

Araştırma Makalesi | Research Article

# Construction of Moral Panic on Twitter About Giving Children Covid-19 Vaccines: The Example of “#DenekDegilBebek”

## Twitter’da Çocuklara Covid-19 Aşılarının Uygulanmasına Yönelik Ahlaki Paniğin İnşa Edilmesi: “#DenekDegilBebek” Örneği



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### Abstract

Moral panic is a useful concept in terms of understanding and explaining the expression of fear and concern over an event that arises in the society in the triangle of power/power relations-public and the media. This study aimed to understand the construction of a process in which the fears and sensitivities of families towards the administration of the Covid-19 vaccines to children have risen in Turkey and created a kind of moral panic in terms of the hashtag #DenekDegilBebek. Following the statement that “Babies are ‘accidentally’ vaccinated against Covid-19” made by Prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl, who is an academic member of Ege University, Faculty of Medicine, to the NTV news bulletin on September 22, 2021, the hashtag has quickly become a trend topic (TT) on Twitter’s agenda on September 23, 2021. For the purpose of this study, the hashtag #DenekDegilBebek, which is ranked of popular posts in the Twitter search engine, and 150 tweets that include this hashtag were analyzed by content analysis. In the study, it is concluded that an already existing fear and concern of families against vaccines has played a significant role in facilitating the construction of moral panic, however the reaction of families was quickly turned into a moral panic by anti-vaccine accounts on Twitter.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 Pandemic, Covid-19 Vaccine, Moral Panic, Twitter, #DenekDegilBebek.

### Öz

Ahlaki panik (moral panic) iktidar/güç ilişkileri-halk ve medya üçgeninde toplumda ortaya çıkan/çıkarılan bir olaya karşı duyulan korku ve buna verilen tepkiyi anlama ve açıklama açısından kullanışlı bir kavramdır. Bu çalışma Ege Üniversitesi Tıp Fakültesi Öğretim Üyesi Prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl’ün 22 Eylül 2021 tarihinde NTV haber bültenine yaptığı, “Bebeklere ‘yanlışlıkla’ Covid-19 aşısı yapıldığı”na yönelik açıklamasının ardından, 23 Eylül 2021 tarihinde Twitter gündeminde kısa sürede trend topics (TT) olan #DenekDegilBebek hashtagi bağlamında, Türkiye’de ailelerin çocuklara Covid-19 aşıları uygulanmasına yönelik korkularını ve hassasiyetlerini arttıran ve bir tür ahlaki panik yaratan sürecin inşasını anlamayı amaçlamıştır. Bu amaçla Twitter arama motorunda popüler gönderiler sıralamasında yer alan #DenekDegilBebek etiketi ve bu etikete yer veren 150 tweet içerik analizi ile incelenmiştir. Çalışmada ahlaki paniğin oluşmasında ailelerde aşılaraya karşı zaten var olan bir korku ve endişenin ahlaki paniğin oluşmasını kolaylaştıran bir rol oynadığı ancak kısa süre içerisinde ailelerin bu tepkisinin Twitter’da aşı karşıtı hesaplar tarafından bir ahlaki paniğe dönüştürüldüğü sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Covid-19 Salgını, Covid-19 Aşısı, Ahlaki Panik, Twitter, #DenekDegilBebek



## Introduction

Although the history of parents' hesitancy or refusal to vaccinate their child(ren) dates back to the 19th century, it has emerged as an increasing trend all over the world in recent years. Especially since the 1990s, researchers examining the reasons why parents hesitate to vaccinate their child(ren) have tried to reveal and understand underlying reasons for parents' concerns about vaccines. For example, following the publication of Dr. Andrew Wakefield's later withdrawn study of the link between vaccines and autism<sup>1</sup>, in his ethnographic work entitled "*Calling the Shots: Why Parents Reject Vaccines*" Jennifer Reich has demonstrated how anti-vaccine advocates use the media to fuel fears about risks of vaccine. According to Reich, these fears were highly influential in parents' avoidance of vaccinating their children (Reich, 2016).

Anti-vaccination, which has been effective in the world since the 1990s, has also increased in Turkey over the last ten years. According to the data provided by the Ministry of Health (MOH), whilst the number of families refusing the vaccine in Turkey was 183 in 2011, it increased exponentially and reached 23 thousand in 2017. Those families, most of whom have child(ren), come together and become organized through social media; discuss the legal basis of refusing to get vaccinated on social media; make various suggestions through sharing the names of doctors who do not recommend the vaccine (T24, 2018). However, increasing messages and misinformation shared on the Internet and social media by anti-vaccine community is considered influential on the increasing fear and anxiety of families (Argüt, 2016; Suran, 2021).

Along with understanding that immunization will be the most effective way to protect from the Covid-19 pandemic, which has spread in a short time around the world and announced to be a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), studies concerning vaccine development to prevent the disease have also been accelerated. The development and the initiation of application of vaccine have also increased the public debates focused on the content, quality and safety of vaccines. The Covid-19 outbreak has further increased families' fears and concerns about vaccines; vaccine development studies were followed closely and many different opinions were covered in the media; especially on digital platforms, unrealistic content got into circulation including many conspiracy theories about the nature and possible side effects of vaccines (Gül Ünlü & Kesgin, 2021, p. 165). That is to say, fears among families about the risks of Covid-19 vaccines for children have risen to the level of a kind of *moral panic* (Calarco, 2021).

Moral panic can be defined as an exaggerated social reaction to things that have minor acts of deviance and amplified by the media (Mutlu, 1995, p. 334). The concept was first discussed by Jack Young in 1971 in his study of drug use among young people in British society and how the media exaggerates the issue in a way that creates panic. Later on, in his book entitled "*Folk Devils and Moral Panics*" and published in 1972 (Cohen, 2019), Stanley Cohen examined cultural changes in British society towards the end of the 1960s, new sociological phenomena including criminality, youth cultures, subcultures, style, vandalism, drugs and football hooliganism, as well as music subcultures of Mods and Rockers.

After Cohen in England, Ben-Yehuda and Goode in the USA (2009), mentioned about three forms of creating moral panic through examining the term within a constructivist approach in their book entitled "*Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*". The first of these forms is the "Grassroots Model" that considers the public as the basis and

states that moral panic often stems from the public and activates an already existing fear and anxiety in the public. According to this model, politicians and the media can only mobilize an already existing fear or anxiety in the public. The second model is the “Elite-Engineered Model” which suggests that elites are the creators or organizers of moral panic. Elites can achieve their own interests by manipulating the fears and anxieties of the public to attain their aims. The third model is the “Interest-Group Model”. In this model, various power and pressure groups, organizations, religious groups and communities are considered to be effective. The fundamental questions addressed by the “Interest Group Model” are who will benefit from a common panic about a specific behaviour or institution and who will gain an advantage from a panic (Ben-Yehuda, 2009, pp. 51-69).

