

Threads of Resistance: Art, Identity, and Survival in Contemporary Türkiye

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Abstract

This research investigates how artists in Türkiye navigate the complex interplay of tradition, contemporary life, politics, and economic pressures, and how their creative practices serve as forms of resistance and expression. In a context marked by commodification, authoritarian governance, and global art markets, sustaining both livelihood and identity has become increasingly challenging. Using twenty semi-structured interviews with artists in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir — including painters, ceramicists, carpet weavers, jewellery makers, and shopkeepers — the study applies thematic analysis to capture lived and living experiences.

Findings highlight four interlinked themes. Firstly, tradition and modern art making practices were framed not as opposites but as mutually sustaining, with artists adapting heritage practices to contemporary contexts while resisting cultural erasure. Second, the systemic and structural struggles of being an artist reflected limited institutional support: education systems that marginalise the arts and galleries dominated by profit and exclusivity restrict opportunities for emerging voices. Third, economic pressures forced many artists to produce commercially driven work for survival, though some continued to prioritise authenticity despite financial precarity. Finally, politics, identity, and expression were central to artistic practice, with art functioning as a subtle but vital, unspoken language of dissent in an environment where overt political speech is constrained.

The study contributes by linking theoretical debates on commodification and repression within Türkiye with empirical insights from artists themselves. It shows that, despite structural obstacles, Turkish art remains resilient — sustaining heritage, identity, and protest in the face of adversity.

Introduction

This project aims to understand how artists have used art as a form of resistance, reaction or protest to the complex climate of Türkiye. This research paper explores this through four subthemes: tradition and modernity; the struggles of being an artist in Türkiye; economic pressures and commodification and politics, identity and expression. The wider literature has highlighted the theoretical assessment of both the negative and positive impact of tourism, globalisation and commodification on how artists make their art and the meaning behind it, however, lacks an in-depth empirical analysis (Yeşilyurt, 2017). Türkiye specifically has been highlighted as a key country which exemplifies the contention between an artist staying true to their art and its purpose and the external pressures of the market. Therefore, there is a clash between making art because of its authentic, intrinsic purpose and value and making art solely to make money. This research aims to fill this void in the discourse (Yeşilyurt, 2017), using qualitative research methods to investigate the artistic issues in Türkiye across Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir and interviewing a variety of artists spanning from carpet weavers, jewellery makers, calligraphers, ceramic artists, painters, book binders, shop keepers and gallery owners.

The interviews reflected a range of opinions that were interconnected. The first subtheme, tradition and contemporary art making practices: while these two variables are often framed in opposition, our findings reveal the cohesion of tradition and modernity, as tradition can only endure through modernisation. Tradition therefore is not a stagnant concept but an evolving one, which needs to be passed down and actively mobilised to exist within today's world. This cohesion between tradition and modernity tied into another subtheme, the struggles of being an artist. The main struggle identified was the educational system at all levels, including university level, in addition to other related factors such as the gallery culture. These systems were found not to support artists, which means many artists struggle with financial pressures without adequate support. Additionally, the economic pressures and effects of commodification was another subtheme outlined. There was a variation in responses, reflecting the complexity of commodification on artists. On the one hand, some artists suggested that as a means of survival, they are forced to create art that lacks meaning and purpose due to the economic pressures. On the other hand, despite financial instability, some artists still focused on making art that reflected their identity, had political meanings and was driven by a deep-seated passion for art. This relates to the final subtheme, politics, identity and expression. The artists identified art as having a deeper meaning beyond profit, to express messages they may not be able to express with words.

Literature Review

Turkish artists today face a variety of challenges, from making sense of personal identity to navigating an ever-shifting institutional and economic environment. What exactly are these challenges, and how have artists in Türkiye responded to them? The literature review aims to provide deeper insight into these questions.

The Historical Battle for Cultural Hegemony: A Brief Chronology

One key paradigm informs Türkiye's institutional and economic constraints in the arts and culture industry: the rise of a right-leaning religious fundamentalist, neoliberal economic agenda against a left-leaning secular, Kemalist establishment. Jean-François Polo divides this development into three periods: the state-building era from 1923 to 1970, the turn toward neoliberalism during the 1970s and 80s, and the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rise to power since 2002 (Girard et al., 2018).

