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About the 67th issue,

We are delighted to present the latest issue of the *ConnectIST Istanbul University Journal of Communication Sciences*. This issue includes seven original research articles. As with our previous issues, curating the 67th edition involved significant dedication and effort. First, we thank our guest editors, Associate Professor Yeşim Kaptan from Kent State University and Professor Ece Algan from California State University. We would also like to thank our authors, peers, and *ConnectIST* readers who participated in our virtual conference. Since 2021, we have been organizing virtual conferences for our thematic issues to reach colleagues abroad. It was a great honor and excitement for the *ConnectIST* team as we received many abstracts from different parts of the world for the last virtual conference themed, ‘Television in the Global South,’ which was held on 14-15 March 2024. The participation of authors and readers from many countries showed us that our efforts to introduce the journal were not in vain. At least we believe in this issue; we ‘connected’ scholars from various parts of the world around the discussions of ‘Television in the Global South.’

Another motivating development in this issue was that an ethics editor had joined the *ConnectIST* editorial board. We thank Prof. Joseph Straubhaar from the University of Texas for accepting the position of ethics editor of the *ConnectIST*.

In this issue, we present the following articles:

Uğur Baloğlu and Lee Artz, in “Conditions and consequences of Turkey’s transnational TV production: A study of American women audiences” examine how Turkish TV series shape the cultural perceptions and intercultural interaction practices of American viewers. Through audience ethnography, the research shows that Turkish dramas improve appreciation of Turkish culture and challenge stereotypes among American women. In “The influence of Turkish TV series on Generation Z in South Africa: An exploratory study,” Mercia Coetzee, Fatih Baritci, and Zühal Fidan Baritci conduct semi-structured interviews with audiences from various ethnic groups and genders living in different cities in South Africa. Similar to American women viewers, the results show that African participants generally gain positive impressions of Türkiye’s culture, nature, fashion, and people through Turkish TV series. Many people express a desire to visit Türkiye based on information from Turkish TV series.

Gökçe Baydar Çavdar, in “Populist styles and meanings in Acun Medya reality shows” through multimodal discourse analysis of three factual entertainment shows of the latest seasons, argues that these shows reaffirm the ideals of the nation and the family in various manners. In “A cultural analysis of Generation Z’s perception of individualism and collectivism in Turkish television commercials through a Hofstedeian lens,” Nilnur Tandoğmuş Kahraman and Özlem Kalan try to understand how Generation Z growing up in Türkiye, which Hofstede defines as a collectivist society, perceives individualist and collectivist messages in advertisements. The double-phased research finds that contrary to Hofstede’s prediction, the participants’ preferences, tendencies, and approaches are in common in the qualities belonging to individual culture. Ayşenur Kılıç, in “Representations of religion in the entertainment media: A comparison of the TV series *Shtisel* in Israel and *Ömer* in Türkiye” focuses on two cases from the Global South -the Israeli series *Shtisel* and its Turkish scripted format adaptation *Ömer*- to revisit the theoretical debates on the relations between entertainment media, politics, and society by employing Curran’s radical democratic approach. The research shows that Curran’s radical democratic framework, in its current form, appears somewhat limited in its ability to fully interpret scripted format adaptations, where production and consumption processes are notably more complex, as in the case of *Shtisel* and *Ömer*.

In “‘Bad word’ for good engagement: The commodification of ‘the Suroboyoan language’ in Indonesian local television newsroom,” Aditya Fahmi Nurwahid, Esa FK Wibowo and Citra Safira explores how Indonesian TV station Jawa Timur TV commodifies the Suroboyoan language in its Pojok Kampung news program. The findings show that the TV channel only considers its market position and audience reach without offering any quality-driven journalism to the public. Sevda Ünal and Mutlu Binark, in the research titled “How past-present-future interconnect in China: CDramas as a tool of cultural governance and the possibility of a ‘Chinese Wave’ in the case of GenZ” try to identify the discursive practices of the Chinese Communist Party’s cultural governance through the GenZ series and examine how transnational audiences perceive the series. Thematic discourse analysis is employed to reveal the series’ discourse themes, and the netnographic research approach is applied to discuss the compatibility of audience reviews with the series’ discourse. Besides some remarkable results, the study finds that artistic quality and idol culture are insufficient for CDramas to create a Chinese Wave among transnational audiences.

Before closing this introduction, let me remind everyone that our journal can continue to publish academic studies in communications sciences through your valued support and participation.

We look forward to appearing before you once again with our 68th issue.