Particular emphasis is generally placed on the role of media in the creation of moral panic. For example, while Young (1971) states that the “commercial media has an institutionalized need for creating moral panics”, Hall et al. (1978), in their work entitled “Policing The Crisis”, place particular emphasis on the role of the media on diverting public attention from economic and political crises in the moral panic created by the rise of robbery events in British society. Similarly, the relationship between moral panic and the media has once again become the main topic of concern with infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and SARS in the 2000s, movements such as Satanism, increase in smuggling incidents, child abuse, drug addiction and increasing fears and concerns of families about their children’s exposure to violent games and new media as a result of the widespread availability of computers and the Internet. In addition, threats to children or young people are other common themes in moral panics (Cricher, 2008, p. 1135; Soygüder, 2007, p. 109; Geçgin, 2019, p. 17).

Today, academic interest in the concept of moral panic continues to grow rapidly, and this concept plays a leading role in understanding of various new sociological phenomena. In this study, a discussion on Twitter which reflects the fears and concerns of families about vaccines is explained by making use of the literature on moral panic. Following the statement “Babies are ‘accidentally’ given the Covid-19 vaccine” made by Prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl in news bulletin from the NTV on September 22, 2021, the discussion examined in this research was launched on September 23, 2021 with the hashtag “#DenekDegilBebek” which soon became a trending topic (TT) on the Twitter agenda, and turned into a kind of moral panic that increased families’ fears and sensibilities about vaccines. In this context, in the study, firstly, the interaction between moral panic and media will be evaluated; secondly, a literature will be presented addressing the vaccination strategies for children in the Covid-19 pandemic and the reasons for families’ fears about vaccines; and lastly, presenting the findings of this research conducted on the hashtag “#DenekDegilBebek” on Twitter which is a predominant online domain where these fears become visible, an answer will be sought whether this process is a moral panic or not.

### **The Role of Media in the Construction of Moral Panic**

Moral panic, which was first empirically and theoretically grounded by Stanley Cohen, refers to process involving identification, labelling or stigmatization of certain social groups as deviant and public enemies by the collective action or moral mobilization of institutional networks, such as media, police, courts, etc. that play an essential role in mechanisms of social control. In his book published in 1972, Cohen addresses the moral panic that began with the news exaggerated coverage and representation of the effect of small-scale fights involving youth groups in a seaside town in England, in 1964. Cohen identifies four key groups in the development of moral panic. These are mass

communication tools (mass media), moral entrepreneurs, control culture and the public. According to Cohen, the media, in the creation of moral panic, both as an organizer of moral panic and as an essential part of social control system, played a key role in spread of stereotypes against young groups (Cohen, 2019).

Hall et al. (1978, pp. 75-76), influenced by Cohen's work, emphasize four key points while explaining the role of the media in creating the robbery panic in England. The first one is the media's dependence on primary definers, that is, official news sources. The second one is the translation of explanations of primary definers into a "public language" familiar to its readers. The third one refers to the media's retransmission of its own reactions given to the primary definers, as if they were opinion of the public. Persons or groups who are pointed out by the media as the source of panic, are highlighted more strongly not only in the news, but also by various commentators, political authorities or those who have the power to direct and manipulate public opinion. The wide network that they have created also represents the "moral entrepreneurs" who establish and implement the rules. Those who are seen as the cause of social disorder, unrest and moral disintegration are being labelled in that direction as a result of the wide network of moral entrepreneurs; deviance is exaggerated and turned into a panic; consequently, deviance amplification or wave is created. Moral boundaries in society are highlighted through the collective effort of moral entrepreneurs and predominantly their control over the mass media. This also updates hegemonic power and authority and the power field of control mechanisms. This process is also highly functional for the control of the social order. This situation is also essential in terms of making the mass media's power felt (Geçgin, 2019, pp. 11-12).

Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009), who developed both Cohen's and Hall's approaches and evaluated moral panic on the axis of social constructionism, draws attention to five elements in the construction of moral panic. The first is the existence of a concern in the public and the media about event(s) or person(s) that is the subject of panic in society. While this concern triggers fear and anxiety about the behaviour or event described being described, at the same time, it should be demonstrable with concrete data, such as opinion polls, news in the media, legislative proposals, and the number of penalties and trials, that is, it should be measurable. The second is the characterization and stereotypification of groups or situations that are believed to be involved in that behaviour or caused to the situation as an enemy. This situation, just as Cohen's (2019) definition of "folk devils", includes the duality and stereotyping of "us" (good, decent, respectable public) and "they" or "others" (deviants, bad guys, unwanted strangers, criminals). How the enemy is portrayed (photographs, cartoons, etc.) contributes to the demonization of the enemy and her/his action. The third is the establishment of a widespread consensus that will make the social reaction meaningful shown to the events or groups due to panic. The extent of pervasiveness of consensus here may vary. Moral panics may not always be a common concern felt by the entire society. A consensus view that a problem exists and needs to be addressed can sometimes involve a significant number of members of a society; sometimes it is more local or can be seen in particular parts of the society. The fourth is the exaggeration of the behaviour or the degree of the threat it poses, that is called "disproportion". In moral panics, the generation and dissemination of numbers and statistics, such as addicts, deaths, crimes, victims, injuries, diseases etc. are extremely important. The fifth feature of moral panic is that, besides its sudden appearance, it also fades quickly, that is called "volatility" (Ben-Yehuda, 2009, pp. 37-43).

Although defining and controlling deviance is a common feature of modern societies, moral panics cannot be thought without the media. The common feature of all these approaches is the emphasis placed on firstly, the important role of the media in constructing and amplifying social problems; secondly, the existence of the media or an effective common communication channel that facilitates the emergence of moral panics; thirdly, existence of outsider groups deemed appropriate to be described as folk devils and existence of a sensitized general audience (Cricher, 2008, p. 1134; Yıldız & Sümer, 2010, pp. 38-39).

Although the existing studies of moral panic seem to mostly focus on traditional media, it is important to understand the role of today's new media in both generating and perpetuating new moral panics. For example, social media can be much faster and more effective than traditional media both in defining new threat areas and in creating public opinion about them. While the new media itself invokes surveillance, censorship and control over online platforms in the presence of "techno-panics" such as online attacks, sexually explicit messages, cyberbullying, digital addiction and pornography, it increases the frequency and intensity of overreactions with its polarizing network architecture and through the social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, etc.) enabling ordinary people to produce content (Walsh, 2020; Tombul, 2020). For example, 'likes', 'retweets', hashtags (#), mentions (@), etc. on Twitter reconfigure communication by promoting the awareness of others and by uniting geographically separated users in communities of common interest and identity (Murthy, 2013). In addition, account users who have a high number of followers and are defined as micro-celebrities can lead target audiences by creating role model. Accordingly, in 2021, the US government made an agreement with a total number of 50 young people who have high followers on Twitch, YouTube and Tiktok in order to prevent the spread of anti-vaccination on social media. Under this agreement, it was aimed not only to persuade those who are not vaccinated, but also to prevent misleading information to be spread by micro-celebrities, who have a widespread influence on social media (Aktaşoğlu, 2021).