The Kemalist establishment was a product of the Turkish state-building era following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, a multi-ethnic and religious state deeply tied to Islam. It was spearheaded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who sought radical reform to construct a new Turkish national identity that associated itself with “Western Civilisation” and ancient, ethnic roots. In their place, institutions such as the Turkish History Society and Turkish Language Society were established, which constructed a narrative of ethnic Turks’ ancient roots (Girard et al., 2018). This established the state-established Kemalist orthodoxy which dominated Turkish cultural policy until the late 20th century.

The turn toward neoliberal economic policy in the 1980s coincides with Islam’s gradual return to political discourse in opposition to Kemalism. The latter came in the form of Prime Minister Turgut Özal’s “Turco-Islamic Synthesis”, which directed government policy following a period of government instability throughout the 1970s: while the secular Turkish identity was maintained, Sunni Islam would become a significant component in Turkish society and national identity. Moreover, an alternate view of the state-building era emerged: Kemalism was an unjust top-down imposition of an elitist, imagined Turkish identity from the centre (Istanbul, Ankara) to the culturally pluralistic, economically left-behind periphery that did not identify with “Turkishness” (Aksoy & Robins, 1997; Du Gay & Hall, 2011; Yaren et al., 2021). Throughout the 1990s, Turkish armed forces fought against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and the secular intelligentsia were purged, leading some scholars to remark that public discussions of the 1990s were characterised by a palpable loss of political sensibility (Uzun, 2009).

Meanwhile, Özal sought to align Türkiye’s historically state-centred economic policy with neoliberalism throughout the 1980s, where cultural policy was considered the “human” dimension of economic development. For instance, the Eczacıbaşı family played an increasingly important role in the cultural sector through their founding of the Istanbul Art and Culture Foundation (IKSV), which has held a classical music festival in 1973 and a contemporary art biennale (large-scale art exhibition) in 1987 (Girard et al., 2018). Additionally, an increased European interest in “third-world countries” within cultural institutions was evident throughout the 1990s, which attracted many overseas Turkish artists to contribute to the burgeoning international art scene (Uzun, 2009). These cultural initiatives gradually shifted the state’s role in the cultural sphere away from a “producer” to “facilitator” and “regulator”.

In 2013, the Gezi Park Protests ensued following the government unveiling plans to reconstruct a 19th century Ottoman barrack and shopping mall in Gezi Park (Girard et al., 2018), and a coup cemented a neoliberal, authoritarian turn in recent years. Whilst the justification provided for further privatisation was to allow an artistic platform for previously repressed conservative identities, other scholars argue that the free market is merely a pretence to further AKP’s authoritarian prerogative toward Islamic fundamentalism (Aksoy & Şeyben, 2015; Reubens, 2024). At the same time, however, it is important to note that the aforementioned conservative camp is not monolithic: a study has demonstrated the various areas of conflict within Islamic fundamentalist artists and their theoretically supportive state institutions, which qualifies the narrative of a simple right vs. left culture war (Yaren & Karademir, 2024).

Hence, it is clear that artists in Türkiye have been situated within shifting ideological and economic paradigms. How, then, do artists respond to them? The following sections will outline sub-themes delineating some specific challenges artists face, which will be explored in further detail later in the paper.

Political Expression

Due to the AKP’s authoritarian turn, many artists who feel unsafe expressing their ideas in Turkish institutional settings decided to base their operations outside Türkiye, often in

Germany: Niepel's study of Turkish artists in Berlin demonstrate this through her interviews with independent Turkish artists (Niepel, 2024).

For artists who had not emigrated, they have found various organisations and actions as avenues for political expression. Through interviews with different artists and institutional stakeholders in small networks, Uzun's study notes the rise in independent arts initiatives run by artists that propose an alternative to the Kemalists' and Conservatives' battle for cultural hegemony. Particularly, these initiatives instead position themselves as a platform for alternative conversations to take place. For instance, whilst the Hafriyat initiative in Karakoy has denounced Kemalism through its Fear of God exhibition, they have also sought to move art outside neoliberal institutions through its independent nature, allowing a platform for artists' messages on topics including gender or ethnic identity without fear (Uzun, 2009). Despite the tense political climate following the Gezi Park protests, independent artist initiatives have also utilised the act of walking as an artistic avenue for activism against the trend of state-sanctioned megaprojects. In response to the state's plans to construct the Istanbul Canal alongside the Bosphorus strait, Taycan's Between Two Seas walk brought the viewer through the ecological and human diversity in the land to be cleared for the canal, subverting the state narrative that the canal was simply the development of unused, empty land (Türeli & Al, 2018).

