

Media Literacy Education and Cultural Differences: A Comparative Reception Analysis on Global TV Show Survivor

OYA ŞAKI AYDIN*

Abstract

Reception analysis takes into consideration not only individual differences but also cultural differences. On the other hand, there are diverse factors determining audience's reception and active participation. Education, age, sex, economical status, family background, ethnicity, world –view and similar factors affect the reception process. Besides that, being media literate and fostering a critical approach towards media texts also determines reception. Taking into account all these factors, this research is designed as a comparative reception analysis. We will be comparing the reception of a global product by youngsters (Survivor Show) within the scope of media literacy education and cultural differences. For that purpose we realized focus group discussions with communication faculty students from Spain and Turkey. The research was realized in the framework of literature review including the above mentioned topics.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Media Literacy, Comparative Reception, Survivor, Television Programs, Focus Group.

* Assoc. Prof., İstanbul Ticaret University

Medya Okuryazarlığı Eğitimi ve Kültürel Farklılıklar: Küresel Televizyon Şovu Survivor Üzerine Karşılaştırmalı Bir Alımlama Analizi

OYA ŞAKI AYDIN*

Özet

İzleyicilerin aktif birer katılımcı olduğunu vurgulayan alımlama çalışmalarında bireysel farklılıkların yanında, kültürel farklılıklar da önem kazanır. Diğer yandan izleyicilerin alımlamasını, yani aktif birer katılımcı olarak medya mesajlarını yorumlamalarını belirleyen faktörler çeşitlidir. Eğitim, yaş, cinsiyet, ekonomik durum, aile yapısı, etnik köken, dünya görüşü ve benzeri faktörler alımlamayı etkilemektedir. Bunun yanında medya okuryazarlığı bilincine sahip olmak ve eleştirel okumalar yapabilmek, alımlamayı belirleyen başka bir etken olarak karşımıza çıkar. Bu genel çerçeveden bakarak, karşılaştırmalı bir alımlama analizi olarak tasarlanan bu çalışma kapsamında, İspanya'da ve Türkiye'deki genç izleyicilerin küresel olarak dolaşıma giren popüler içerikleri alımlamaları incelenecektir. Bu bağlamda, İspanya'da ve Türkiye'de iletişim fakültelelerinde öğrenci olan gençlerle küresel bir televizyon programı olan Survivor ile ilgili odak grup çalışmaları gerçekleştirilmiştir. Konuyla ilgili literatür taraması yapılarak, karşılaştırmalı alımlama çalışmaları ve medya okuryazarlığı kavramları incelenmiştir.

Keywords: Medya Okuryazarlığı, Karşılaştırmalı Alımlama, Survivor, Televizyon programları, Odak Grup

1. Introduction: Theory And Literature On Comparative Reception

Media literacy is a very common research topic among scholars in communication since 1990s. The concept refers to a critical analysis process generally. It is quite common to define the notion as an ability “to access, analyze, evaluate media messages and create new ones” (Baran, 2004:50; Hobbs, 1998:16; Potter, 2005:22; Livingstone, 2004:4). Reception studies on audiences became very popular among scholars of cultural studies especially after 1980s. Television became a popular family entertainment and with the rise of global neo-capitalist order, many private channels began broadcasting diverse programs (Mattelart-Neveu, 2003). Reception studies and media literacy perspective intersect in their emphasis on critical spectatorship abilities of popular media audiences. The main question is generally “how audiences produce meanings from media contents and which variable quality effect this process?”. Most of the researchers use quantitative methods such as interviews, observations, and focus groups (Morley, 2005:99).

Using terms from literature such as reading, coding, and so on, Morley tried to show the process of active audience viewing. David Morley’s study about TV show *Nationwide* is one of the first ethnographic researches, observing its participants in their natural environments (Morley, 2003:95). Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz in their article titled “six interpretations of *Dallas*” especially leaned on culture and class differences determining reception (Liebes-Katz, 1992:127).

Sonia Livingstone and Peter K. Lunt in their article, “The reception of public participation programs” discuss diverse reception types of these programs. They adopted the method of focus group discussion to see the interactions between audiences (Livingstone-Lunt, 1992:146). Comparative reception analysis as a method of research seems to increase after 1990s because of globalization process. With this analysis, usually two or more nations are used as research units for cross-cultural observations (Chisholm, 1995: 21; Haddon, 1998; Hofstede, 1998:16; Jensen, 1998:5-10; Livingstone, 1998: 435; Livingstone-Bovill, 2001:3-14; O’Donnell, 1999).