### **Anti-Vaccination in Turkey and Discussion on the Vaccination of Children in the Covid-19 Pandemic**

In the childhood immunization schedule established by the MOH in Turkey, it is stated that children will be vaccinated free of charge in institutions and organizations of the MOH until the 8th grade of primary school. However, there is no legal regulation regarding the mandatory application of vaccines in Turkey. MOH and various non-governmental organizations from the field of public health are trying to explain the importance and the necessity of vaccination to the society by organizing trainings and awareness campaigns about vaccination. On the other hand, the vaccination rates of children in Turkey are decreasing. For example, Turkey Demographic and Health Survey conducted every five years by Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies has revealed that in 2018, in Turkey, only 67% of 12-23 or 15-26 month old children had all immunizations appropriate and recommended for their age. While this rate was 77% in 2008, it decreased to 74% in 2013 (Doğanışık, 2019). In addition to that it is also well known that vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccination and the number of families who do not vaccinate their children have increased in the last ten years. The main anti-vaccine discourses are based on the arguments that the chemical substances in the vaccines are harmful to human health, consuming certain foods can prevent these diseases naturally

and money concerns of companies producing vaccines and their effectiveness in scientific research (Gür, 2019, p. 1).

Vaccination process against Covid-19 in Turkey started on January 14, 2021, at the end of the first year of the pandemic, based on a strategy plan and schedule prepared by evaluating the risks of exposure to the disease, severity of the disease, risks of transmission and the impact of the disease on the functioning of social life. The vaccination schedule, which first started with the vaccination of health workers, continued with the vaccination of individuals over 65 years of age and other risk groups (Sağlık Bakanlığı, 2022).

At the beginning of the vaccination process, children were not included in the vaccination schedule along with statements made by the MOH and various health professionals, that children are less affected by the disease, their hospitalizations are rare and they can overcome the disease with mild symptoms. However, recent studies demonstrated that children and young people of all ages, including the new-born period, are infected and can develop severe symptoms and transmit the virus to other people (Toraks-Der, 2021). Since then, the scientific circles have started to voice and place more emphasis on the necessity of including children in the vaccination schedule (Toraks-Der, 2021). Thus, there has been a shift in the medical discourse arguing, at the beginning of the pandemic, that children are less affected by the disease towards explanations that children and young people are also severely affected by the pandemic<sup>2</sup>.

Following these developments, while the number of countries giving children, aged 12 and over, the Covid-19 vaccine has increased gradually in 2021, along with the studies on the use of the vaccine between the ages of 5-12, countries such as Cuba and China have started to vaccinate children at much earlier ages (Türk Tabipler Birliği, 2021). The transformation of the Delta variant into the dominant variant from the second half of 2021 has made herd immunity important, and administration of Covid-19 vaccines to children, especially the vaccination of the 12-18 age group, has gained importance (Tanır, 2020, p. 40). In Turkey, optional vaccination of children between the ages of 12-17 started in September 2021, in the third phase of the vaccination program. From the end of 2021, research mainly concerned with developing and testing COVID-19 vaccines regarding children in earlier age groups has accelerated. In collaboration with the US-based pharmaceutical company Pfizer and the German BioNTech company post-administration reviews of vaccines developed for children were shared by the mentioned companies. Based on this, it is stated that children aged 5-11 years can tolerate the vaccine well and similar clinical studies will be carried out on the 6 months to 2 age group and the 2 to 5 age group as well ([www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-58624980](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-58624980), 2021).

It can be claimed that the shifts observed in discourse and practice regarding the effects of the disease on children and vaccination of children increased the already existing concerns of the families and strengthened the impact of anti-vaccine discourses. At the beginning of the pandemic, although various negative social and psychological effects of Covid-19 on children are mentioned, there was general knowledge and common understanding that compared to adults, children are less likely to catch Covid-19 and have a milder symptom. At the beginning of the pandemic, MOH and Turkish Medical Association (TMA) have stated several times that the disease in children is rare and mild, and that no death has occurred so far. These statements made by health experts were also covered in the media and news<sup>3</sup>. While it is an issue of concern whether vaccination will be given to children under 12 years of age in Turkey, mothers who do not want to

have their children vaccinated express their concerns as follows: “We are talking about a vaccine whose Phase-3 and Phase-4 studies have not yet been completed. It means humans are experimental object so how can I throw my child into this bottomless pit?” (Gül, 2021). For example, while TMA criticizes that based on the experiences of citizens and medical doctors who consulted him to receive information and assistance there are problems with the vaccination of children included in the Covid-19 vaccination program and apart from the suggestion there is no clear explanation addressing the questions of the families in the information page of the MOH about vaccines (Türk Tabipler Birliği, 2021), a news article in Hürriyet covered the concerns of families about getting their children vaccinated (Kaçmaz, 2021). Calarco (2021), who traced the similar dilemma faced by families in the USA, emphasizes that the explanations for the necessity of vaccination of children increase the fears and concerns about vaccinations in the society and families after the statements that children are not affected by the disease and therefore do not need to be vaccinated made by organizations such as US Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC), World Health Organization (WHO) and health professionals at the beginning of the pandemic. The author, who characterizes this process as “moral calm” before “moral panic”, observes that this calm, supported by health professionals and the media, causes mothers to perceive their children as “naturally healthy” in the face of Covid-19, and to consider vaccinations unnecessary, and it forms a basis for moral panics about vaccines through increasing concerns regarding the vaccination process (Calarco, 2021, pp. 16-21).

### **#DenekDegilBebek Hashtag on Twitter as a Communicative Space and Discussion Related to Vaccines**

Social media is an easily accessible communication medium where individuals become active users and can share on many topics. Schmidt (Schmidt, 2016, p. 48) mentions three analytical features of Twitter, which he defines as “personal public” by emphasizing its feature that allows for the emergence of a new type of public: These are the technological features and opportunities, social and textual relations and shared rules. Twitter, which allows posting using short messages (tweets) of up to 140 characters, has additional feature such as automatic shortening of URLs to upload images to backend and interface and save on character limit. However, the main difference that distinguishes Twitter from other forms of online message sharing formats, such as e-mail or discussion boards, is the forms in which articulated relations use to structure the flow of communication and filter information. While both individual tweets and collections of a particular user’s past tweets are publicly available via permalinks, which rely on articulated social networks to establish “sender–audience” relationships of Twitter, the key concept guiding Twitter use is the idea of “following”. The account name followed by the @ sign is used to address or reply to a specific user (Schmidt, 2016, p. 50). In addition, it is possible to access the source directly by tagging (hashtags) a person or topic on Twitter, to be able to quickly access another link via hyperlinks, and to share articles, news, videos or photos created by someone else with the retweet feature.

