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Sohbet

Revitalization of the Hizmet/Gülen Movement in Finland through Spiritual Gatherings

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Sohbet (conversation) is a weekly, informal, religious-learning gathering that has been conducted by members of the Islamic Hizmet/Gülen Movement since its inception. The movement was established in Turkey in 1966 by Fethullah Gülen and his followers. It has evolved into a transnational social movement through educational, dialogical, and humanitarian aid/entrepreneurial activities. The movement was held responsible by the Turkish government for the so-called coup attempt in 2016. Tens of thousands of members fled, and the movement's centre of gravity shifted from Turkey to the diaspora. This ethnographic research project addresses the transformations within the movement during the diaspora phase. Focusing on a female *sohbet* group in Helsinki, I investigate the participants' understandings of *sohbet* and how the *sohbet* has evolved since 2016. Thematic analysis reveals three predominant themes for understanding: socialization, belonging to a community, and a quest for piety. This article illustrates that *sohbet* is a space for religious learning, social interactions, and affirming a shared identity that shapes the *hizmet* habitus. Furthermore, *sohbet* revitalized the *hizmet* habitus following the forced migration. This study contributes to the existing literature on the *sohbet* by investigating it post-migration. Simultaneously, it contributes to studies on religious movements and how migration affects them.

Introduction

In the past twenty years, numerous studies have explored the transnational Islamic Gülen movement, covering such diverse topics as education and religious practices (Çelik, Leman and Steenbrink 2015; Marty 2015). Empirical research has been conducted on the movement in Turkey (Jassal 2014) an opportunity emerges to explore how Islamic knowledge is transmitted through the discursive practice of pious reading circles known in Turkish as *sohbet* (conversation) (Rausch 2008). However, studies notably decreased after 2016 when the Turkish government associated the movement with the alleged coup attempt on 15 July that year. Following the 15 July events, movement members were arrested in Turkey, while tens of thousands sought asylum abroad, shifting the movement's focus and prompting new research on its impact. I conducted ethnographic research on a female *sohbet* (weekly spiritual gathering) group in Helsinki, exploring the participants' perspectives on *sohbet* and *sohbet*'s post-migration evolution. Since the research participants refer to the movement as the "Hizmet (Service) Movement" (HM) and themselves as "volunteers", I use this terminology as well. This article shows how participants use *sohbet* for religious learning and social interaction and to affirm a shared identity, shaping the *hizmet* habitus and reinventing it in the context of migration.

Since HM's founding in 1966 by Fethullah Gülen and his followers, *sohbets* have played an important role (Ebaugh 2010) and given rise to numerous studies. *Sohbet* has primarily been studied through the lens of ethnographic research. The studies reveal that *sohbet* serves three primary functions: supporting spiritual growth (Rausch 2008) / religious learning (Dohrn 2014), socialization (Sametoğlu 2015), and building/fostering a community (Geier et al. 2019; Jassal 2014). *Sohbet* is a pedagogical tool (Geier et al. 2019) for transferring HM's values and certain dispositions through consistent practice (Vicini 2020). Previous studies have found that the purposes of *sohbet* are to establish an "Islamic way of life" (Jassal 2014, 203), to foster a "Gülen-defined Islamic habitus" (Ahmed 2013, 8), to serve as "informal educational practices" (Geier et al. 2019, 406), and to promote "religious subject formation" (Dohrn 2014, 252). However, only limited research has been done on *sohbet* since 2016 (Geier et al. 2019; Sunier 2024), and the past studies have not researched the changes resulting from forced migration. This article demonstrates the structure and functions of *sohbet* in the Finnish setting among HM volunteers who migrated after 2016. It contributes to the existing *sohbet* literature by showing how *sohbet* has evolved since the forced migration.

The article has four main sections. The first reviews the history of *sohbet* and the literature on it. The second section explains how the concept of habitus is utilized as an analytical framework throughout this study. The third outlines the ethnographic methodology and focuses on HM in Finland. The final section analyses the participants' views on *sohbet* using a thematic approach. I examine the participants' understandings of *hizmet* and *sohbet*. I then shed light on the migration's impact on *sohbets* in Finland.

Sohbet and the Hizmet Movement

The concept of *sohbet* in HM stems from the Sufi tradition. *Sohbet*, deriving from the Arabic world *suhba* (companionship), means "conversation" in Turkish, and it is linked to the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (Vicini 2020; Jassal 2014). Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, policies and reforms have taken place within the framework of laicism, later referred to as Kemalism, named for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the republic. Atatürk, by adopting French laicism, excluded Islamic principles from the newly established state ideology and confined them to the realm of private life, thus authorizing the state to employ initiatives and sanctions targeting Islamic practices. For instance, the state banned some religious communities, and religious affairs were monopolized by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanliği), a state institution created as part of the new order. After the Democratic Party came to power in 1950, the practice of Islam was allowed to some extent (Ebaugh 2009). The Nur Movement played a role in reviving *sohbets*, led by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876–1960), a Turkish Islamic scholar and author of *Risale-i Nur* (1926–49, The Epistles of Light). He interpreted the Quran through science and reason by focusing on faith in his works. His emphasis on science, particularly his belief in the harmony between religious and natural sciences, has profoundly shaped Gülen's ideas and teachings. The significance of *sohbets* grew within the context of HM (Vicini 2020; Jassal 2014).

In 1966, Gülen became both the administrator of a dormitory for students studying the Quran and administrator of a mosque in Kestanapazarı, in Izmir, Turkey, which laid the foundations for HM. Gülen's followers joined him from the beginning and

worked together with him to shape the HM process. The movement is deeply rooted in Islam, prioritizes education, entrepreneurship, humanitarian aid, and dialogue to address societal problems like ignorance, poverty, and hostility (Ebaugh 2010). It expanded nationally through educational institutions and gained global influence in 180 countries (Pahl 2019). In Europe, it began with the Akyazili Foundation in Rotterdam and spread from there. Not all participants are volunteers, and some only benefit from the movement's services (Van Bruinessen 2014). Gülen draws inspiration from various Islamic sects, especially Sufism-influenced Sunni-Hanafi Islam, which draws from the Anatolian-Ottoman tradition, Western classics, and philosophy (Saritoprak 2015). Gülen's philosophy emphasizes harmonizing knowledge and practice, termed "activist pietism" (Sunier and Şahin 2015, 229). The core *hizmet* concept, meaning service, is central to the movement's philosophy and the volunteers' motivation. Actions related to *hizmet* are driven by the desire to seek God's pleasure and serve humanity. Volunteers consider even small actions to be examples of *hizmet* if the acts are beneficial for others or humanity (Rausch 2008).