Economic Struggles: Livelihoods

Beyond the state's challenge to artists' ability to express themselves, artists also navigate challenging economic realities: how does the economic climate, underpinned by political and cultural institutions, affect artists' individual expression?

Answers to this question have been explored in the music sphere, which conclude that in lieu of the state's withdrawal from the cultural sector, private institutions' support structures for developing artists remain inadequate, especially when compared to other countries. One comparative study between musicians in Paris and Istanbul remark that Türkiye fails to enforce their labour protection regulations adequately. This leaves them in worse positions compared to their French counterparts who can rely on a relatively stable income via welfare programmes (Peksan, 2025). Another case study also points out the failure of a private sector programme (ÇSV) to support talented musicians' education: while they were helpful, they were also unable to consistently produce successful musicians. They lacked a developed management or mentor structure which could guide them to successfully increase their visibility as musicians (Çoruk, 2020).

Economic Struggles: Commodification, "Tradition" and "Modernity"

In light of neoliberalism, the forces of industrialisation and global art markets are one of the main pressures that independent artists face today. This compounds the difficulty artists face in supporting themselves, especially when market tastes do not align with work from independent artisans who have inherited old art forms. Coupled with an often-unstable financial situation, how do Turkish artists balance the need for income with the opportunity to impart their own thoughts and expressions into their art?

The literature suggests that the dichotomy may not be so pronounced. Particularly, Glassie's ethnography of Turkish artists finds that business does remain possible despite the advent of machine-woven carpets: one carpet dealer, Lüftü Bayhan, maintains that the best carpets continue to be those woven by people, each containing the weaver's personalities. He also continues to give weavers artistic freedom in their colour choice. This also supports the idea that despite art's nature as a commodity, this does not necessitate the loss of personal fulfilment (Glassie, 1993).

This dichotomy is further complicated by various connotations that “tradition” and “modernity” carry in the Turkish context: besides the proliferation of machine-made commodities, “modernity” can also refer to the ideas of Kemalist modernisation set against the religious fundamentalists. One study of Alevi Turks demonstrates the ambiguity of such a categorisation: (Gelenek, Töre) and “modernity” (Cağdaşlık, Muasır) emerge as ambiguous and strategic categories rather than fixed definitions. Alevi invoke “tradition” to assert cultural continuity and difference, while claiming “modernity” to align with secularism and democratic ideals. Hence, tradition and modernity in Turkey are less clear-cut cultural realities than politicised tools mobilised in specific contexts (Erdemir, 2005).

Data & Methods

Research Method

For this project, twenty interviews were arranged in various locations across Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. We decided qualitative research methods offer a more effective approach for investigating artistic issues in Turkey. The decision to use interviews, rather than surveys or other quantitative methods, was rooted in the aim of the project: to access in-depth accounts of identity, cultural expression, and economic pressures. According to the methodology workshop, qualitative interviewing is a ‘conversation with a purpose’ that enables participants to articulate meanings and feelings in their own words. This approach was appropriate given that the research questions were exploratory in nature, seeking to understand how artists interpret their roles in relation to tradition, modernity, politics and commodification.