Hashtags are widely used to tag a tweet in terms of a particular topic and make it easier to discover by other users. Incorporating hashtags into tweets by a user indicates that the user wants to be involved in a wider communicative process with everyone who is interested in the same topic (Bruns & Moe, 2016, p. 64). In this respect, hashtags can help to create common publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). Since hashtags are made searchable by the interface, it links tweets from pre-existing users who do not have

previous follower/followed relationship. Hashtags are not moderated; therefore, they can be used by any user, creating a wide and uncontrollable variety of hashtags. Trend topics are a kind of agenda setting tool of Twitter, which includes popular word groups, phrases or hashtags that list frequently shared topics on Twitter. Highlights on Twitter enable users to identify popular discussions that they will follow or participate, and to add themselves in discussion by allowing the common use of certain hashtags (Schmidt, 2016, p. 50). According to Bruns & Moe, tweeting a hashtag on a particular topic is like a speech delivered at a public meeting where participants don't necessarily know each other, but are brought together by a common theme, interest, or thought (Schmidt, 2016, p. 64). With the "Spaces", voice chat room application, which Twitter put into practice in 2021, Twitter created an important space for people's participation and social inclusion; in Boyd (2010) definition, it refers to a space and a set of people, that is, a "networked public" structured by networked technologies.

In this study, the reactions that started with the *#DenekDegilBebek* hashtag on Twitter were discussed in the context of the concept of moral panic were discussed in the context of the concept of moral panic. As previously mentioned, this public reaction appeared after the statement that "babies were 'accidentally' given the Covid-19 vaccine" made by Prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl, who is an academic member of Ege University, Faculty of Medicine, during his speech on the safety of vaccines in the NTV news bulletin on September 22, 2021. In the study, the common themes of this discussion, which increased the fears and concern of families about vaccines and turned into a kind of moral panic on September 23, 2021, and which it flared up again on October 4, 2021 and soon followed with anti-vaccine arguments, its interaction with other tags/users, and whether this process can be characterized as a moral panic were questioned.

### **Aims and Methodological Approach**

The widespread availability of social media and the fact that users have become content producers have made the analysis of content on these platforms possible (Erdoğan, 2021, p. 210). The sample of this research is all tweets including the hashtag *#DenekDegilBebek*, which became trend topics (TT) in a short time on the Twitter agenda between September 23 - October 23, 2021. Tweets were selected via Twitter API and also this hashtag was monitored in Getdaytrens website, and the top 100 most popular tweets in the website are also included in the sample. Out of a total of 172 tweets including this hashtag common tweets were excluded from the sample and 150 tweets were analysed using interpretative content analysis. The interpretative approach goes beyond the quantitative and statistical description of interpersonal communication and offers a broad area of analysis by giving providing an opportunity to learn something about the aims and motivations of the people who make this communication (Erdoğan, 2021, pp. 213-214). While conducting content analysis on Twitter data, tweets can be evaluated and analyzed as single sampling units. Twitter enables creating a dataset consisting of the most visible tweets related to the issue in question through monitoring tweets including certain hashtags (Einspanner, 2016, p. 160). Accordingly, beyond describing the content of the tweets, through monitoring the *#DenekDegilBebek* hashtag, this study aimed to provide an in-depth examination of the context of the tweets (perspectives on the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccine, the reactions to the vaccination of children), and their interaction with the outside world (interaction with traditional media and social events) by taking into account the and their interactions with each other (mention and @reply interactions).



The coding guide used in the analysis of tweets was created by the coding of researchers separately, and after the first evaluation, it was revised again and given its final form. In order to increase the reliability, the reliability calculation between the coders was found  $\alpha = 0.95$  after the first 15 tweets that the two researchers coded separately Krippendorff (2004, p. 241). The data were analysed using the SPSS 22 program. The contents of the tweets, the images used, the profile information of the tweeters and their previously shared tweets were also used in the evaluation of the contents.

## Findings

### Development of #DenekDegilBebek Hashtag on Twitter in the Examined Dates

Following Prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl's statement in the NTV news bulletin that "Babies are 'accidentally' given the Covid-19 vaccine", the hashtag #DenekDegilBebek started on September 23, 2021 became a trend topic (TT) in a short time on the Twitter agenda, and soon turned into a kind of moral panic that increased the fears and concerns of families about vaccines. According to the data of the Getdaytrends site, which provides the topics discussed in the Twitter agenda with date and time information, reactions to the statement were ranked 5th among the most discussed topics in Turkey from 10:00 PM on September 22, right after the announcement (see Figure 1). After the statement, a discussion on the reliability and safety of the vaccine has started with the #DenekDegilBebek hashtag on Twitter on September 23, 2021. The discussion rose to the second in rank in Turkey's agenda and became a trend topic with the hashtag #DenekDegilBebek (see Figure 2). After this process, which started on Twitter, the hashtag became active once again with an anti-vaccine dialogue in the TV series *Arka Sokaklar*, which was broadcast on *Kanal D* on September 25.

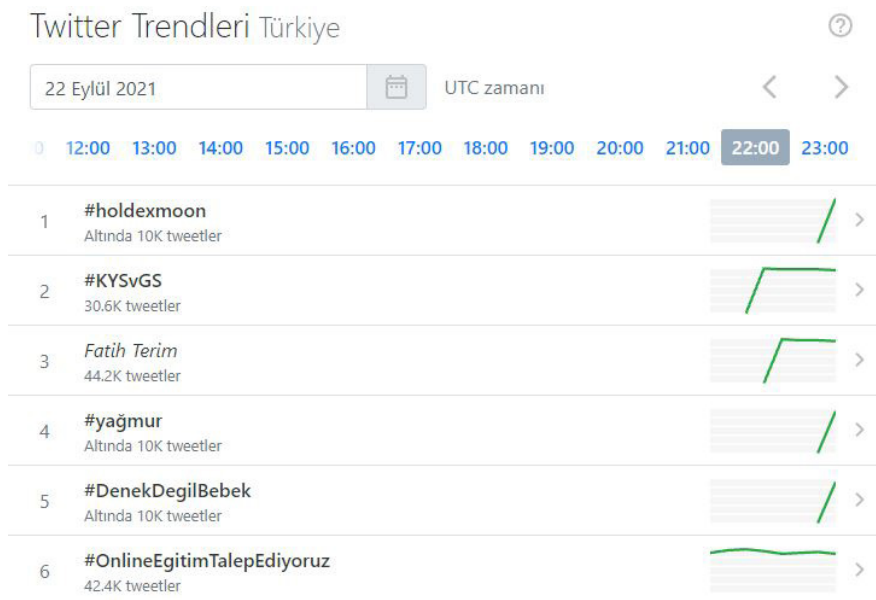
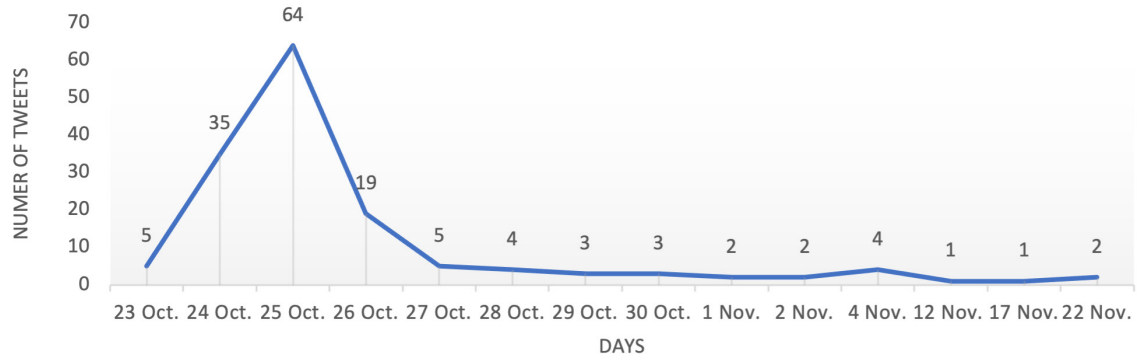