HM volunteers start by forming small *sohbet* groups in new cities or countries, which eventually grow into communities (Toğuşlu 2015). *Sohbets* differ from other Muslim community circles in certain key aspects. For instance, since the *sohbets* take place in smaller groups in private places rather than a mosque congregation, it is easier to establish a sense of community (Geier et al. 2019). Various *sohbet* groups form based on changing needs arising from age, marital status, profession, and educational background (Rausch 2008). Gender segregation characterizes *sohbet* groups, not so much because men exclude women, but because women choose to hold separate discussions because of diverse interests (Ebaugh 2010). The leader/facilitator, referred to as *abi* (elder brother) or *abla* (elder sister) (Geier et al. 2019), does not need a formal religious education. However, their experience with, commitment to, or knowledge of HM is deeper than that of others. It allows for a hierarchical structure in the group (Sunier 2024). Their role is not limited only to *sohbets*; they are expected to lead by example, living as an ideal Muslim in a way that inspires creation of the *golden generation* (*altın nesil*). From the 1970s, Gülen described the golden generation as those capable of integrating religious and secular sciences. This generation comprises Muslims who live not only for themselves but also for others, accurately representing (*temsil*, meaning example/role model) Islamic values through *hizmet* (Vicini 2020). In *sohbets*, the most frequently cited examples of an ideal life are drawn from the lives of the Prophet and his companions. Thus, integrating theory and practice facilitates the application of acquired knowledge in daily life (Yavuz 2013). *Sohbets* mostly follow a consistent structure: Quran recitation, prayers, reading Gülen's and Said Nursi's books, listening/watching to Gülen's sermons, and HM project discussions. Sessions end with social interaction (Alam 2019; Pahl 2019). Thijl Sunier and Mehmet Şahin (2015) and Sunier (2024) report *weeping* inspired by Gülen's sermons as a ritual/part of a *sohbet*.

When examining existing literature on *sohbets*, three main functions emerge: supporting spiritual growth/religious learning, socialization, and building/fostering a community. First, *sohbets* generally serve as spaces for religious learning (Dohrn 2014) and as support mechanisms for those struggling spiritually while engaging in worldly affairs (Rausch 2008). Second, *sohbet*

provides volunteers a platform to socialize with like-minded individuals (Sametoğlu 2015) while building a network for social interaction and sharing of ideas (Ebaugh and Koc 2007). Joshua Hendrick (2013) describes HM's educational institutions and *sohbets* as two ways to find employees for HM institutions. *Sohbet* provides a network that connects participants in the same group and those living in different cities or countries. The final function is creating community awareness within HM. It serves as a platform for identifying overall goals and values, aligning them with the principle of *hizmet*, which entails contributing to the welfare of others. In this regard, it serves as a pedagogical tool (Geier et al. 2019). Moreover, by following the same pattern in gatherings (Sunier and Şahin 2015), *sohbets* have also been considered a tool or space for creating habitus and a strong sense of identity (Jassal 2014; Vicini 2020; Ahmed 2013). This topic will be further elaborated in the next section.

Some scholars have criticized *sohbets*, however. Hakan Yavuz (2013) argues that the practice of relying on the same sources and patterns in *sohbets* may limit critical thinking and prevent individuals from independent thinking. HM-affiliated schools in Europe and various organized events exhibit a secular structure, while volunteers or sympathizers utilize *sohbet* for religious learning, spiritual nurturing and maintaining their connection with the movement (Van Bruinessen 2014). According to David Tittensor (2014), HM's main aim of providing a secular education, together with *sohbets*, is to demonstrate that modern Muslims can adapt without compromising their faith. However, this effort at making a secular and religious distinction has led some groups to perceive HM as having a hidden agenda (Van Bruinessen 2014). There have been instances where concerns have been raised regarding the political inclinations of HM, as well as its strategic approach towards engaging with its supporters, especially in the aftermath of the 9/11 incident (Tee 2021). While Hendrick (2013) describes the movement's opacity and the differences between discourse and practice as "strategic ambiguity" (p. 58), Simon P. Watmough and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (2018) further characterize the movement and its activities as having parapolitical attributes. Since 2016, in response to increased criticism about transparency, *sohbet* groups in some countries have become officially institutionalized. The Sohbet Society in London, which opens its doors to all Muslims, can be cited as an example in this regard (Weller 2022). My research yielded similar findings on volunteers' understandings of the functions of *sohbet*. However, this article focuses more on how *sohbet* has functioned in Finland since 2016 as a result of post-migration changes.

Habitus

The term *habitus* is extensively used in diverse fields of the social sciences. Pierre Bourdieu (1990) argued that people develop habits based on their lifestyle and experiences without requiring strict rules or a central structure. Over time, these habits create a habitus, which incorporates dispositions that influence how individuals think and behave. Bourdieu describes this process as a natural development rather than a conscious one. The concept of habitus has been used to study religious communities as well. For instance, Helena Kupari's (2016) research on Finnish Orthodox Christian women of Karelian origin uses habitus to explore their practices. She has examined how religious experiences become habitus, considering especially the role of religious discourse

and structures with respect to beliefs. She found that women's practices evolved over time. She introduced the notion of "lifelong religion" (p. 7) to encompass such changes in habitus formation. Additionally, she demonstrated how women's current practices reflect their underlying habitus.

