acquire the status of "shady".

In reality, of course, the incoherence shades the official narrative and the first excerpt is critical of it. Notice that this evaluation is not centrally related to values the interviewee evokes. The second example is similar to the first in this regard, but different in that the coherence assessment concerns the internal or diegetic elements. Below, the interviewee questions the microchip-vaccine conspiracy:

Interview 26. "If they were to chip, why should they..."

About the chip issue, frankly I do not believe this. Because why should they start from the old people for this? I mean, [the vaccination] priority has been given in many countries to the elderly. I mean, if they were to chip, why should they start off with the elderly? They would start with the young...

Her questioning implies that narratives concerning COVID-19 and its vaccines being fabricated to implant chips in people - to further control the population - are not internally coherent. If the hidden agenda of the conspirators were to control people this way, one would

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expect they control primarily those who are more disposed to dissidence, e.g., the youth. In contrast, the elderly pose no threat to authorities and therefore their control does not even seem necessary.

In this example of internal coherence assessment, the plausibility of the conspiracy is not directly questioned or interrogated. The interviewee does not seem preoccupied with the alleged conspirators as villains or them having some evil motive. Nevertheless, the story is discarded as internally incoherent. This shows that once a flaw is identified within the logic of the narrative, one does not need to have a recurse to its plausibility; the story does not hold, as it were an argument with failed warranting structure (Üzelgün et al., 2022).

The next example resorts to a different track in evaluating the official narrative. After saying that she was not scared from the virus, but acted with caution because of her parents' old age, Interviewee 8 counts how she started doubting the official COVID-19 narrative:

> Interview 8. "How cannot they stop it?"
>
> ...Many things were said. It was said that it got out from China, a laboratory. No, it is the US, etc. Many events revolved around social media. To me, the more I heard these, its credibility decreased. Then it appeared to be not a real thing. I mean, then all the things done appeared absurd to me. I mean, why are they shutting me home? Why are they shutting everyone this much? ...In 2020, 2021, I mean, <u>in this technological age that it cannot be stopped... It is nonsense, I mean, how cannot they stop it</u>? <u>Technology has advanced to such an extent, all the things you can do</u>. We have so many scientists all over the world... That it cannot be stopped to this extent, I <u>started to see it as they don't stop it</u>. Then I started to see it as a game.

Her reported experience with conspiracy narratives seems to confirm the basic implications of the availability heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973). Accordingly, the more she was exposed to various stories deviating from the master narrative, the more its "credibility" decreased. But beyond this, the interviewee's questioning of "how cannot they stop it?" constitutes an explicit case of material and characterological coherence assessment - a check for the coherence between the COVID-19 world she was made to participate in, and the world as she knows external to or before it. Crucially, she discerns an incompatibility between the two with regard to the level of technological advancements or capabilities, and the capacity to control the virus. Her conviction on the power of science and technology

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seems inversely related to her trust in those institutions: instead of revising her belief concerning techno-scientific power and capabilities, she reaches the conclusion that "they don't stop it".

The repeated use of the pronoun "they" indicates a cleavage between the self and those who are endowed with the powers and responsibilities to "stop it". Indeed, it is the characterological coherence engraved here that seems to characterize the majority of evaluations recorded in our interviews[2]. That is, an indeterminate "they", some kind of obscure otherness is omnipresent throughout the discussion and evaluations of COVID-19 (conspiracy) narratives. As this is well-expected (Casthanho Silva et al., 2017), below we focus further on the decisive role this otherness plays in structuring the three levels of the story, discourse and norm.

Interview 4. "People who steer money"

- Every month comes the news of another variant, another virus.. Like "such a variant, such fatal, such contagious, such, such, such, such". I mean things are coming up, I keep seeing on the social media, on the news channels. (Interviewer: hmhm) I think this done to, well, I think it's done to keep people's fear active. But I don't think people can stand anymore. Like, they are trying to come up with new things in order to prolong the situation. I think like they are trying to ensure that people live under this fear, but no. I think this is done, stand no more.

Interviewer: These who want to evoke fear in people, are they governments? some other entity? I mean, who according to you is this who tries to...

- I mean uh of, funders of mainstream media, I mean owners, owners of the largest companies, owners of the largest TV channels, people who steer money, people who direct state politics with money.

Interviewer: Ok, what kind of benefit would they expect in creating a psychology of fear?

- What kind of benefit? Well, they control people more easily.

In a way that reminds the conspiracies built around "the hidden elite" (Castanho Silva et al., 2017), the evaluation of pandemic narratives relies heavily on the positioning of key evil characters who are many times obscure. Once such story-level, characterological coherence is

[2] Indeed, even in the excerpt above from Interview 27, despite the focus on the internal coherence of the story, interviewee expresses the inconsistency in terms of "their" actions.

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set, it may be said that a narrative is sealed against many types of criticism. In this example, "they", as the very cause behind the story, appear as structuring the relations and concerting the levels of narrative positioning. Overall in our interviews, the "characteristic" appearance of the power elite is a determining factor, be it in terms of coherence or lack thereof. The next excerpt exemplifies both this evil characterological coherence, and how it precipitates distrust across contexts.