For the fieldwork, we specifically used semi-structured interviews. Doing so allowed us to focus on the needs of the research (to explore how artists navigate tradition versus modernity, economic pressures, and political identity expression in contemporary Turkey) and at the same time be prepared to address the unique needs of individuals. A small number of questions was developed to serve as a guide for the interviews, and during the course of their execution, the respondents were allowed to address any matters they considered to be of the utmost importance. For example, if during the interview a craftsman mentioned an issue related to state regulation or the economic expansion of tourism, interviewers would ask them for detailed explanations using visual aids like maps, brochures, and music. Visual aids helped participants express complex relationships difficult to articulate verbally - maps clarified geographical impacts, brochures revealed commercialisation tensions, and music prompted heritage discussions. This region-oriented research approach allowed us to identify previously undervalued factors. For example, Istanbul artists highlighted gentrification pressures on traditional crafts, whilst Ankara participants emphasised state censorship concerns, and Izmir artists focused on tensions between international market demands and cultural authenticity. Each interview began with obtaining informed consent, ensuring participants understood their anonymity would be protected and they could withdraw at any time.

Transcription

With the close of the fieldwork, the interviews were transcribed, and the transcriptions were created after in a predominantly verbatim manner to minimize any loss in the voices of the participants and the loss of meaning of what they said. As elaborated on in the workshop, transcription presents a challenge in crafting an entirely meaning and interpretation-free product, as transcribers are forced to interpret nuances in meaning during the speech, enforced pauses, and speech elements that are stressed. We tackled this by double-checking our work - whenever a transcriber was unsure about how to represent something like a long pause or emphasised word, they flagged it for discussion with another team member. This happened in roughly one-third of our interviews, and these conversations helped us develop clearer guidelines as we went along.

Data Coding

Having been transcribed, data was coded systematically. Coding involved developing brief labels to label recurring ideas and experiences, moving from initial descriptive codes to more elaborate and interpretive categories. The process started with open coding, identifying patterns throughout the transcripts without preconceiving a tight framework. These then merged into more specialized codes, which eventually solidified into four key subthemes: (1) tradition vs. modernity, (2) the challenges of being an artist in Turkey, (3) economic pressure, and (4) politics, identity, and expression.

Analytical strategy

The choice of using thematic analysis was deliberate. Thematic analysis is optimally suited to the subjective interpretation of qualitative data through systematic categorisation into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Subjective interpretation was optimal for understanding how Turkish artists themselves made sense of their experiences with tradition, modernity, and economic pressures, allowing us to capture their own meaning-making processes rather than imposing external analytical frameworks. Compared to content analysis, with its more deductive and quantitative methodology, thematic analysis was better suited to the recovery of layered meanings and tensions expressed by the artists.

Results & Discussion

Tradition and Modernity

Collected data and transcripts highlighted the recurrent use of the terms “tradition” and “modernity” in participants’ interviews. Upon closer analysis, it became clear that participants employed “modern” and “modernity” to describe current practices and methods of art production, often using “modern” interchangeably with “contemporary.” This distinction surfaced most clearly when participants described the tension between honouring traditional methods and adapting to contemporary conventions.

For instance, one carpet shop owner in Istanbul explained that machine-made carpets, purchased primarily as decorative props for households, are in much higher demand than hand-woven silk carpets, which are more often displayed on walls as art pieces (Art Carpet interview). He reflected on the “olden times,” when even the more expensive double-knotted silk carpets were affordable. In contrast, over the past fifty years, rising prices and decreasing affordability have drastically reduced the sales of hand-woven carpets.

Another shop owner recounted the high annual costs of employing skilled weavers, procuring silk, and absorbing the opportunity costs inherent in traditional carpet production. He explained that weaving an intricately designed silk carpet can take more than a year, and despite his preference for selling only traditional pieces, production has been significantly scaled back due to persistently low demand in Istanbul (Türkiye Rugs Interview). The weaver herself acknowledged that while she often creates patterns that appeal to her own aesthetic, she has, on occasion, modified designs to satisfy customer preferences.

These accounts resonate with broader scholarship on Türkiye’s art market. Özatalay and Örnek (2017) argue that over the past two decades Istanbul has shifted away from traditional methods and institutional models toward a contemporary art scene increasingly driven by sales. This shift has fostered new market logics that privilege replicable, ornamental, and marketable objects over labor-intensive, tradition-bound works. Such pressures explain why demand in shops is dominated by machine-made carpets and consumer-friendly designs, while hand-woven silk carpets, once affordable and treasured as works of art, are now economically marginal. The narratives of shop owners and weavers thus reflect the structural transformations noted in Özatalay and Örnek’s (2017) article: the commodification of Türkiye’s

visual culture is actively reshaping what can be produced, sold, and even what is or can be recognized as art.