Saba Mahmood's (2005) ethnographic study of the women's mosque movement in Egypt favours Aristotle's perspective of habitus over Bourdieu's, unlike Kupari. Mahmood argues that Bourdieu views habitus as an unconscious process, ignoring how habitus is learned. Also, his perspective lacks a pedagogical and ethical dimension. Mahmood's research findings challenge his view of the term. Participants in her study engaged in intentional moral training, in contrast with Bourdieu's idea of automatic assimilation. The Aristotelian model emphasizes the importance of self-directed actions for a rooted mindset, involving both conscious and unconscious facets of a person's character. Aristotle argued that habitus develops through a repetition of practice until it has a lasting impact on an individual's character. In other words, by repeatedly engaging in certain practices, a person's virtue can become ingrained in their disposition. The study conducted by Mahmood suggests that wearing a *hijab* helps cultivate the virtue of modesty through practice. Mahmood also demonstrates that a pious self serves as a type of agency. Her definition of agency extends beyond resistance and autonomy, including active participation in shaping subjectivities.

In her research, Smita Tewari Jassal (2014) has explored the attitudes and tendencies developed among female HM volunteers in Turkey through *sohbet*. Her work demonstrates how such women think and act in a particular way shaped by their involvement in *sohbet*. Jassal emphasizes Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which can create specific dispositions and steer individuals towards particular behavioural patterns. She bases her analysis on Mahmood's argument about agency, which goes beyond the idea of only a "subversive agency" (p. 190). Jassal shows how *sohbets* function as a place for social formation and identity creation. Practising what they learned through *sohbets* strengthens the women's identity in one particular "Islamic way" (p. 203) in their role as housewives and volunteers in the movement. Muhammed Ahmed (2013) describes *sohbet* as a crucial practice contributing to the formation of the Islamic habitus defined by Gülen in his ethnographic study of a male *sohbet* group in Turkey. In his argument, Ahmed draws upon the works of Bourdieu. Ahmed argues that *sohbet* differs from Mahmood's study of the piety of women of the mosque movement and Charles Hirschkind's (2006) study of the role of religious cassette sermons in the formation of piety among Egyptian taxi drivers. *Sohbet*, he argues, is rather a set of different rituals that include praying, listening to Gülen's sermons, and fellowship.

Fabio Vicini (2020) conducted extensive ethnographic research on two Islamic communities (Suffa and HM) strongly influenced by Said Nursi in Turkey. His work shows how the two communities utilize the reading of religious texts, especially, to revitalize and adapt Islam to the modern world. According to him, reading books by Said Nursi and Gülen can help develop "dispositions of a good character" (p. 181) like "patience, dedication, and self-sacrifice" (p. 156), which are essential to forming *hizmet*. Vicini agrees with Mahmood that Bourdieu's habitus definition does not focus enough on ethical concerns and principles. However, he criticizes how Mahmood and Hirschkind portray

Muslim life, emphasizing only repetition like Bourdieu, and overlooking the intellectual involvement tied to a series of practices. Their perspectives depict habitus as a constraining force that limits Muslim life to predetermined social structures, resulting in mechanical adherence to religious authority. While repetition is important, the individuals in this study embrace a Muslim way of life through "meditative reflection (*tafakkur* in Arabic, meaning to think)" (p. 115), which involves using reason to understand their place in the universe and has ethical and political consequences.

Given the range of discussion on the concept of habitus, this article uses Bourdieu's understanding of it to explain a lifestyle that generates specific dispositions. It also incorporates Mahmood's perspective regarding the learning process through which the dispositions are cultivated and the agency at play in such a process. However, I use the literature on *sohbet*, especially Vicini's work, to overcome the limitations of the habitus concept. My contribution is to show the transformation of a *sohbet* group consisting of participants already involved in HM who have long internalized its values.

Methodology

Data collection

This article is a part of my doctoral project that focuses on the effects of forced migration on HM in Finland. I conducted ethnographic research on one female *sohbet* group in Finland between August 2021 and August 2023. Research methods included participant observation, group discussions, WhatsApp messages, semi-structured interviews and asking brief individual questions before or after the *sohbets*, done with the permission of each participant. I also encountered participants in various settings, such as birthday parties and dinner invitations. I conducted interviews with seven of them separately outside the *sohbet* environment. I collected and analysed all the data in Turkish. I translated the themes derived from the analysis and the extracts used in the article into English. I provided consent forms, read them before each interview, and recorded the interviews. After transcription, I deleted the recordings and used pseudonyms, while removing any identifying information.

Researcher positionality

The definition of an insider researcher encompasses various layers and remains a highly debated concept. Despite being aware of the critical considerations and scepticism associated with it, I position myself as a "total insider" (Greene 2014, 2) in this study. I share with my interlocutors the same language, national background, traumatic experiences and membership in the movement. However, there are varying levels of volunteering among participants, with each level carrying different responsibilities and time commitments. I have categorized volunteering into three levels based on commitment to HM, role within the movement, and experiences. The first level consists of former employees of HM-affiliated institutions, such as schools and tutorial centres (*dershane*), and volunteers who held the position of *abi*/*abla*. People at this level have a degree of authority in the movement. The second level includes individuals who actively and regularly participate in such activities as *sohbets* and provide financial support without holding authoritative positions. The third level includes individuals who occasionally participate in and support HM, but not regularly. I position myself at the second level, where I do not have any authoritative power. Although I have considered myself a volunteer since I was born, during

my time in Turkey I merely participated in activities without assuming any inherent responsibility within the movement. Additionally, as a researcher my position and the respect accorded to this role in Turkish culture led to the spontaneous delineation of a boundary. I am aware of the advantages and challenges inherent in insider research. However, I have endeavoured to overcome the challenges by planning the research diligently (Forster 2012) and employing various methods, such as "debriefing" my research and findings on several occasions. The questions and feedback that I received after debriefing helped me review my research critically (Greene 2014, 8). The basis for my selection of this group for research stems from my prior inclusion as a participant since the group's formation four years ago. This allowed me to become closely acquainted with the participants, understand their sensitivities, and create a sense of trust and comfort among them with my presence. I consistently participated in the group's weekly sessions for two consecutive years. Having been acquainted with all the members since the group's inception four years ago, the participants interacted with me in a completely unreserved manner.