Interview 19.

- "Biontech causes infertility" "Biontech is made by the infidels" (Laughs) of course not like that but.. But hmm this hmm well, we said, be it American government, be it Chinese government... these governments have poisoned people in the cold war period.

Interviewer: Sorry, what period?

- Cold war period, especially. Hmm this may be biological, sexual, biological, pandemic... their experiment experimentations in certain places... So I don't trust much.

In this except the interviewee dissociates oneself from a certain conspiracy mindset that he does not take seriously. That is, he first ridicules those conspiracies concerning the vaccines being manufactured with evil motives. He then seems to resort to the historical fact that governments have experimented with and poisoned populations before. The coherence here is not just external but characterological, and the US and Chinese governments were mentioned repeatedly in our corpus with such characteristics.

Competing narratives - such as the official narrative and conspiracy theories - project clear-cut evaluations for the characters. In the former, the authorities appear as heroes, in the latter as villains. While the excerpt above exemplifies how motives are attributed to the elite and the authorities in the role of villain, most participants' evaluations oscillate between the two positions. With regard to characterological coherence, are the authorities benevolent or are they sinister enough to willingly "decrease" the world population? Many times, the final verdict on such story-level positioning is guided by the values the interviewees commit themselves to. Let's see how it plays out in an example:

Interview 18. "There are many people who can reason like this"

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> Interviewer: What according to you is coronavirus exactly? Do you have an idea about it?
>
> - I believe that COVID did certainly not transmit from an animal. Certainly it is made in a laboratory and I think that some countries developed it. And the whole process was premeditated ...until the vaccines were to be invented. I believe so. Because it was said at some point when the vaccines would be delivered. Until that time, maybe some people really tried to kill the aged population. Because what does the old people mean demographically? They are a dependent population, redundant population, and you have to pay them. Yes, if it is possible to kill them, and we are able to do it through a virus, which is easier for the youth to undergo, and if this would decrease the world population a bit, then we should do it. There are many people who can reason like this, and I believe that these people with such intentions do exist. The world is not such a good place.

Interviewee 18 seems to take two main steps in her evaluation of the conspiracy story that may be called the "population weapon". The first is a consideration that the aged population is a burden on a country's economy. It is formulated as a reason for the terrible conclusion to "decrease the world population a bit". This motive attribution to some countries, however, is not directly translated into a conviction that "some countries developed it". The second step in her judgment to position "some countries" as villains seems to require the following consideration: it might be true that the aged are a burden, but, are there such evil people to reason this way, conspiring against the aged? Here comes her normative position concerning this licensing mechanism: the world, as she knows it, is home to such evil intentions and people. Unlike the examples above, here the evaluation of the characters is based on the overall setting - the world being "not such a good place". It is because in this place "many people" with bad intentions exist, some countries may have developed the virus.

Whereas Interviewee 18's evaluation draws on the fidelity assessment of the conspiracy narrative through her sceptic position against "people", the same kind of assessment can also be a factor for critically examining various conspiracies and inclining towards the official narrative. That is to say, if one believes that the world and the people are not that evil, one will hesitate to position certain actors and authorities as villains. Next example comes after the interviewee had proclaimed that she "doesn't know but", the conspiracies about a country spreading the virus to others "don't appear reasonable":

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Interview 16. "I don't want to think that the people are that evil"

Interviewer: Ok, why don't they appear reasonable?

- Humm, why not appear reasonable? I mean, I don't know. I guess I don't want to think that the people are that evil. I mean, causing the death of all these people, I mean, it is not easy (laughs) consciously, willingly...

This example provides a textbook example of the narrative fidelity assessment (Fisher, 1994). The interviewee expresses that she "does not want to" base her judgement and adopt a position on COVID-19 narratives leaning on the idea that people are so evil to "cause the death of all these people consciously, willingly". In other words, the values conveyed by the weapon virus narrative are not acceptable for her to reproduce and live by. So, it can be said that, in relation to Example from Interview 18 above, for her the world is not such a bad place. But let us see how the same interview proceeds:

Interview 16. (Continued)

Interviewer: So, you believe that the virus is natural? ... There was this claim that it was produced at China, Wuhan, and somehow leaked from there…

- No, I believe it is natural.

Interviewer: Ok, besides this virus, you were saying a little ago, China, Russia, or we can add other countries such as the US... The claims that such countries may develop these diseases, or their versions, as a weapon. What do you think about it?

- Well, these, hum, may be certainly true. I also think that such viruses as biological weapons do exist. But I mean these do not directly being globally used, I mean for example something America using against Russia only. I don't know how to say, or if Corona is also such thing you see I can say that it blew in their face.

Interestingly, as the conversation proceeds, when Interviewee 16 is reminded of the possibility that the virus might be a biological weapon, she acknowledges it. This is a swift and interesting shift in position: in a manner that seems as if she would not like to appear naive, she announces biological warfare as a reality. Then she starts to entertain the idea that "maybe" the big powers have blown-up the pandemic in their faces. That is, although she considers the possibility of biological warfare, she prefers to believe that no great power would consciously and willingly choose to act malevolently enough to spread the virus around the world. In other words, for interviewee 16, it seems plausible that the virus is an

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agent of some biological warfare, but the characters are sanctioned against the evil of spreading the war to all the world, rather than to specific enemies.