This kind of research is valid, especially for underlining cultural globalization and showing its effects. We may say that communication studies such as on sociology have to be comparative by definition (Nowak, 1989: 34). Communication as a process of meaning production led to research questions dealing increasingly with facts and relationships between nations and other human groups. Sociologist Melvin L. Kohn in 1989 mentions four kinds of cross-national research. This typology he presents is quite useful to form the pattern of each research. The first approach is taking a “nation as object of study”. Here, the aim is to understand particular countries for their own sake. The researcher tries to determine the distinctive features about a country. “In the first type of cross-national research, where nations are the object

of study, the investigator's interest is primarily in the particular countries studied: how Germany compares to the United States, France to the Soviet Union, or India to Pakistan" (Kohn, 1989: 21).

The second model is "nation as context of study"; in this kind of research, "one is interested in testing the generality of findings and interpretations about how certain social institutions operate or about how certain aspects of social structure impinge on the personality" (Kohn, 1989: 21). The third model considers a nation as the unit of analysis, that is, "in this model given the prior identification of a number of measurable dimensions along nations vary (e.g. gross national product, unemployment rate etc.) systematic relations are sought among these dimensions, each nation thereby serving as one unit or data source" (Livingstone, 2003: 485).

The last model that interests us more in this study takes nation as a "component of a larger" international or transnational system. Kohn calls it "transnational" research. Borrowing this term from economists and political scientists who have studied corporations, Kohn underlines the transitions between countries. We can give a straightforward example from media studies such as Robert C. Allen's study on soap operas as a global phenomenon in his book called "To be continued... Soap Operas Around The World", 1995. Therefore, in this study, we compare two nations not only focusing on their differences but mostly searching for similarities on a global level. Many scholars since the middle of the twentieth century are realizing comparative researches on media use. Without doubt, they have diverse interests. Transnational or even global media companies as well as the industry which offers branded products and services, have an existential interest in data on how their products and marketing campaigns can be used in other countries. (...) Thus, empirical findings on how a new technology is accepted and used in other countries and the consequences this has for established media play an important role in media development. Furthermore, transnational politics aim at solving intercultural and international conflicts or at deepening the collaboration between different countries (Hasebrink, 2012: 383). As Beniger claimed briefly: "The word comparative is redundant in the social sciences and the term comparative analysis is doubly redundant. All social science research is comparative and so too is all analysis" (1992: 47). The notion of comparative analysis is rather problematic but it is also meaningful in a way that it widens our perspective while designing a research and presenting its results to an international platform.

"Beyond this relevance for political and economic agents, comparative research is also particularly relevant for academic research. One reason is the studies on universally applicable concepts and theories. (...) Furthermore, the transnational influence of single global players (e.g., Disney) or of single countries and their

cultural industry (e.g., United States), on the cultural identity of other countries represents an important area of comparative research on media use and reception” (Hasebrink, 2012: 384). “The main barrier for transnational media consumption is the diversity of language. Media users everywhere in the world clearly prefer media in their domestic language; they will only turn to options in other languages if they look for functions, which are not fulfilled by domestic media” (Hasebrink, 2012: 391).

As we see, comparative research on media reception and appropriation is still rather selective and focused on case studies on a few selected countries, media products, and users. Thus, it is rather difficult to obtain a more general and systematic overview of this research field. Quite a number of comparative studies have focused on the question of how globally distributed media products are interpreted by users in different cultural contexts. A pioneer study in this respect has been the American TV series *Dallas* as mentioned before, which was particularly successful in many parts of the world. Other examples of comparative studies have focused on *The Lord of Rings*, *Big Brother*, or Disney products (Hasebrink, 2012: 392). As Hasebrink says:

“The increasing relevance of transnational phenomena-e.g., global media players, globally distributed media products, increasing mobility and migration, transnational, social and political movements and supranational institutions and governance- clearly requires approaches to compare research which do not take countries as homogeneous containers.” Hasebrink, 2012:394).

“Comparative research could be called the communication field's 'extended and extendable frontier' as Kohn claimed (1989:93). In addition, many scholars such as Blumler agree on that comment: “Any comparisons we take within a single country are necessarily limited to one set of political, economic, cultural and historical contexts represented by that particular country” (Blumler et al.1992: 3).

If we summarize shortly, there are three important roles of comparative research:

1. Comparative research helps us to comprehend social change beyond the boundaries of nation state.
2. It also supports our imagination by creating information about diverse cultural contexts.
3. Comparative studies will lead us to explore and analyze macro issues about different societies.