Figure 1. #DenekDegilBebek Date and Time Order



**Figure 2.** #DenekDegilBebek Agenda Ranking

138 of the 150 tweets analyzed in this study, that is, almost all of them, belongs to September, only 12 belongs to October. The first tweet using this hashtag was sent on September 22, 2021 after Prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl's statement on the *NTV news* bulletin that "Babies were 'accidentally' given the Covid-19 vaccine" and the use of the hashtag has intensified on October 23-25 (see Figure 3). It has been seen that this hashtag soon became a trend topic on the Twitter agenda and at the same time reached to the point that unites anti-vaccine. In addition, the stage where anti-vaccine advocates were criticized in the TV series *Arka Sokaklar* on *Kanal D* on September 25 increased the reaction of the anti-vaccine. These reactions against the series played an important role in the hashtag #DenekDegilBebek to reach the top of Twitter's agenda. Additionally, as recently, a public demonstration, similar to the one held in Istanbul Maltepe on September 11, 2021, where anti-vaccine protesters came together, was held in Ankara Anıt Park on September 26, 2021 and the hashtag #DenekDegilBebek was used in the posts regarding this public demonstration. After this date, the effects of the hashtag #DenekDegilBebek reduced and the relevant topic was observed until October 22. In this study, the contents of tweets posted especially between 23-25 October 2021 were examined in the context of the concept of "moral panic".



**Figure 3.** Development of #DenekDegilBebek Hashtag on Twitter in the Examined Dates

In the analyzed tweets, it was seen that other hashtags were used together with the hashtag #DenekDegilBebek. The other three most frequently used hashtags are #BoykotKanalD

with 25 tweets, *#MaltepeRuhuAnıtparkta* and *#DrZaferKurugölTutuklansın* with 23 tweets, other hashtags, according to the frequency of use, are *#KalpKrizleriSalgını*, *#ArkaSokaklar*, *#savASInMaskesiniKaldır*, *#PcrHatalıAşıZararlı*, *#PlandemiAnkaradaBitecek* ve *#AsıVePcrDurdurulsun* (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Top Ten Most Commonly Used Hashtags Along with *#DenekDegilBebek*

Hashtag	Number
<i>#BoykotKanalD</i>	25
<i>#MaltepeRuhuAnıtparkta</i>	23
<i>#DrZaferKurugölTutuklansın</i>	23
<i>#KalpKrizleriSalgını</i>	17
<i>#ArkaSokaklar</i>	16
<i>#savASInMaskesiniKaldır</i>	15
<i>#Fahrettinkocaistifa</i>	14
<i>#PcrHatalıAşıZararlı</i>	13
<i>#PlandemiAnkaradaBitecek</i>	11
<i>#AsıVePcrDurdurulsun</i>	10

### Elements of Moral Panic Constructed in the Context of the *#DenekDegilBebek* Hashtag

One of the questions that the study seeks to answer was whether the process examined in the context of the *#DenekDegilBebek* hashtag can be considered as a “moral panic” involving families’ reactions to Covid-19 vaccines. The answer to this question was examined by taking into account the five elements (concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility) that Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009) draw attention in the construction of moral panic. The first element in the construction of moral panic is the interest and concern shown by the public and the media about the event or person that is the subject of panic. The hashtag *#DenekDegilBebek*, which developed after the statement that babies were accidentally vaccinated, *has triggered* increase in vaccine refusal which *has* become widespread in society in the last ten years and concerns about vaccines which increased with Covid-19 vaccines. Implications that vaccines are not given to babies by mistake and that babies are used as subjects for experiment is also observed in the tweets<sup>4</sup>.

The second element is the hostility and stereotyping of groups or situations that are thought being involved in or caused the behavior in question. In the tweets analysed in the context of the case under investigation, the dichotomy of “us” and “they” is often created in tweets, and reactions were directed towards Prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl’s with the hashtag *#DrZaferKurugolTutuklansın*, the Minister of Health with the hashtag *#fahrettinkocaistifa*, and vaccine advocate physicians and to medical science in general<sup>5</sup>. While, in the analysed tweets, descriptions such as “vaccine representative terrorists with white coats”, “lie machines”, “despicable murderers” and “murderer doctors” were used, some of the images included in the tweets also reinforced this discourse of hostility (see Figure 4). After the broadcast of the scene in the TV series *Arka Sokaklar* on Kanal D, in which the anti-vaccine advocates were criticized, the targets became the TV channel and the actors of the series. The hashtags, such as *#BoykotKanalD*, *#ArkaSokaklar*, *#BoykotArkaSokaklar*, *#ArkaSokaklarboykot*, were created, calling on complaining the series to Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) and Presidency’s Communication Centre (CIMER) and boycotting *Kanal D*<sup>6</sup>.



*Caption: Sections from Today's Healthcare World"*



*Caption 1: Don't Remain Silent Against the Cruelty  
Caption 2: Either You Say Stop or You Lose*

#### **Figure 4.** Example Images for Discourse of Hostility

Another element of the moral panic constructed in the context of the hashtag examined in the research is an effort to establish a consensus towards people and events designated as the hostile. This effort is especially noticeable in other hashtags used together with *#DenekDegilBebek* hashtag. For example, in tweets referring to a public meeting organized by a political party with anti-vaccine views, hashtags such as *#MaltepeRuhuAnıtparkta*, *#PlandemiAnkaradaBitecek*, *#BüyükUyanışAnkarada*, *#savASınMaskesiniKaldır*, *#AsıVePcrDurdurulsun*, *#AsıMasıOlmıycam* were used together with the hashtag *#DenekDegilBebek*. In these tweets, apart from showing reaction to the vaccination of children, there were various main arguments of vaccine opponents, such as that there is a commercial concern behind the vaccine studies, that such pandemic does not exist in fact, that there is a plan to be made in the genes of the human species, that there is no benefit to the human body.