Prof. Aysen Akkor Gül
İstanbul University, İstanbul, Türkiye

Special Issue Editors' Introduction: Television in the Global South

Guest editors: Yeşim Kaptan (Associate Professor, Kent State University) & Ece Algan (Professor, California State University, San Bernardino)

Despite being considered old media, television is still one of the most powerful media forms. With the rise of digital platforms and streaming services, television continues to play a central role in globalization, dissemination of information, and entertainment. These new developments have helped television acquire a new significance by enabling a wider consumption of TV content through the Internet and other digital technologies all over the world. While this new media environment has contributed to an increase in television production worldwide, it has also led the way for a number of players in the Global South to become visible outside of their national contexts. The TV products originating from the Global South, which have reached millions of viewers, have challenged the global monopoly of the West (Thussu, 2024).

In light of these contemporary developments, this special issue aims to bring forth new discussions that can contribute to the de-westernization and decolonization of media and television studies. In this special issue, the authors investigate the influence of non-Western television production and consumption in a rapidly changing "global mediascape" (Appadurai, 1998) by focusing on the transformations in contemporary television in the Global South. In this introduction and the framework of this special issue, we define the "Global South" with reference to Dados and Connell (2012). According to Dados and Connell, the Global South refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It denotes regions outside Europe and North America, mostly low-income, economic inequality, and often politically or culturally marginalized (Dados & Connell, 2012).

Since the development of satellite TV, the audiences' media consumption has diversified (Ogan, 2001). In the last three decades, due to the multidirectional flow of transnational media across different countries and regions, national audiences have been exposed to a wide range of global television content as well as local productions. Three articles in this special issue focus on audience reception of popular TV dramas in global circulation and the cultural politics of TV drama consumption. In the first article titled, "How past-present-future interconnect in China: CDramas as a tool of cultural governance and the possibility of a 'Chinese wave' in the case of *GenZ*," Sevdâ Ünal and Mutlu Binark explore Chinese Dramas (CDramas) and the Chinese Wave via a thematic discourse analysis and netnographic research. Specifically focusing on *Gen Z* series, Ünal and Binark compare transnational and Chinese audiences' perception of CDramas to shed light on the instrumental function of these dramas for the cultural governance of the Chinese government, youth politics in China, and audiences' response to the subtle ideological content of CDramas.

In their article titled "Conditions and consequences of Turkey's transnational TV production: A study of American women audiences," Uğur Baloğlu and Lee Artz investigate the worldwide fame of Turkish TV series and their reception in the United States of America. Through audience ethnography and in-depth interviews, this article examines the cultural perceptions of American audiences who watch Turkish TV dramas and TV dramas' importance in intercultural interaction. As a significant initial touchpoint from a Global South country, the Turkish TV dramas not only spark American viewers' curiosity about Turkish culture, history, and social life but also foster an appreciation for this foreign culture and deepen understanding of global intercultural dynamics between two countries by challenging existing stereotypes.

The popularity of Turkish TV series (*dizi*) makes them a field of hegemonic struggle (Carney 2023). In the same vein, the third article titled, "The influence of Turkish TV series on the perception of Türkiye in South Africa: An exploratory study," analyzes the global popularity of Turkish TV series in South Africa in the context of international relationship between two countries. As Türkiye's presence in South Africa has become more prominent in the past 25 years, especially the younger generations (*GenZ*) began to watch Turkish TV series. Conducting semi-structured interviews with audiences, Mercia Coetzee, Fatih Barıtcı, and Zühal Fidan Barıtcı discuss Türkiye's soft power in South Africa and illustrate that Turkish TV series have a positive impact on South African audiences' perception of Türkiye.

In the age of contra-flows of media, cross-cultural remakes, especially TV dramas, offer a valuable and insightful opportunity to explore the intricate connections between global media flows, media texts, and transnational audiences (Kaptan, 2018). In the fourth article, inquiring about Curran's radical democratic view of entertainment theory in Global South contexts, Ayşenur Kılıç points out the political and ideological meanings embedded in TV dramas and their remakes. By looking into the popular Israeli TV drama, *Shtisel* and its Turkish remake *Ömer*, Kılıç argues that *Shtisel* portrays religion (Judaism) as a natural part of daily life, avoiding real-time socio-political conflicts in the society. In contrast, its remake presents religion (Islam) as a site of contestation and identity polarization, highlighting political issues and a pervasive skepticism toward the outside world.

After the neoliberalization of television in the 1990s, the late 2000s proved to be the start of the next important transformative phase for world television marked by the widespread use of personal digital media devices and

increased access to the internet. This contemporary phase has witnessed rapid technological developments in television, such as the digitalization and platformization of television services and the expansion of television consumption via social media. In his article titled ‘Bad word’ for good engagement: The commodification of ‘the Suroboyoan language’ in Indonesian local television newsroom, Aditya Fahmi Nurwahid, Esa FK Wibowo, and Citra Safira show us how the Indonesian TV station, JTV, utilizes its social media channels and short video form to increase its viewers and revenues at the expense of reinforcing the stereotypes about the Suroboyan culture. Drawing from a critical media studies perspective, this paper argues that the commodification of the Suroboyoan dialect by JTV’s revenue-driven editorial strategies turns a cultural marker of a regional identity into a tool for creating marketable content.