Reception analysis is also crucial to defining the unknown audience. As young people are increasingly consuming global products of the culture industry, to create a media-literate society, we should try to understand their perspectives as audiences. Franco's (2001) comparative study on identity and community relations,

Castello, Dobson, and O'Donnell's (2009) comparative discourse analysis on soap operas in Scotland and Cataluña, and Biltereyst's reception analysis (1991) about American soap operas and local products are distinctive examples from the field. Reception as an active meaning-producing process depends on both individual and cultural characteristics. Educational background, age, gender, economic status, family structure, political views, and society determine our reception. On the other hand, we assume that media literacy education and awareness effect reception process too. Based on the literature, we may formulate the basic questions of this research as following:

- What are the differences and similarities concerning the reception of a global program, between students from two different cultural contexts?
- How do media literacy courses affect the reception of university students?
- What are the determinant factors for becoming a media literate person?

2. Research Methodology

Our studies started with an overall investigation of reception studies literature. Subsequently, we created two focus groups. To make a comparison, the first one was realized in Turkey from the Communication Faculty students of Istanbul Commerce University (Turkey-Istanbul:7 students: 2 female and 5 male). The second comprised 7 students from the Communication faculty of Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain-Barcelona) who attended the focus group (7 students: 3 male and 4 female). As methodology, we applied a triangulation of qualitative methods; observation, questionnaire, and focus group discussions. We watched a 15-minute piece of the local *Survivor* show with the participants in Turkey and in Spain separately while asking the same questions and observing them. In addition, the question form was filled out by the participants. We also studied the media literacy education briefly in Turkey. We made a literature overview to see the developments in this area to compare with Spain.

Comparing nations is a challenging task as mentioned before. But the task is still meaningful. To deal and understand global cultural products, we must realize more cross-national projects. To achieve this goal, we compared and contrasted discussion results by categories and emerging topics. Finally, we wrote down the findings using quotes from the focus group discussions. The final report was prepared keeping in view theory, literature, and our findings.

2.1. Emerging Issues

2.1.1. Perspectives from East and West

Note that the primary focus was not to search for differences between countries. It was rather to look for similarities in the media reception of youngsters. Still, we

encountered some specific differences. While doing the comparative study, the main obstacle was language. With Turkish students, we used our and their native language (Turkish), but with students from Barcelona (who defined themselves as Catalans), it was more complex. We choose to solve that problem by using a common language: English. During the discussions, at some points when some participant became nervous or excited, we witnessed that they immediately began to speak Catalan with others. This is also indicates the role and importance of native language as a tool of expression. We have to note that there was no significant difference between media access to the two groups. They all had access to internet and other media.

2.1.2. Media Literacy in Spain and Turkey: Education and Background

Media and information literacy has a rich history in Europe and in Spain. There have been diverse efforts—local, regional, and national—supporting media literacy in general since 1990s. Some of these efforts mostly aim teachers and their formal education and others aim school curriculums and educational strategies. Nevertheless, in Europe we see that media and information literacy is often taught by a teacher who has a degree in another subject such as social sciences, arts, or language. There are different efforts to bring media literacy courses to students. In reality, each school has its own way to deal with that problem. As a result, some schools have a strongly supported media literacy and some have not (Culver, 2013: 76). Today we witness that this imbalance is of high concern when media literacy is seen as a crucial part of education.

When we look at the situation of Turkey, we should note that the regulatory body, The Supreme Council of Radio and Television (RTUK), plays a crucial role in developing and applying media literacy policies in Turkey. After 2000, RTUK implemented a Project called «Smart Signs» for protecting children, especially from the negative effects of television. In fact, it is a guidance system for parents to protect their children from harmful content. We must say that perhaps the most important step for media literacy education is the elective courses for schools organized by and in cooperation of RTUK and the Ministry of Education. The other development was Media literacy courses that started in the 2006-2007 school year (www.rtuk.org.tr, 2013). Furthermore, media literacy and media education in Turkey are still new concepts and need to be developed. At universities, many communication departments have media literacy courses or courses related to this subject since 2000s. In Commerce University, Istanbul, the communication department has a Media Literacy course only since 2012. However, before that, the subject was included in some other courses.

In the case of Barcelona, Spain, numerous efforts have been made by the department of Communication and Education at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in relation to the Cooperation Program of the Global Chair on Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization–United Nations Alliance of Civilizations University Twinning and Networking Programme (UNESCO-UNAOC UNITWIN). The main research projects in this field were: 1) EMEDUS—that aims to analyze the various media literacy education approaches in national curricula across the European Union’s 27 member states and to develop recommendations to sustain educational policy levels 2) DINAMIC—that is creating new indicators of Media and Information Literacy (MIL), which refer to individuals and institutions (Pérez Tornero et al. 2013: 99).