The fourth element is the exaggeration of the extent of the concern and threat created in the society. In the examined tweets, it was seen that the pandemic and the vaccines are described as part of another plan, conspiracy theories are frequently referenced, some scientists and publications are referred to support the view of content creators and a variety of images are used (see Figure 5).

The fifth feature of moral panic is that besides its sudden emergence, it quickly fades away, that is, its variability. In the context of the analysed hashtag, moral panic emerged after the statement that babies were accidentally vaccinated, and it became active from time to time and faded within a month.



*Caption: Vaccines claimed that can be mixed! None of them have anything to do with each other! (Vaccines mentioned in the picture are Sinovac, Chicken pox, Measles, Rubella, Mumps, BioNTech, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis A.)*



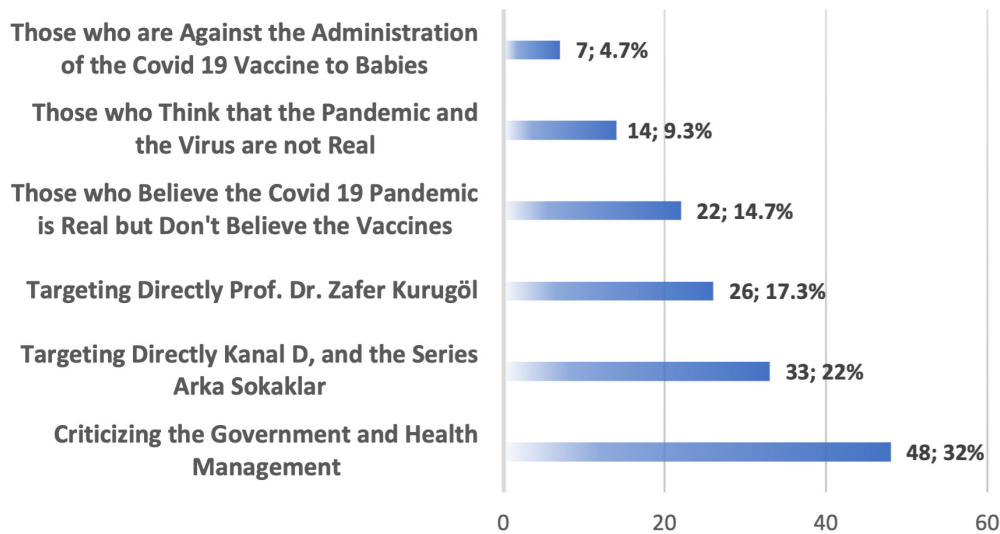
*Caption1: What did not allow!?*

*Caption2: On its official website, #BioNTech officially admits that they designed Turkey and South Africa as test subjects!!...*

**Figure 5. Example Images of Discourse of Conspiracy Theory**

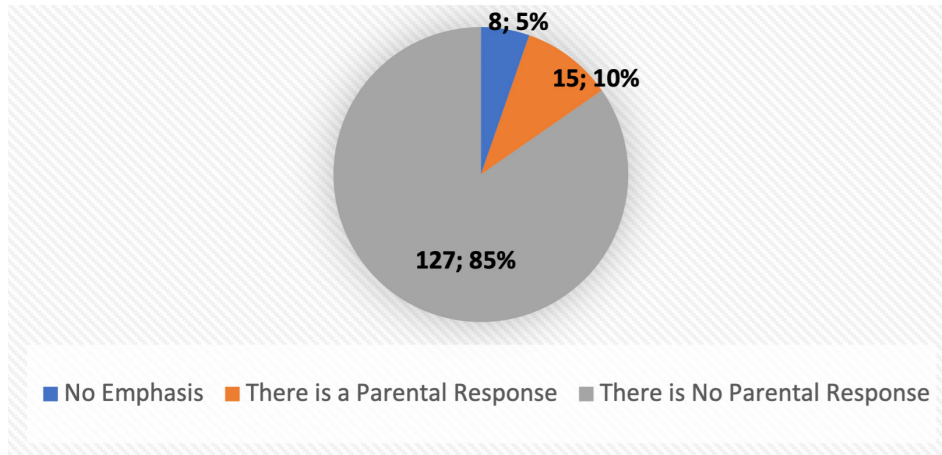
### Themes of Moral Panic Constructed in the Context of the #DenekDegilBebek Hashtag

According to Graph 2, it can be seen that the moral panic created in the context of the #DenekDegilBebek hashtag combines different discourses, and at the same time, different groups endeavour to be visible through using the effects of this hashtag. While approximately one-third of the tweets analysed in the study consist of tweets against the administration of the Covid-19 vaccines to children (32%), a considerable amount of tweets also argues that the Covid-19 pandemic and the virus are not real (22%). The distribution of tweets according to their content is as follows: Tweets belonging to those who believe that the Covid-19 pandemic is real but do not believe in the necessity of vaccines (17.3%); tweets targeting Prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl (14.7%); tweets targeting the *Kanal D* and the series *Arka Sokaklar* and its actors (9.3%); and tweets criticizing the government and health management (4.7%). (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6. Themes of Moral Panic**

While, in about one-third of the tweets analysed in the context of this hashtag included expression a response to the administration of the Covid-19 vaccine to babies (see Figure 6), how much of this response was a parental response is also tried to be understood. In the analysed tweets, the number of tweets emphasizing that the twitterer is parent or against the administration of these vaccines to their own child is quite low (15 tweets) (see Figure 7).



*Figure 7. Percentage of Parental Response in Tweets*

Looking at the contents of the shared tweets, those who think that Prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl will spoliage evidence; those who do not believe that the vaccine administered to children was made by mistake; those who describe vaccines as test fluid; those who claim that the process is planned; those who think that people are used as experimental subjects; those questioning the phenomenon of motherhood; those who state that responsible persons remained silent; those who claim that there is no virus; those who consider the process as a game of powerful global actors came together with the hashtag *#BebekDegilDenek*.

## Conclusion

While it has been revealed in various studies that the number of families who do not want to have their children vaccinated in Turkey, as in the rest of the world, has increased, this phenomenon has significantly increased especially with the Covid-19 pandemic. Statements that children and young people are less affected by the disease, the disease is mild in most children and they are naturally immune, made to the public since the beginning of the pandemic, can be considered as the source of this concern experienced by families. These statements were also voiced by organizations such as MOH or TMA and were covered in the media. As Ipsos' public opinion poll conducted in April 2021 reveals, a quarter of parents who participated in the study said that they would not have their children vaccinated against Covid-19 (Ipsos, 2021). However, from the beginning of 2021, it has been stated that administration of Covid-19 vaccines for children is necessary for herd immunity, children are also affected by this disease, deaths can occur; therefore, children need to be vaccinated. In Turkey, optional vaccination of children aged 12-17 started in September 2021.