Alternatively, artists have also described tradition as a refusal to “let go” of their cultural heritage. Many artisans we interviewed presented their creations as a means of preservation. Craft is positioned as resistance to cultural erasure under the emergence of modern industrial methods of art creation. A Kazaziye jewelry maker characterized each hand-tied silver knot as “a refusal to let go of our heritage” (Kazaziye interview). A felt artist similarly saw tradition as feminist resistance, in which the gendered rejection of women's labor and capitalist mass production were both contested by laborious, handmade labor (Felt artist interview). Through its political re-signification, tradition in this context takes on a new meaning associated with cultural heritage represented in art. Tradition, then, is not just the inheritance of methods in art, like hand-weaving, but is also a contested space, reinterpreted by artists negotiating between cultural preservation and commodification.

Struggles of Being an Artist in Türkiye

Though there is tension between practitioners of traditional and non-traditional forms of art in Türkiye, the common denominator between them is the struggle to maintain an artistic living. The country's gallery culture and educational system are causal factors of this.

The battle for many aspiring artists starts in Türkiye's educational system. “The education system doesn't really support the arts at all,” one gallery assistant clarified. “Its very much aligned to science and mathematics” (Gallery Assistant interview). Students that pursue art often do so against social and financial odds due to this lack of institutional attention, with families usually guiding them toward more stable careers. This was echoed by a Hacettepe University student who noted that “it is difficult to survive just on an artist's income after graduation. In Türkiye, artists often need to work other jobs as well” (Exhibition interview).

These difficulties are exacerbated by financial constraints. Students in Türkiye encounter less exposure and fewer public opportunities to engage with art, in contrast to countries with dense networks of galleries and museums (Ankara artist interview). Additionally, university costs for art are notably exorbitant. “In some countries, children grow up with access to many galleries and museums, but here it's not the same,” as one gallery employee observed (Art Gallery interview). A vicious cycle results from this: fewer artists get professional recognition due to a lackluster educational system, which furthers institutional indifference and public disinterest. Thus lack of an educational support becomes a systemic struggle to be an artist in Türkiye.

Furthermore, Türkiye's gallery culture, which many artists characterize as exclusive and profit-driven, is another systemic struggle for new artists. Istanbul has become the focal point of Türkiye's art scene since the 1990s due to the emergence of banks and private enterprises as major financiers (Ankara artist interview). However, younger or less well-known artists have also been left out of this concentration, since they struggle to get into markets that are controlled by well-known artists and affluent collectors. “Many galleries closed [in the last ten years], and the ones that survived mostly worked with established, well-known artists,” one artist noted. Today, finding a venue is significantly more difficult for young artists (Art Unite-2 interview).

These patterns resonate beyond Türkiye. Scholars of global art markets note that gallery cultures in cities like Beijing, Delhi, and London similarly cater to established artists and wealthy collectors, leaving newer artists with limited access to exhibition and gallery opportunities (Velthuis & Baia Curioni, 2015). McRobbie (2016) frames this dynamic as part of a broader art economy where artists are celebrated symbolically but struggle materially, as market and entry exclusivity define gallery culture worldwide.

Thus, the struggles faced by artists in Türkiye are not merely the result of personal adversity; they are a reflection of systemic educational disparities and a gallery system that values

connections and money over creativity. When combined, these factors make it difficult for artists to survive, pushing many of them to make concessions or rely on outside funding.

Economic Pressures and Commodification

Economic pressures and commodification were a recurring theme throughout the interviews as a concern for many artists and an area of contention which impacts their art. Artists highlighted how difficult it was to earn a living from their art. The time and effort embedded into their art isn't often translated into fair financial compensation. The economic pressures often force artists to create commercially driven, less meaningful pieces, not because they want to but as a means of survival. A Kurdish artist contrasted his expectations and his present realities of his sign-making days. He had no expectation of making money from his art and was focused on the meaning and purpose of his paintings "reflecting our people, our way of life (Kurdish Painter interview)." However, when financial struggles kick in "you're forced to create work that lacks meaning – just to make money." Similarly, other artists adapt to the economic pressures not necessarily by commercialising their work but having to get extra jobs as source of living and pursuing art because it is their passion. This sentiment is shared by a Turkish artist and art student who said: "Turkish artists is not just an artist... they work (other) jobs (Exhibition-2 interview)," a situation which affects artists globally (Zhang, 2021).