In 2004, Prof. Pérez Tornero was appointed to prepare a draft report on promoting digital literacy. The title was changed into media and information literacy. In this report, two qualitative changes in the strategy of promoting digital competence were proposed:

-Considering digital capacities not only as a technical skill but also mainly as a process of cultural and institutional transformation.

-Proposing policies that promote digital capacities using ecosystemic and cultural vision that carefully consider the specific contexts and times in which the new digital culture can sustain itself and develop in a specific social system. Without a comprehensive and systematic view on this topic, any process will be partial and unstable (Pérez Tornero et al. 2013: 100–101).

They developed five indicators to measure media literacy levels in terms of use, critical understanding, and communicative skills. These indicators were : Social Behavior, Communicative skills, Citizen Participation, Communicative skills, and Content creation (Pérez Tornero et al. 2013:109–111). By content creation they mean individuals creating content in order to communicate and interact. The focus of this project is to create a system of indicators for media literacy applicable to individuals and companies. Participant students from Barcelona stated that they already had a course named “Communication Education”.

2.2. Comparative Reception Analysis’ Results on TV Show *Survivor*

Survivor is a reality game show in which contestants are isolated on a tropical island to win several prizes and to achieve diverse goals. The show is broadcasted in many countries with slight differences. The format was actually created by a British television producer in 1992. The first edition took place in Sweden in 1997. In Turkey, the show with the original name *Survivor* has been broadcasted since 2005. On the other hand, in Spain, the show began in 2000 under the name,

Supervivientes: Expedición Robinson. After this brief description of the show, to compare reception, some topics and quotes from the discussion are used. Instead of using the participants' actual names, we denoted Turkish students as T and Catalan students with C. With this word code, we used numbers from 1 to 7 (7 students attended our discussions from each country) and added their sex and age as indicators of their social position. The students from Barcelona, Spain, have a strong ethnic awareness. As they distinguish themselves from the mainstream Spanish people, we name their group as Catalan instead of Spanish.

The evaluation of general topics and the main results of the investigation is summarized below.

2.2.1. Watching Habits of Youngsters

Youngsters in the focus group watch American serials such as "Game of Thrones" or "How I met Your Mother" and Catalan students mostly watch news programs. They underline the differences in content between Spanish television and Catalan ones: "In Catalunya we have alternatives. In Spain they do not have." (C1/Female/20).

Turkish students watch local sitcoms also. However, Catalan participants do not have any favorite shows on national television and specifically do not watch Spanish television shows. They distinguish themselves from Spanish Culture. The media use of Catalan students is part of their cultural and ethnic identity: they criticize Spanish people's watching habits. The Turkish group showed no emerging ethnicity.

Both focus group participants watch television via Internet and individually. They do not watch TV with their family. They have their own watching habits and mostly criticize other family members on that issue: "In my house, my mother and sister watch them (reality shows). I tell them to watch other stuff, but they watch them to socialize" (C3/Female/20). All participants watch TV shows and programs; only one student mentioned that he never watched TV (T5/Male/25).

2.2.2. Critical Reading and Meaning Production

Catalan students were very critical of TV messages. They also produce texts (write tweets) on this subject. Turkish students, mostly did not think there was any kind of message in media texts. For Catalan students, studying journalism forced them to be aware of the problems of the Media Industry. Ethics and codes were often revealed. They could not agree on the need for these shows. Some Catalan students thought that it is TV market some Catalan students say it is an uneducated people's choice. "It is a matter of interest. Critical people watch that kind of programming (news programs)" (C5/Female/20).

They separate themselves not only from Spanish people but also from ordinary people in general. Catalan participants thought that *Survivor* has a Mediterranean format from Spain or Italy. Turkish students thought that it has a US format.

All students saw themselves as conscious media users. They thought that being a communication student made a difference. But some thought family education as more important: (C1/Female/20) says, "Education is important but for me, family education is more important. In my sports club there are young people like me they are cultivated educated but they watch silly programs".

When watching the show, all participants made negative remarks. They made remarks about the contestants and talked about the love life of the contestants. They agreed with the researcher when she said "They are famous because they are on TV". As indicated, one of the important media skills is the ability to differentiate between factual and fictional media content. We asked them about reality shows and if they were real. They mostly agreed about them being fictional.

2.2.3. The Concept of Media Literacy

Catalan students (all of them) could define media literacy using terms such as: critical reading, education, and awareness.