Profile of the group

Given the lack of prior research on HM in Finland, no academic sources detail its Finnish development. Thus, I draw insights from my data. Although the initial group of volunteers arrived in the early 2000s, their impact in Finland differed from other European countries. A limited number of cultural centres, dialogue venues, and a short-lived school were established in some cities. Yet, Finland's low percentage of Turkish immigrants curtailed participant engagement, pivotal for HM's European growth. High tax rates dissuaded Turkish businessmen from supporting the institutions, and Finland's esteemed education system deterred interest in HM schools. Since 15 July 2016, there has been a significant decline in volunteers and participants associated with HM. Only a few families who were in Finland before 2016 still maintain their relationship with HM. Currently, these families are inactive and avoid assuming responsibilities, only participating in certain activities. As a result, HM in Finland underwent a reconstruction process, primarily relying on volunteers who arrived after July 2016 as refugees. Unofficially, Fin Polar Kulttuurikeskus Ry (a registered HM-affiliated association) notes that approximately 1,500 volunteers, including adults and children, sought asylum in Finland after 2016. Ninety-five per cent of newcomers are highly skilled, and most were in the first level of volunteering in Turkey. Activities such as interfaith/intercultural dialogue, human rights activism, art, culture, information technology, literature, and mentoring continue within the working groups organized by Fin Polar. Meanwhile, *sohbets* continue in an informal setting, as in many other countries. While a few volunteers are responsible for transnational connections, the *sohbet* groups emerge organically within the local context. The predominant factor influencing the formation of such groups is volunteers' geographical proximity. Currently, around twenty women's *sohbet* groups exist in Finland. Considering the presence of only a few women's *sohbet* groups before 2016, the current number of groups can be recognized as highly significant.

The group studied consists of twelve women (two joined in the second year), led by an *abla*. Two of the women in this group live in a different city. They joined this group because they did not have enough participants to form a *sohbet* group in their city.

Despite regularly participating in the first year, they found it hard to attend the meetings in the second year because of the distance. One woman transferred to another group after a change in her responsibilities within the movement. The participants are all married with two or three children. All except one of them possess at least a bachelor's degree. Six participants are employed on a full-time basis, while one participant works part-time. Two participants are currently enrolled in vocational/language schools. Three are at home with their small children. The average age of the women in the group was approximately forty years. All the participants arrived in Finland after 2016 through refugee status or family reunification, apart from two. Notably, one participant, who predates 2016, is not classified as a refugee since she is not a Turkish citizen. The other came to Finland through her responsibilities at HM before 2016 but transitioned into refugee status because of her inability to return to Turkey owing to her affiliation with HM. If we exclude these two volunteers from the calculation, the average duration of the participants' stay in Finland has been four years. In terms of their relationship with the movement, all (except for two who joined the HM after their marriages) have either worked in HM-affiliated institutions or have held various roles within the movement. Therefore, most group members possess accumulated knowledge and have developed a sense of attachment to HM through their involvement with the movement since high school or middle school.

The group consists of twelve individuals, but the average weekly attendance is around six to seven participants, in view of the distance that some participants must travel to the location of the *sohbet*, illnesses, or having young children. The first year of research coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, and for a period of three to four months, when the number of Covid-19 cases was high, the *sohbet* sessions were conducted online via Zoom. The sessions were scheduled for one hour after the children had gone to sleep in the evening, which often resulted in about ten participants. When the *sohbet* sessions coincided with occasions like visiting a participant's newborn baby, all the participants were then able to attend. During the summer season, after a short break of two to three weeks, the *sohbets* were held in the form of picnics since the weather was pleasant and participants who come with their children prefer open spaces with more play areas. Additionally, two to three times a year, when spirituality-enhancing programmes like book readings are organized for all groups to participate, no regular *sohbet* session is scheduled. I describe *sohbet* as an interactive gathering in which participants actively engage by contributing their interpretations and questions, promoting active participation rather than passive reception.

Method of analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis, which is the most suitable method for my research as the data were collected in various ways (Nowell et al. 2017). Initially, I did not have predetermined questions. I applied the inductive method to mitigate potential biases because of my role as an insider researcher, ensuring an unbiased approach to the data. This allowed my previous knowledge and assumptions to take a back seat, enabling the data to guide the analytical process (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012). As the research continued, I formulated the questions. After collecting sufficient data, I manually analysed field notes to identify specific themes related to the participants' perspectives on *sohbet*. These themes included socialization,

belonging to a community, and a quest for piety. By comparing this data with previous literature on *sohbet* and the information provided by the participants, I was able to identify the changes that have occurred since forced migration. I conducted interviews in the second year of the research. Subsequently, upon comparing the themes with those derived from the interviews, I observed a convergence with respect to the overall themes. The data analysis addresses what *sohbet* means for the participants as well as their motivations for participating. In this regard, I first address how *sohbets* play a practical role in forming the *hizmet* habitus and what *hizmet* means. After discussing the volunteers' perspectives, I demonstrate the impact of migration on *sohbets*.

Analysis

"*Hizmet* is my life"

The data show that *sohbets* play a significant role in the inheritance of certain dispositions. Additionally, *sohbets* provide a practical way to integrate these dispositions into daily life. The participants did not begin their involvement in HM by directly reading one of Gülen's books or listening to his sermons. Initially, *hizmet* was introduced in practice through *sohbets* with the *ablas* or teachers, who serve as role models. Hence, I would like to begin by addressing the meaning of *hizmet* for the participants. When I asked what *hizmet* meant for Ece, who joined HM because of her classmates at the age of twelve, she said:

> The meaning of *hizmet* and its place in my life? Considering that I have been involved with *hizmet* from such a young age, I initially struggled to define it. It has become so integrated into my life, so ingrained in my experiences, that I felt the need to consider what *hizmet* truly is. However, I later realized that *hizmet* is my life. For me, *hizmet* is anything I do with the intention of earning Allah's pleasure. When it comes to the question of what I do to earn Allah's pleasure, firstly, I focus on cultivating myself to become a better person, a better servant to Allah, a good mother, a good daughter, a good citizen, and a good human being. This notion of goodness encompasses general morality, which means being virtuous, helpful, and tolerant, in line with widely accepted moral definitions, whether [applied] by individuals or universal standards.[1]

Ece was not the only participant who had to pause and consider just how best to define *hizmet*. Almost everyone struggled to respond immediately. Furthermore, even after providing an answer, they were still uncertain about their responses. This difficulty arose from the profound influence of *hizmet* on various aspects of their lives, ranging from daily actions to religious practices, making it challenging to articulate a precise definition. However, most perceive the activities they engage in for self-improvement as acts of *hizmet*. Some participants emphasized that even seemingly insignificant gestures in their daily lives, such as smiling at someone, can be considered acts of *hizmet*. The dispositions of being helpful and tolerant, as defined by Ece, are essential for her understanding of *hizmet*. This implies that if the dispositions overlap with the concept of *hizmet*, they are considered good.