It is possible to say that the shift observed in discourse and practice regarding the vaccination of children becomes grounds for the increase in families' concerns about Covid-19 vaccines and vaccine refusal in Turkey. Those who are hesitant about vaccines are also affected by the disinformation campaigns about vaccines and the increasing discourses of vaccine opponents. Loss of trust in science and health authorities in

Turkey after Covid-19 and the spread of infodemic/disinformation and conspiracy theories, contradictory messages that initially framed the risk to children as low have caused for families being more prone to believe false information about vaccine risks and more sensitive to disinformation and considering Covid-19 vaccines unnecessary for their children.

As seen in this study, although the hashtag *#DenekDegilBebek*, which became a trending topic on the Twitter agenda, initially emerged as a reaction of the parents, it created a moral panic effect which promptly mobilized anti-vaccine circles and parents' concerns and fears about Covid-19 vaccines. While research on moral panic mostly focuses on the role of activists and the media in promoting panic, as this study shows, conflicting messages from health authorities, misinformation and disinformation campaigns on social media can give raise to the widespread concerns about Covid-19 vaccines. The moral panic built in the context of the hashtag *#DenekDegilBebek*, which was initially emerged perhaps as a parental reaction, after a while, more than being parents' reactions to Covid-19 vaccines, it gained a feature that includes anti-vaccine and conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic.

Considering the fact that issues concerning public health, such as vaccine hesitancy in Turkey, are often used for the motivation of groups who want to gain status, economic and political power and political circles instrumentalized anti-vaccine narratives in order to expand their electorate (Arabacı, 2022), it can be said that it is important to question and reveal the main components, actors and main motivations of the discussion to understand the relationship between Twitter and anti-vaccine, based on this example.

## Notlar

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Andrew Wakefield's article published in the medical journal the Lancet in 1998 claimed that live virus in MMR (measles, rubella, mumps) mixed vaccine passes into the blood and then to the brain by increasing the permeability of the intestinal mucosa and causes autism. However, the study received criticism from scientific circles due to the reasons such as serious methodological problems, insufficient sample and no control group in the study and was withdrawn by the journal. Despite this, the findings of the article were widely covered in the media; because of the increasing concern among parents MMR vaccination rates in the UK declined from 92% to 80% between 1998 and 2003 and Wakefield has become one of the symbols of global anti-vaccination (Üren, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the information note titled "COVID-19 and Vaccination in Children" published in mid-2021, Turkish Medical Association in Turkey (TMA) emphasizes the necessity of vaccination by stating that "Contrary to common belief, the information that Covid-19 is mild in children and does not cause death have lost its validity today. Like the infection itself, post-COVID conditions may confront the children with a wide range of health problems ranging from lowering the quality of life in children to death" (TMA, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Regarding this, an example can be the statement that "the disease is rare and mild in children" and "no deaths have been observed in children so far", appeared in the Covid-19 Information Platform of the Ministry of Health under "What is COVID-19?" and made to answer the question "Are Children at Risk?" (Sağlık Bakanlığı, 2022). In addition to this, it is also stated that the clinical manifestations of Covid-19 in children is milder and deaths are rare in the report titled "Covid-19 (Sars-Cov-2 Infection) Pediatric Patient Management and Treatment" published at the beginning of 2022 by the Scientific Advisory Board of the Ministry of Health (Sağlık Bakanlığı Halk Sağlığı Genel Müdürlüğü, 2022). TMA also stated in its various statements and publications that Covid-19 is less severe in children, that children may need protection because they get sick even though they are not serious (Tanır, 2020), and that children seem to be less affected by Covid-19 in terms of both frequency and severity compared to other respiratory tract infections (Karaturan, 2020). Although there is no research regarding how these discourses are covered and developed in the media, in a general search made in the archives of the Hürriyet newspaper, news that children are more resistant to Covid-19, made especially at the beginning of the epidemic appears. The news titled "Parents are wondering: How can I protect my child from the coronavirus?" reporting that "As a result of the existing evidence, it is understood that the risk of Covid-19 infection in children is less than in adults" can be given as an example (Hürriyet, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the owner of the first tweet examined in the context of this hashtag expresses as: “Followers know, I deactivated my account last month. My conscience did not allow me to stay as a spectator. I activated it back. If you can’t say wrong to wrong, don’t say you are human. If not today, when are you going to speak?” Examples of tweets showing concern about vaccines and implying the use of babies as experimental subjects are as follows: “Even testing on animals requires approval, but Turkish babies are not as valuable as rat. A dead silence ☹ Everyone is blind, deaf, dumb. I am experiencing the biggest fear now. I realized that these people will never wake up ☹”. “First, you’d have to be an idiot to accidentally mix these vaccines up! They made all the people test subjects. Now they treat them as suckers. Vaccine representative terrorists with white coat ☹☹”.

<sup>5</sup> The following tweets can be given as examples of the us and them dichotomy created in the context of this element: “Your babies can be experimental subjects then. Do not touch ours”; as an example of response to prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl, “Is Dr. Frankenstein still on duty ??”, “Protect yourself from doctors and entrust yourself to doctors (hekim), a DOCTOR (HEKİM) wrote yesterday. Here, you see a doctor to whom you must protect yourself! ☹”; as an example of hostility towards doctors, “Teachership was the most respected profession in my childhood. Then they got into a mood, they currently have no fans, no supporters. Doctorship was a profession that was considered blessed, in this pandemic, they had such disgusting behaviours, people hated...”.

<sup>6</sup> The following tweet can be given as an example: “0212 478 00 88 --> Kanal D complaint line. You can call and complain about the series by saying that the series is leading the public to hatred, provoking separatism and fascism. It only takes 2 minutes”.

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# Twitter’da Çocuklara Covid-19 Aşılarının Uygulanmasına Yönelik Ahlaki Paniğin İnşa Edilmesi: “#DenekDegilBebek” Örneği

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## Genişletilmiş Özet

Dünyada ailelerin çocuklarına aşı yaptırmaktan çekinmesinin (*vaccine hesitency*) ya da aşı yaptırmayı reddetmesinin (*vaccine refuse*) tarihi 19. yüzyıla uzanmakla birlikte, son yıllarda tüm dünyada artan bir eğilim olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Dünyada 1990’lardan itibaren etkili olan aşı karşıtlığının Türkiye’de de son on yılda arttığı görülmektedir. Özellikle 1990’lardan itibaren ebeveynlerin çocuklarına aşı yaptırmaktan çekinmesinin nedenlerini inceleyen araştırmacılar, ebeveynlerin aşılar ile ilgili endişelerinin nedenlerini ortaya koymaya çalışmışlardır. Ailelerin korku ve endişelerinin son yıllarda artmasında internette ve sosyal medyada artan aşı karşıtı toplulukların mesajlarının ve yanlış bilgi paylaşımının etkisinden söz edilmektedir (Argüt vd., 2016; Suran, 2021).