Additionally, we found there was a tension between art being a passion project and having to use it to stay afloat in the economy. A ceramic artist in Türkiye, despite the country's worsening economic conditions, rising inflation and few customers, continues to practice out of love for the art, despite worrying about the sustainability of her business. She says, "If I were doing it for money, I would've had to shut down already (Pottery and Ceramic Interview)." And she remains hopeful saying "I believe things will change (Pottery and Ceramic Interview)." Many artists shared a similar sentiment to her, remaining defiant amidst the economic pressures.

Also, a felt artist said, "I need to earn, yes. But I also love what I do. When someone wears my work in another country (Felt artist interview)", and says, "This is Turkish art"—my heart swells. That's more than profit. That's legacy (Felt artist interview)." The variation in artists' reactions to the economic pressures is true to the complexities of the wider literature. The tourism and commodification nexus promotes both cultural homogeneity where there is a loss of authenticity and cultural diversity due to economic pressures. However, there is simultaneously an increasing sentiment within artists to defy the demands of commodification, despite the potential economic costs. This is supported by several researchers who believe the interaction between tourists and local people generates "cultural self-consciousness and drives them to get proud of their own culture (Finn, 2009)." This contrast highlights the importance of acknowledging the reaction to the economic pressure is experienced not just on a national level but on an individual level making it relative and complex, substantiating the variation in artists' responses (Coşkun, 2021).

Politics, Identity and Expression

Lastly, the collected data highlights the artists' conviction in their art through an underlying subtheme of politics, identity, and expression. Art is used as a medium for artists to express messages that they may not be able to say with words both subtly and directly, when "traditional avenues of dissent are denied" (Johnson, 2025). This includes drawing attention to the hardships such as the effects of inflation, hunger and uncertainty without direct slogans or statements. Moreover, art is a quiet but powerful form of resistance or national pride. For example, a lot of artwork features national symbols like flags, calligraphy and portraits of Atatürk who has divided opinions as the founder of modern Türkiye who ended the empire and brought secularism. Similarly, there is a lot of artwork of Erdoğan who the ceramic artist described as a "polarising figure. He (Erdoğan) gets around 50% of the vote. He's built many

roads, airports, hospitals. But some people fear the increasing role of religion in politics (Art shop keeper interview).” Art therefore reflects these political tensions.

In addition, politics, identity and expression are infused within traditional art and its politicisation. A traditional jewellery maker highlights how Kazaziye symbolises a resistance to the fast world we live in. Art becomes a form of protest in a world that tries to force culture to “modernise at the cost of its soul (Traditional jeweller interview).” It could be seen as a way of challenging “Orientalist stereotypes (Traditional jeweller interview).” As Lewis said Turkish art which has traditionally been seen as “subaltern” and “spoken for” is instead “deliberately articulating their own cultural inscriptions, thus demonstrating the West was never the... owner of meaning about the Orient (Lewis, 2012).” Lewis’ argument supports the sentiment of many of the artists interviewed who highlight that despite the effects of commodification and tourism, Turkish art is rooted in artist’s individual and authentic stories, Turkish history and their culture.

The importance of women-centred history and narratives was emphasised by female artists. Turkish art forms such as carpet weaving and jewellery making was a craft dominantly done by women and passed down from generation to generation. A modern jewellery maker said “this isn’t just about the fabric. It’s about memory (Modern jewellery maker interview).’ When she creates, she “honours the women who held this country together.”

A recurring theme was art as a political act of cultural and religious preservation. Art forms such as calligraphy can be a tool for reclaiming pride in language, names and faith in the face of Islamophobia and attempts of cultural erasure. As an Islamic calligraphy master said, “When you write “Ali” or “Abu Bakr (Islamic calligraphy master interview)” in thuluth script, you’re not just honouring the caliphs—you’re reminding people of their lineage, their history (Islamic calligraphy master interview).” This sentiment highlights how Turkish art combines devotion and identity where words such as Ali or Abu Bakr are not merely names but uphold and affirm religious and spiritual heritage.