Consequently, the *sohbets* take various forms, as the first encounter with HM

1 All excerpts of the interview material have been translated from Turkish to English by the author.

can differ significantly for a twelve-year-old child like Ece and Nilgun, who joined HM after getting married. For instance, those who became acquainted with *hizmet* during middle school stated that they had continued ever since being involved in HM, inspired by the pleasure they derived from reading books or listening to religious stories with their teachers or university students (*ablas*), sometimes while watching films or having meals together. They mentioned that initially, such activities were not labelled *sohbet*, but later they realized that the activities were indeed *sohbets*. Moreover, during this period they stated that they discovered many of the stories they were told were from the books of Said Nursi and Gülen.

During her middle-school years, Aleyna encountered *hizmet* through *sohbets* in HM-affiliated schools. However, after completing her first year of high school, she had to leave and attend a state school, severing her connection with HM. Nevertheless, from a young age she tried to continue her engagement with HM without knowing the actual meaning of *hizmet* or *sohbet* or having any information about Gülen. She decided to organize activities similar to those arranged by her former teachers in her new school to relive the feelings she had experienced there. When she began attending her new school, she requested a class with younger students to mentor them. She organized her small-scale *sohbet* group in that class, involving a group of girls from her year:

> I prepared a *çetele* [weekly spiritual to-do list] for them every week, and I presented them in several ways through drawings and paintings. I showed special interest in them. In the meantime, we subscribed to *Sızıntı* [a monthly HM publication in Turkey between 1979 and 2016]. I shared what I read in *Sızıntı* with the kids, but there was no *abla*, nothing. I simply did what I observed from my teachers there. You know, it is like I did not have any specific plans or goals. I did not have anything particular in mind. However, this automatic process just evolved, you know.

Aleyna loved and internalized the *hizmet* ideology at a deeply intense level, even without comprehending its full meaning. She created a personal space for herself, unrelated to HM institutions, in which she sought to relive the emotions that her former teachers had awakened in her. I wish to emphasize in this article that volunteers encounter *hizmet* in line with Gülen's definition of it. However, rather than merely being part of their lives, *hizmet* becomes their way of life. Many similarities can be readily observed, ranging from how they dress to how they behave. Even their sense of humour shows similarities, together with the similarity in their food choices. At times, one volunteer can finish a sentence that another has started. These similarities can be attributed to a shared culture and religion, but as they themselves stated, they can easily discern whether a Turk they encounter is affiliated with *hizmet* without even asking them. It is impossible to deny the existence of dispositions that influence one's behaviour and thoughts, as defined by Bourdieu (1990).

This way of life can be categorized as "a particular habitus of modern Islamic reality" (Jassal 2014, 207), as religious (Kupari 2016), or as a Gülen-defined habitus (Ahmed 2013). Volunteers, while learning and internalizing the concept of *hizmet* and implementing it through specific patterns, also develop distinctive methods and practices for experiencing *hizmet* in their

daily lives. As exemplified in the case of Aleyna, some volunteers had been unable to participate in *sohbets* and engage with HM for a certain period, and this detachment had sometimes extended to two to three years. However, during those periods they had continued to engage in *hizmet* by reproducing it in their own ways. At this juncture, we can characterize volunteers as active agents (Mahmood 2005) within the habitus and as active participants (Wenger 2009) in the learning process. However, the practices of *hizmet* change in different contexts, and different methods are reinvented to continue the *hizmet*. For instance, in the Finnish context, learning the Finnish language for integration purposes is considered a practice of *hizmet*. Hence, unlike Mahmood's research, my data show that the practices of *hizmet* are not limited to particular rituals or practices. This finding aligns with Ahmed's study (2013), but the practices extend beyond *sohbet*. Moreover, although it may seem to be entirely unconscious participation, especially for those who encounter *hizmet* and *sohbet* at a very young age, such participation emerges as a completely conscious decision in terms of their desire to continue a *hizmet*-oriented lifestyle and create practices that align with *hizmet*, even when alone. Therefore, I define this way of life as *hizmet habitus*.

The volunteers first encounter *hizmet* through practical engagement and live their lives with a *hizmet*-oriented focus, which encompasses all stages of their lives, including their families. For some participants, *sohbets* have served as a hub for continuously reproducing *hizmet* for over twenty to thirty years, through weekly engagement. Hence, I consider the *sohbets* as spaces for the theoretical learning and transmission of this type of lifestyle and as centres for practical instruction in embodying *hizmet*. It becomes evident that no learning stage is distinct from any of the others in the *sohbet* context. In this regard, my evidence is in accord with Etienne Wenger's (2009) argument that the components of learning – meaning, practice, community, and identity (p. 211) – are interconnected and interwoven. *Sohbet* became more important to produce *hizmet* practices since the participants began living in a completely different environment where they needed guidance to create *hizmet* practices suitable for the Finnish milieu. Moreover, the participants had different occasions to gather with other volunteers in Turkey. However, for most the *sohbet* is the only occasion when they gather and learn from each other in Finland.