Dünyada kısa zamanda yayılan ve DSÖ tarafından bir pandemi olarak ilan edilen Covid-19 salgınından korunmanın en etkili yolunun bağışıklama olacağının anlaşılması ile birlikte, hastalıktan korunmaya yönelik aşı geliştirme çalışmaları da hızlanmıştır. Calarco (2021), salgının başlarında ABD Hastalık Korunma ve Kontrol Merkezi [CDC] ve Dünya Sağlık Örgütü [DSÖ] gibi kuruluşlarca ve sağlık uzmanlarınca yapılan çocukların hastalıktan etkilenmediği ve dolayısıyla aşılınmalarına gerek olmadığına yönelik açıklamaların ardından, çocukların aşılınmasının gerekliliğine yönelik sonraki açıklamaların toplumda ve ailelerde aşılar hakkındaki korku ve endişeleri arttırdığına vurgu yapmaktadır. Bu süreci “ahlaki panik” öncesi “ahlaki sakinlik” (*moral calm*) olarak tanımlayan yazar, sağlık uzmanları ve medya tarafından beslenen bu sakinliğin çocuklarını Covid-19 karşısında “doğal olarak sağlıklı” olarak algılayan annelerin aşıları gereksiz görmesine neden olduğunu ve aşılama sürecine ilişkin endişelerini arttırarak, aşılarla yönelik ahlaki panikler için temel oluşturduğunu söylemektedir (2021, ss. 16-21). Aşıların geliştirilmesi ve uygulamanın başlaması kamuoyunda aşıların içeriği ve niteliğine yönelik tartışmaları da arttırmıştır. Covid-19 salgınının ailelerin aşılarla yönelik korku ve endişelerini daha da arttırdığı, aşı geliştirme çalışmalarının yakından takip edildiği, medyada çok sayıda farklı görüşün yer bulduğu, özellikle dijital platformlarda aşıların niteliği ve olası yan etkilerine dair çok sayıda komplo teorisi içeren, gerçek dışı içeriğin dolaşıma girdiği görülmüştür (Gül Ünlü & Kesgin, 2021, s. 165). Öyle ki aileler arasında Covid-19 aşılarının çocuklara yönelik risklerine ilişkin korkuların bir tür *ahlaki panik* düzeyine yükseldiği söylenebilmektedir (Calarco, 2021).

Günümüzde ahlaki panik kavramı üzerine akademik ilgi devam etmekle olup, bu kavram birçok yeni sosyolojik olguyu anlamada yol gösterici olmaktadır. Bu çalışmada Twitter’da ailelerin aşılarla dair korkularını ve endişelerini içeren bir tartışma ahlaki paniğe yönelik literatürden de yararlanarak açıklanmıştır. İncelenen tartışma 22 Eylül 2021 tarihinde Ege Üniversitesi Tıp Fakültesi Öğretim Üyesi Prof. Dr. Zafer Kurugöl’ün NTV’de yayınlanan haber bülteninde yaptığı, “Bebeklere ‘yanlışlıkla’ Covid-19 aşısı yapıldığı”na yönelik açıklamasının ardından, 23 Eylül 2021 tarihinde Twitter gündeminde kısa sürede trend topics (TT) olan “#DenekDegilBebek” etiketi ile başlamış ve kısa sürede ailelerin

aşılara dair korkularını ve hassasiyetlerini arttıran ve bir tür *ahlaki panik* halini almıştır. Çalışmada 23 Eylül 2021 tarihinde ailelerin aşılara dair korkularını ve hassasiyetlerini arttıran ve bir tür *ahlaki panik* ile başlayan ve 4 Ekim 2021 tarihinde tekrar alevlenen ve kısa sürede aşı karşıtı argümanların da bulunduğu bu tartışmanın ortak temaları, diğer etiketlerle/kullanıcılarla etkileşimi ve bu sürecin bir “ahlaki panik” olarak nitelenip nitelenemeyeceği sorularına yanıt aranmıştır.

Bu amaçla çalışmada *#DenekDegilBebek* hashtaginde yer alan ve Twitter arama motorunda popüler gönderiler sıralamasında yer alan *#DenekDegilBebek* etiketi ve bu etikete yer veren 150 tweet içerik analizi ile incelenmiş ve Covid-19 aşılara yönelik ahlaki paniğin toplumda nasıl geliştiği, hangi kaynaklardan beslendiği ve Twitter bağlamında medyanın rolü ortaya konulmuştur. İlgili hashtag izlenerek gerçekleştirilen içerik analizi ile sadece içeriği betimlemeyi değil, tweetlerin bağlamına (Covid-19 salgınına ve aşıya bakışları; çocuklara aşı uygulanmasına yönelik tepkileri), dış dünya ile etkileşimi (geleneksel medya ve toplumsal olaylar ile etkileşimi), birbiri ile etkileşimlerini (mention ve @reply) dikkate alınarak derinlemesine incelenmiştir. Veriler SPSS 22 programı kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. İçeriklerin değerlendirilmesinde tweetlerin içerikleri, kullanılan görseller, tweet sahiplerinin profil bilgileri ve geçmiş tweet paylaşımlarından da yararlanılmıştır.

Twitter gündeminde trend topics olan *#DenekDegilBebek* hashtagi başlangıçta ebeveynlerin bir tepkisi olarak doğmuş olmakla birlikte; aşı karşıtı çevrelerce kısa sürede ebeveynlerin Covid-19 aşılara yönelik endişelerini ve korkularını harekete geçiren bir “ahlaki panik” haline gelmiştir. Ahlaki panik üzerine olan araştırmalar, daha çok aktivistlerin ve medyanın paniği teşvik etmedeki rolüne odaklanırken, bu çalışmanın da gösterdiği gibi, sağlık otoritelerinden gelen çelişkili mesajlar ile birlikte sosyal medyadaki yanlış bilgilendirme ve dezenformasyon kampanyalarının da Covid-19 aşılıyla ilgili yaygın endişeleri körüklediği görülmüştür. Özet olarak *#DenekDegilBebek* hashtagi bağlamında inşa edilen ahlaki panik bir süre sonra Covid-19 aşılara yönelik ebeveynlerin tepkilerinden çok aşı karşıtlığı ve Covid-19 salgınına yönelik komplo teorilerini içinde barındıran bir özellik kazanmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Covid-19 Salgını, Covid-19 Aşısı, Ahlaki Panik, Twitter, *#DenekDegilBebek*.

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