Conclusion

This study focused on the reasons with which young people in Turkey evaluated various narratives associated with COVID-19. In examining story credibility (Bubikova-Moan, 2021) in the interview discourse, we paid attention specifically to the detection of (in)coherence and (in)fidelity of story features by our interviewees.

Let us start projecting the recorded interview assessments first on the interactional or discourse level - among the three narrative positioning levels of story, discourse, and norm. Most of our interviewees did not explicitly partake and reproduce a particular narrative. They did not - exceptions remaining - talk as a participant to or character in a pending narrative, they did not have a clear message to pass on. Instead, they evaluated sequences of events, performed character or motive analysis as well as practical reasoning based on their evaluations. While coherence assessments zero in on the motives of the characters and identifies them as (in)consistent with the descriptive world, fidelity assessments are normative in the sense of being guided by the values of the interviewees associated to the alleged heroes and villains.

In the coherence assessments we recorded, on the story level, typically external evidence was employed to inhibit the plausibility of the narrative; some internal inconsistencies especially within the conspiracy theories were also identified. For instance, the shady events right before the outbreak in China are counted as a weak spot of the official narrative. On the norm level, considerations of efficiency and practicality were salient. For instance, concerning various conspiracies, a salient form of questioning involved the discrepancy between all the effort that the ruling elite had to make, e.g., vaccinating all the elderly population, and what the elite achieved.

In the recorded fidelity assessments, on the story level, the characters were sanctioned against malevolence or benevolence - to be discussed further below. On the norm level, the fidelity

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considerations in determining the evil or good in characters play a significant role. In other words, whether the world - the setting where all events take place - is taken to be a good place, or "not such a good place" was a decisive factor in the evaluation of various storylines. Still the "goodness" just mentioned pertained primarily and mostly to various characters - social actors and mainly the authorities.

A very salient feature of the interviews is the appearance of a key character, reported above as the power elite, some people, the authorities, and some countries. Appearing mostly in the abstracted pronoun form, "they", and both in questioning the official narrative and debunking various conspiracies, this sinister otherness is arguably the keystone in the admittance and adherence to conspiracy narratives. Crucially, this obscure figure predates COVID-19 and is diegetically "bigger" and more foundational. We thus conclude that the "hidden elites" is central for youth narratives in Turkey about COVID-19, since it structures and provides the necessary motivational basis for various conspiracies, e.g., population weapon, lab leak, micro-chip vaccine.

Pending narratives create a sense of emergency and a need for action reconstructing a particular storyline of the past and future events (Törrönen, 2021). For instance, in the official COVID-19 narrative, SARS and other pandemics are the past that mediates the definition of the present, the population needs to adapt to the new normal to be able to survive in the future. In the COVID-19 conspiracy narratives that emerge in our interviews, the pandemic is the perfect tool for a hidden elite to achieve the control over the people that was otherwise unacceptable. Notably, the elite appears already at place before the COVID-19 crisis, and the motives attributed to it seem to underpin and structure the sceptic considerations, if not the conspiracy narratives. Accordingly, a global uprising against the power elite is the only way for survival and authenticity.

Narratives are an occasion for agency both in experiencing and in reflexively engaging the world (Bjorninen, 2020). Pending narratives provide a safety network for the subject and help coping with uncertainty. Participating in a pending narrative, be it the official or the conspiracy, allows audiences to become actors with a certain goal and message to pass on. They transform from naive to informed subjects about past events and have a clear role in

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making the future. In this sense, pending narratives may be regarded as trauma-mitigation strategies.

The traumatic effect of uncertainty is noticeable in the interviews that swing between discrepant positions. In the absence of a pending future hinging on the actions and norms of one's own, the interviewees oscillate between competing stories, in varying degrees of uncertainties and insecurities. They do not preach any position as they do not lean on well-organized pasts and self-assembling future imaginaries. The pending narratives provide a sense of identity, mobility in the story plane as a character. Not participating in them means that the past consists of fractured, obscure, and shady events, the present of uncertainties, and the future of blurred distant imaginaries at best.

Nevertheless, remaining in-between can also be regarded as a resilience strategy, often used by actors dealing with multiple conflicting positions (Üzelgün and Castro, 2015). By remaining in-between, our young participants appear to be immune to the genesis of a new crisis and impending solutions and responsibilities thereof. As a clear line between the before and after COVID-19 is not demarcated, the virus comes to play merely as an extension of a struggle for economic and power dominance already at place. To better understand youth engagement with conspiracies around COVID-19, it is this dominance struggle, and its key actors in terms of both a hidden elite and other legitimate actors, that seems to require more scholarly attention. The omnipresence of the reported hidden elite means to call attention to the growing abyss between those in power and those who are affected by the decisions taken, and its consequences in both experiencing, re-cognizing, and expressing new health and socio-environmental challenges humanity is currently facing.

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