"*Sohbet* is not such a simple word"

In this section, I discuss how the participants understand *sohbets* as well as their motivations for joining. However, I would like to begin by describing a typical *sohbet* session. The participants gather at one of their homes and communicate through messaging platforms like WhatsApp before *sohbets*. At the start of the gathering, sections from the Quran and *Cevşen*, a collection of prayers with God's names, are read. Gülen transmitted Cevşen to his followers, attributing its origin to Said Nursi. It is believed that the Archangel Gabriel (Cebrail) conveyed this prayer for protection and armour to the Prophet Muhammad during a war. The volunteers maintain the belief that the daily recitation of this prayer serves as a protective measure against a wide array of adversities, encompassing illness, bad intentions, and unforeseen accidents. The next set of readings is based on the week's topic, either from Said Nursi, Gülen, or various HM sources. One of the sources is Çağlayan, a journal that began publication on 1 April 2017. The journal covers such topics as religion and science,

volunteers' experiences with forced migration, and biographies of prominent volunteers within HM. Sometimes, participants listen to Gülen's sermons instead of reading and engage in collective discussions to better understand the notes they took while listening. Following the discussion, the *abla* communicates information about any decisions or activities to the group members, such as those related to Fin Polar or other HM-related issues/projects. This part of the gathering usually lasts for about one to one and a half hours, after which they drink tea, accompanied by treats provided by the host, and discuss various religious or worldly matters in a way that resembles a friendly gathering rather than a formal religious lesson. Following the socializing period, they perform their prayers. Daily prayer times change, so the time for prayer and the order of the *sohbet* change depending on the prayer time. After the prayers, the namaz *tesbihatı* (prayer beads) are collectively recited, as compiled by Said Nursi and adopted by his followers, serving as a form of *dhikr*[2] after prayers. The *sohbet* progression (Alam 2019; Pahl 2019), the informal structure of the gatherings and selecting a private location (Geier et al. 2019) are consistent with the previously mentioned studies on this subject. However, weeping (Sunier 2024; Sunier and Şahin 2015) or strong emotional scenes were not part of the *sohbet*.

Ece's characterization of the *sohbets*, "*sohbet* is not such a simple word", becomes the best explanation for *sohbet*. When I asked her to elaborate further, she explained that *sohbet* serves as a means for religious and social learning and bonding with like-minded individuals by meeting their spiritual needs and it plays a crucial role in creating social and professional networks. She firmly believes that *sohbets* have shaped a specific way of life for them focused on *hizmet*. Additionally, Ece divided her life into three stages: pre-university, university, and post-marriage; she highlighted that her expectations and needs related to *sohbet* have evolved during each stage. When examining the factors that motivate participation in a *sohbet* group, three main themes emerge: socialization, belonging to a community, and a quest for piety. The themes are consistent with previous research on *sohbet* groups. Each participant reflects on the three themes, but with different points of emphasis. I explain them starting from the most intense one.

Socialization typically begins during teatime, after the reading and discussion part of a *sohbet*. During one teatime, I asked the participants why they attend the *sohbets*. Nilgün, a mother of two children who joined HM after getting married, was the first to start talking. She mentioned that she does not regularly attend the *sohbets* because she has started working and sometimes the working hours do not align with the gatherings. Then, she talked about the guilt she feels because she has been unable to do something she should do, that is, regularly attend the *sohbets*, which she had previously been doing every week for years. She also mentioned feeling frustrated during the weeks she cannot attend the *sohbets* because she cannot be with her weekly friends. She even laughed while explaining how this frustration affects her household and how her husband motivates her to go to the *sohbets* by saying, "Go to a *sohbet*, you will relax". She then added that she tends to look at things from only one perspective, while during the *sohbets* she learns to see things from different perspectives by talking with her friends, which

2 Originating from Arabic, the word means remembrance of Allah and is used to praise and glorify Allah verbally.

greatly benefits her by broadening her horizons. The teatimes sometimes last longer than usual because the participants can speak Turkish with someone other than their family. The hours are used for conversations about various topics, ranging from finding additional resources for learning Finnish to discussing their children's difficulties in school and identifying *halal* products. As in Nilgün's case, many find these hours therapeutic, with the others acting as a peer support group where they can learn about daily life while enjoying their friendship. The importance placed on socialization aligns with Sametoğlu's (2015) study as well, which found socialization through *sohbets* is crucial for female high-school and university students in France and Germany and which emphasized the importance of engaging in various activities to support it.

Socialization fosters a sense of *belonging to the community* by connecting the participants with shared values and emotions, as discussed in previous research (Ebaugh and Koc 2007; Jassal 2014). Zehra, who had been in Finland before 2016 and joined HM through HM-affiliated schools during high school, said that other people often do not understand how she feels or what she thinks. She mentioned feeling good about attending the *sohbets* because the people involved have the same values and backgrounds:

> For me, *sohbets* and the friends I have here are extremely important. I have always been searching for an environment like this, because I could not find anyone among my friends, relatives, or neighbours who shared similar dreams or with whom I could discuss my aspirations. Whenever I shared my thoughts, they would look at me strangely, as if I were envisioning something utopian. They made me feel different from them, and I felt like a stranger among them. They could not understand me even if they were my relatives or friends. However, I have found my place within this circle of friends. They understand me; their values align with mine. That is why these friendships are crucial, as our goals and values are the same.

Zehra also joined a *sohbet* group in Finland before 2016. When I asked her if she had the same feelings, she immediately said no. She explained that those who came to Finland after 2016 more closely mirror her background: highly educated and wanting to pursue a profession while engaging in a *quest for piety*. This is because most of the participants who joined HM were influenced by their *ablas* or teachers, who served as role models for them and were educated, working, and religious women. When I asked Zehra if her aspirations were related to religious matters, she mentioned that the aspirations she shares with her friends in the *sohbets* encompass various aspects of daily life, ranging from religious topics to family life. During one *sohbet*, Zehra also had the following to say:

> But most of all, I find it spiritually fulfilling. We remind each other of our purpose in the world. I can read books alone at home, but I enjoy it more in the *sohbet* because it is done reflectively. Everything becomes more meaningful when done together. That's why doing something with the community is very important to me.

The perspectives of Zehra and Nilgün regarding *sohbet* were also reflected in the views of the other participants. It became evident that reading texts is not separated from engaging in discussions to learn

from others' interpretations. Although the sources of texts remain the same, each individual's understanding of the text and how they implement it in their daily lives differ. Hence, it is not sufficient to repeatedly read the same sources and follow the practices mechanically. This outcome confirms the importance of repetition, but it also emphasizes the role of intellectual discernment, as noted by Vicini (2020). The participants found the discussions intellectually engaging and enjoyable. Learning about how others apply the text in their daily lives in Finland made the *sohbets* more appealing. Therefore, *sohbets* are still gatherings where people come together to learn about religion, both theoretically and practically. As in the research conducted by Kristina Dohrn (2014) on teachers in Tanzania, religious texts are read and interpreted, and the information learned from them is applied in practical life. *Sohbets* also provide a nurturing environment for spiritual growth, as seen in Margaret Rausch's study (2008) of female participants in Kansas City.