Conclusion

This research has sought to examine the struggles, adaptations, and resistances of artists in Turkey by weaving together literature, empirical fieldwork, and thematic analysis. At its core, the study has shown that artistic expression in contemporary Turkey cannot be understood apart from the broader political, economic, and cultural conditions in which it is situated. Across Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, artists spoke of their craft as both livelihood and resistance, caught between tradition and contemporary tradition, survival and expression, commerce and authenticity. Their voices highlight the resilience of art as both a practice and a form of quiet dissent.

First, the tension between tradition and contemporary life emerged as a central theme. Far from being static opposites, artists repeatedly reframed tradition as something dynamic—adaptable and alive only when carried forward into contemporary practice. Carpet weavers and jewellery makers, for example, acknowledged the necessity of modern tools and designs to keep their crafts relevant, while simultaneously positioning their work as a refusal to let cultural heritage fade. In this sense, tradition becomes a site of negotiation, not loss: every silver knot or handwoven carpet signifies continuity in the face of rapid commodification and industrialisation

Second, the systemic struggles of being an artist in Turkey reveal how fragile the infrastructure supporting creative practice has become. Testimonies from students, gallery assistants, and shop owners pointed to an educational system that sidelines the arts in favour of science and mathematics, and a gallery culture that privileges wealth, established reputations, and institutional connections. These structural exclusions mean that many younger or less-established artists cannot secure the recognition or financial sustainability needed to continue their craft. This aligns with global critiques of art economies, where symbolic celebration

masks the material precarity of creative workers. In Turkey, however, these struggles are exacerbated by political polarisation and authoritarian cultural policies that narrow the spaces in which art can flourish.

Third, the economic pressures and commodification that frame artistic production are perhaps the most tangible challenges facing Turkish artists today. Whether Kurdish painters, ceramicists, or shopkeepers, interviewees consistently emphasised the difficulty of making a living from art. Some admitted to producing work tailored to consumer demand—commercially driven pieces stripped of personal or cultural meaning—while others maintained their focus on expression, even at the expense of financial survival. These dual responses underscore the ambivalence of commodification: on one hand, it threatens authenticity and reduces art to market logic; on the other, it can provide artists with exposure and resources that ensure survival. Yet even in this context, passion and purpose remain powerful motivators, with many continuing to create despite economic precarity.

Finally, art in Turkey retains a profound connection to “politics, identity, and expression”. From ceramicists embedding quiet protest into their clay, to jewellery makers framing heritage as resistance, to painters reflecting the daily lives of marginalised communities, art functions as an alternative language of dissent when speech is censored. This finding resonates strongly with the literature, which describes Turkish artists as simultaneously vulnerable to repression and uniquely positioned to critique power structures. In a climate where overt opposition can bring imprisonment or harassment, subtle symbolism and cultural memory become critical forms of resistance.

Taken together, reveal findings in this paper that the experience of being an artist in Turkey is marked by paradox. Tradition and contemporary life do not cancel one another but intertwine; art is both commodified and resistant to commodification; artists are constrained by systemic challenges yet continue to produce, teach, and innovate; politics suffuses creative practice, even when silenced into subtlety. These paradoxes do not represent contradiction but instead embody the complexity of Turkish artistic life.

This study offers insight by connecting existing theoretical accounts of commodification and authoritarianism in Turkey with the lived experiences of artists navigating these realities. By grounding the analysis in first-hand narratives, the research offers a textured understanding of how creativity persists amid constraint. Moreover, it highlights the importance of recognising art not merely as a product to be consumed but as a vital process of identity, resistance, and continuity.

Ultimately, the conclusion is one of resilience. Turkish artists — whether working in paint, clay, silver, or thread—demonstrate that art endures even in hostile environments. Their testimonies remind us that culture is not a static inheritance but a constantly renewed act of creation, one that both reflects and resists the political and economic forces of its time. In this way, the struggles of Turkish artists are not only national but universal: they speak to the ongoing global negotiation between creativity and commodification, heritage and modernity, survival and meaning.

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