Turkish students were unable to define the term. Only one student could talk about media and its political implications. Catalan students find themselves media literate or they think they are becoming one. They say studying communication (journalism) makes them media literate. Turkish students (after a short definition of media literacy) find themselves partially media literate. Catalan students remember taking a course on this subject. Turkish students mostly did not remember such a course. Both groups underlined the importance of education concerning media use. One student states that: "It is linked with education and skills" (C3/Female/20).

2.2.4. The General Understanding about Reality Formats

Catalan and Turkish students watch common international TV shows. Their favorite show is *Who wants to be a millionaire?* They think it is a contest about knowledge. They find it useful and entertaining. "This show is not a waste of time. It maintained its content during the years and we watch different people's stories" (T6/Male/23).

Catalan participants also mention some local programs such as *el gran dictat*, which they say protects Catalan language. Turkish participants mostly watch a local popular quiz show "kelime oyunu" (word game). Nearly all students think that reality shows are a manipulation of reality. They use words such as: fictional, false reality, or stimulation. "In reality shows there are script writers. We cannot talk about reality here. It is all about entertainment" (T3/Male/24). "They are acting",

there is a script, they are actors, this crying is not real (while watching the show)” (C7/Male/20) and (C6/Female/20).

2.2.5. Reception Issues and *Survivor* Show

All students knew the show and its content. Some could easily describe the actions. One student described the show as “Famous people trying to survive on an island” (C3/Female/20) or some negative approaches such as: “popular show with disgusting contestants and dramatization and bad production (C4/Female/20) were made. Most comments were negative. Turkish students (2 of them already were watching the show) could easily tell the names of the producer and presenters. Only two Catalan students could tell the names of the presenter and producer in Spain. They all agreed about the characteristics of the winners: according to them popular, beautiful, and aggressive people win this contest. One student said: “There are common points of people all around the world like ambition. That’s why *Survivor* is so popular”(T3/Male/24). And one added: “There is everything for rating in this contest. Participants, presenter all is good. There are curiosity and identification. The viewer can also participate via internet or mobile phone. It is a good way to relax” (T4/Male/24).

When we asked which countries broadcast the show, Catalan participants could only tell Turkey and the United States of America. Turkish participants also said Spain, Turkey, the United States of America, and Argentina, and one added that it was broadcast in nearly 50 countries around the world.

Some found local characteristics in the show: “They make Turkish grill and eat baklava. We definitely see local food culture” (T6/Male/23). Catalan students did not see any cultural resemblance: “Because we are Catalan we feel different from Spanish Culture (C2/Male/19)”. Catalan participants drew a line between Spanish and Catalan culture including watching habits and contents: “Audience of TV 5 (national popular channel in Spain also broadcasts *Survivor*) and La Sexta (Catalan Television) is different. Young and educated people are critical and watch *Salvados* (a news program on La Sexta) older people watch *Supervivientes (Survivor)*” (C2/Male/19). (C3/Female/20) says: “People watch this shows because they are not well educated and they are Spanish”.

One Catalan student commented about the global nature of the show: “They look for ideas which can bring success in many countries. We can think it is from here but in Great Britain or Germany they will say it is from there” commented (C4/Female/20).

2.3. Conclusion and Comments

In order to compare the media literacy awareness of university students from two countries in a limited context, we studied youngsters' watching habits and perspectives on the subject. We acknowledge that this project is a small step toward understanding the effect of media literacy education on reception and meaning production process. Nevertheless, the results show that media education and political involvement is crucial for media literacy. Catalan students were aware of media organization and were highly critical because of the political situation of their country. Only one among the Turkish students (T3/Male/24) talked about political issues and media ethics and that student was also critical of media content.

On the other hand, governments and policy makers have to take into account the new abilities concerning media reception. The comparative setting mainly produces information for the international planning of media. It is vital to see the global picture to understand clearly the process of media literacy education. The global contents are usually commercial and sensational. They are designed to attract all types of personalities and people from different cultural and educational backgrounds. "As users of multimedia media, young people develop their tastes and skills -of varying levels and types. Young people may even play active roles in their relationship with media, for example communicating for their rights and for other social issues" (Kotilainen-Suoninen, 2013: 141). Creating meaning is a very essential component of media literacy and needs several literacy skills.

In the limits of this research, we witnessed that cultural and educational background together with other social and national realities affect meaning production. On the other hand, awareness about media literacy provides students with more critical skills about media content and spectatorship. Therefore comparative studies about reception enable us to discover and comprehend the global audience faced with popular contents.

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