Consequently, regardless of the degree of intensity, the three themes reflect common understandings, even though each has impacted various aspects of their lives differently. For instance, two decades ago, when accessing religious knowledge was difficult, pursuing religious knowledge and gratification was the foremost reason for participating. However, for all the participants except two, socializing and belonging to a community through *sohbet* outweigh religious learning. The reason for this is that they are in the process of becoming used to living in a new country and other Turkish immigrants avoid communicating with them since HM volunteers have been declared terrorists in Turkey.

"Bringing people together and helping them remember what they have forgotten"

In this section, I discuss the changes that occur in the structure and content of *sohbets* after migration. Migration has inevitably influenced the movement and its volunteers. However, neither its core values nor the importance of Gülen's teachings have changed in *sohbets*; rather, certain aspects of the movement are accentuated to help them overcome traumatic experiences while maintaining their ties with HM and to ease their adaptation to Finland. Nevertheless, the volunteers' accounts reveal that such a transformation cannot solely be attributed to migration; indeed, it began with the modes of disapproval and the isolation processes initiated by the Turkish government even before migration. Aleyna, who had been serving as an *abla* in various *sohbet* groups in Turkey for many years, explains this situation as follows:

> During the most troubled times in Turkey, the news came from Hocaefendi (esteemed teacher/Gülen) urging us to preserve our faith and protect what we had. Here, people need to be rehabilitated, adapt to the environment, and integrate into it. However, they also need to maintain their existing culture (*hizmet*). Therefore, it is necessary to present *sohbet* in a moderate way. … People's opportunities for socializing have decreased; cultural gatherings, family visits, and similar activities have diminished [in number]. Some can only find solace in *sohbets*. There are not many alternatives. Thus, *sohbet* has become a reservoir catering to all needs. In these *sohbets*, some attend for their friends, while others come to listen to the discussions. However, the organizers have to meet the needs of all partici-

> pants and present something that satisfies everyone. Each person must find what they are seeking. As a result, teatime can be extended, and sometimes it takes precedence over other activities. It can vary in different ways. However, what is crucial is bringing people together and helping them remember what they have forgotten. It involves recalling the reasons behind their past experiences and actions, preserving what they have, and revitalizing them. Essentially, it is about not forgetting the truth. In the past, they ran with great energy and enthusiasm, dedicating themselves to the pleasure of Allah. They must regain that spirit, as there might be different [sources of] exhaustion on this path. Perhaps there are disappointments, and perhaps they have forgotten that excitement. It is necessary to reinvigorate them in Finland at present.

At this juncture, the primary objective of the *sohbets* is apparently to sustain participants' engagement and keep the concept of *hizmet* alive in Finland. While the structure and functioning of the *sohbets* may remain mostly unchanged, there has been variation in the selection of topics addressed during the *sohbets*. This change aligns with the messages conveyed by Gülen after 2016. The emphasis now lies on such issues as integration, coexistence, and women. As an example, the *abla* of the group asked me to give a lecture on "Islamic feminism" in this regard. In Turkey, at the beginning of each year an academic calendar was prepared that included all the topics to be covered throughout the year. The same topics were presented to all groups, but they were approached in more detail or in a simpler manner based on the group's profile. However, in Finland the groups are mainly composed of individuals who have previously served as *sohbet ablas* and have been involved in HM since a young age. Therefore, different programmes are implemented for each group to engage them in the *sohbets*. For instance, there was a period where they listened to Gülen's sermons together and discussed their interpretations of them, or another period where they read and discussed a specific book by Gülen during the *sohbets*. Unlike the practices in Turkey, the potential topics for the *sohbet* are subject to discussion within the group. Additionally, the *abla* encouraged participants to present their own topics and facilitated the *sohbet* to increase engagement. Despite repeated requests from the *abla*, no one volunteered to facilitate the *sohbet*. However, this finding also shows the *abla's* willingness to share authority and reduces the hierarchy in the group, as opposed to the authoritarian position given to the one leading the *sohbet* in the other studies (Sunier 2024). In another distinct application, one differing from its implementation in Turkey, there are instances where someone requests the sharing of prayers/Quran readings or that prior study of the topic be addressed. However, unlike in the Turkish setting, a weekly task list (*çetele*) is not formulated and monitored by the *abla*. When questioned about the rationale behind this situation, Nilgun perceives this circumstance as facilitating the continued engagement of volunteers who, along with their migration to Finland, have encountered numerous challenges, such as being a refugee and learning a new language.

Emel, whose elder sister lived in HM-affiliated student houses while at university, was greatly influenced by what she heard from her sister about Gülen and *hizmet*, and she developed a strong attachment to *hizmet* with dreams of staying in the houses during her university years. She

described the experience of being together with other volunteers in *sohbets* or other activities as follows:

> We had a busy life in Turkey. Work at the *dershane* (private tutoring centre) was very intense. Since we had been living for years with people who had the same ideas and thoughts, being with my current friends here feels like having extra oxygen, like being able to breathe more easily. So, it had incredibly positive aspects for me. Among my friends, we go through the process of integration together, meaning that when someone has any problem or there is something we do not know, we try to share it with each other. That is a beautiful thing. We learn from those who have experienced something before us. It accelerates and facilitates the integration process.

In Turkey, groups were formed based on various factors, including age, marital status, education, profession, financial well-being, location, or the husband's occupational group. However, the only criterion was location during the first years in Finland. The individuals in the groups come from different professions and educational backgrounds. However, the process of learning a new language and culture while also sharing the same traumatic experiences becomes a unifying factor for them. During an interview with one *abla*, I asked whether having university graduates and housewives (even though only a few) with no university degree in the same *sohbet* group has had an impact on the group's dynamics. She replied that the need to learn Finnish makes everyone equal, despite the difference in their educational backgrounds. Therefore, having people with different educational backgrounds or professions in the same group poses no difficulties. Moreover, the need for socialization and belonging to a community seem more important than piety for most participants, for the reasons mentioned in the previous section. The *hizmet* habitus also has had a significant influence for many years on what they seek in terms of socialization and the kind of community they need. Therefore, they need to find a specific group of individuals who share similar values and experiences while seeking God rather than just any Turkish or Muslim community. As Emel put it, the need for these types of *sohbets* can be likened to the necessity of taking a breath, which also explains why some volunteers who had also criticized the lack of transparency of the HM after 2016 continue to participate in *sohbets*.

In *sohbets*, especially in recent years, the *abla* has occasionally prepared presentations using a computer to convey the content. She has even organized a guessing game with the titles of Gülen's books in the form of a visual quiz. During my interview with her, I inquired about whether digital presentations had also been utilized in the past and the reasons behind her preference for them. She mentioned that she had also occasionally prepared digital presentations in Turkey, but she has used them more frequently in Finland. She explained that one reason has been the increased use of technology in recent years, particularly during the Covid-19 period. Another reason she cited was the need to keep the group lively and engaged, which had been continuing for four years and had become somewhat monotonous. Thus, as with other changes, it became evident that the decision to use technology was related to the group's needs.

During the Covid-19 period, participants in the *sohbet* listened to Gülen's (2020) sermons dating back to the 1970s, which consist of nineteen videos on *Çocuk*

Terbiyesi (Child Upbringing), and during the subsequent discussions, conducted on the Zoom platform, everyone contributed their own interpretations and discussed the sermons together. There were several reasons for the almost full attendance during those *sohbets*. First, the *sohbets* were scheduled at a relatively late hour, around 9 pm, allowing mothers with babies or young children to participate after putting their children to sleep and also enabling them to better focus on the *sohbet*. Second, as there were no other concerns, such as taking care of children or preparing tea during the *sohbets*, those who preferred discussions with a more spiritual focus participated more enthusiastically. Third, the lack of other opportunities for socializing during the Covid-19 period led to an increase in attendance. Finally, the topic of child upbringing is a common interest that all participants share.

Sohbets are still segregated by gender; there are no mixed-gender *sohbets*. However, throughout the research period, the participants did not perceive segregation as a problem, which is consistent with Helen Rose Ebaugh's (2010) findings. This is because women view *sohbet* as a space where they can comfortably share both religious matters relevant to women and the challenges they may encounter in daily life as wives or mothers. Therefore, they appreciate being part of a women-only group and do not perceive it as any form of subservience. We can see volunteers' preferences in this regard as parallel to those discussed in Saba Mahmood's (2005) study. Like her examination of agency, my findings challenge conventional Western understandings of agency by highlighting that it is not solely about resistance or autonomy but also about actively engaging with cultural and religious norms, even if they might appear restrictive from an outsider's perspective. As a female researcher, conducting ethnographic research on men's *sohbet* groups poses challenges. However, based on the information gathered from the participants through their husbands, the functioning and structure of the men's *sohbet* groups are similar to those of the women's groups, focusing on topics relevant to their gender. Nevertheless, a comparative study of women's and men's *sohbet* groups would contribute to a better understanding of the topic.

The changes have aimed at revitalizing *hizmet* in the *sohbets*, which had in part begun before the migration, as well as at making the *sohbets* more socially oriented. However, after four years, participation declined due to changes in the group members' needs, leading to the decision to divide them into different groups. For instance, two participants currently working full-time in their professions reduced their involvement in the *sohbets*, perceiving that they were becoming less spiritually fulfilling. They requested a *sohbet* group that resembles a lesson rather than a place for socializing, with a greater emphasis on religious learning, including Arabic. Consequently, a separate group was formed with participants who wanted to emphasize spirituality more. Ultimately, the main reason behind such changes was to reinvigorate the stagnant *hizmet* ethos by encouraging participants to take more initiative, a response to various incidents that had caused a decline in the volunteers' commitment.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the *sohbet*, a regular weekly activity within HM since its inception, particularly emphasizing its significance for volunteers who arrived in Finland as refugees after 2016. The research showcases the pivotal role of the concept of

hizmet for each participant, highlighting its transformation into a way of life. This study explores how *sohbets*, play a significant role in shaping a *hizmet habitus*, a space for religious education, social interactions, and affirming a shared identity within a specific community. The study draws on Bourdieu's (1990) notion of habitus and Mahmood's (2005) perspective on it, along with existing literature on *sohbet* (Ahmed 2013; Jassal 2014) especially Vicini's (2020) contribution regarding the importance of intellectual discernment. *Sohbet* introduces the concept and practice of *hizmet* to participants, either consciously or unconsciously.

The thematic analysis of the participants' perspectives on *sohbet* revealed three predominant themes: socialization, community belonging, and the pursuit of piety. The existing literature also supports these themes aligning with the functions of *sohbet* (Ebaugh and Koc 2007; Jassal 2014; Rausch 2008; Sametoğlu 2015). Notably, the focus has shifted from seeking spiritual fulfilment to prioritizing socialization and community involvement in the post-migration period. The recent evolution of discussion themes, prompted by political events and migration, has also been influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic and technological advancements. *Sohbets* still serve as an informal pedagogical tool to transfer *hizmet* values (Geier et al. 2019) and religious knowledge and demonstrate their practical application (Dohrn 2014). However, the participating group focused on in this article comprises long-standing HM volunteers, integrated into this specific lifestyle. Hence, *sohbets* primarily aim to revitalize *hizmet*, which means sustaining the HM-participant relationship. Consequently, the format of the *sohbets* has been adapted to suit the participants' needs.

This study contributes to the existing literature by revealing how a religious-based movement and a specific lifestyle have been adjusted to fit the diaspora environment, using *sohbets* as an integration tool. It also offers insight into Muslim women's devoutness through the lens of *hizmet*. The volunteers' average stay in Finland is only approximately four years; further research is needed to understand how *sohbets* continue to evolve based on changing needs. Comparative studies on ongoing *sohbets* in various countries are also necessary for more comprehensive insights into post-2016 changes. ■

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