In their article titled “A cultural analysis of generation Z’s perception of individualism and collectivism in Turkish television commercials through a Hofstedian lens,” Nilnur Tandıçgüneş Kahraman and Özlem Kalan examine the impact of television advertising on younger generations in Türkiye, who are attuned to global trends and ideologies, via an intercultural communication perspective. Their research has found that the cultural values of Generation Z, who grew up under the influence of globalization and digitalization, show individualistic tendencies as opposed to collectivistic values, as once had been identified by Hofstede for countries, such as Türkiye.

In her article titled “Populist styles and meanings in Acun Medya reality shows,” Gökçe Baydar Çavdar illustrates how populism is reproduced by the reality show formats, the lucrative Acun Medya production company, and contestants participating in the programs. Tracing how the ideological positions in the show regarding the family and nationalist sentiments align with those of the conservative right-wing populist government, this article is a great reminder that “culture sits in places” (Escobar, 2001) and in order to situate television in the global South, we need to consider the ‘place’ of its production and consumption.

Lastly, we would like to express our gratitude to the editor of *Connectist*, Prof. Ayşen Akkor Gül, and the journal’s managing editor Dr. Rabia Zamur Tuncer for inviting us to put together this special issue. They have been instrumental and supportive from its conceptual stages to the online conference we organized and held on March 14-15, 2024, where we had a chance to meet and converse with the contributors, to the reviewing and editing of the manuscripts.

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Conditions and consequences of Türkiye's transnational TV production: A study of American women audiences

Türkiye'nin ulusötesi televizyon yapımlarının koşulları ve sonuçları: Amerikalı kadın izleyiciler üzerine bir araştırma

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Abstract

In today's globally connected landscape, transnational media establish pathways for cultural interchange, transforming how worldwide audiences interact with varied stories. Turkish TV dramas (dizi), which have gained widespread popularity in Latin America, Europe and the Middle East markets, exemplify this global shift and offer American viewers the opportunity to encounter Turkish culture. The research examines how Turkish TV series shape the cultural perceptions and intercultural interaction practices of American viewers. Although these series present idealized or commercialized versions of Turkish society, they function as important first points of contact that stimulate viewers' interest in authentic Turkish culture, history, and social practices. Through audience ethnography and in-depth interviews, it shows that Turkish dramas improve appreciation of Turkish culture, challenge stereotypes, and enhance comprehension of global intercultural relationships. It also emphasizes transnational media's role in encouraging intercultural dialogue, while noting the constraints imposed by profit-driven media partnerships. While *dizi* Turkish TV dramas--promote intercultural dialogue and support a more inclusive global media environment, the potential for cultural exchange is shaped by the commercial purposes underlying transnational media collaborations and joint ventures.

Keywords: Transnational media, Turkish *dizi*, audience ethnography, American viewers, intercultural communication

Öz

Bugün, küresel etkileşimlerin yoğunlaştığı ve kültürlerarası iletişimin arttığı dünyada, ulusötesi medya kültürel alışveriş için yollar oluşturmakta ve dünya çapındaki izleyicilerin çeşitli hikayelerle etkileşim kurma biçimlerini sürekli dönüştürmektedir. Latin Amerika, Avrupa ve Orta Doğu pazarlarında geniş

izleyici kitlesi tarafından takip edilen ve yaygın bir popülerlik kazanan Türk dizileri, bu küresel değişimi belirgin bir şekilde örneklemede ve Amerikalı izleyicilere Türk kültürüyle karşılaşma fırsatı sunmaktadır. Araştırma, Türk dizilerinin Amerikalı izleyicilerin kültürel algılarını ve kültürlerarası etkileşim pratiklerini nasıl şekillendirdiğini incelemektedir. Her ne kadar bu diziler Türk toplumunun idealize edilmiş veya ticarileştirilmiş versiyonlarını sunsa da, izleyicilerin otantik Türk kültürü, tarihi ve sosyal pratiklerine olan ilgisini canlandıran önemli ilk temas noktaları olarak işlev görmektedir. İzleyici etnografisi ve derinlemesine mülakatlar yoluyla, Türk dizilerinin Türk kültürünün takdir edilmesini geliştirdiğini, yerleşik kalıp

yargılara meydan okuduğunu ve küresel kültürlerarası ilişkilerin anlaşılmasını güçlendirdiğini göstermektedir. Ayrıca, ulusötesi medyanın kültürlerarası diyalogu teşvik etmedeki önemli rolünü vurgularken, kâr odaklı medya ortaklıklarının getirdiği kısıtlamalara dikkat çekmektedir. Diziler kültürlerarası diyalogu teşvik edip daha kapsayıcı ve sürdürülebilir bir küresel medya ortamını desteklerken, kültürel alışveriş potansiyeli ulusötesi medya işbirliklerinin ve ortak girişimlerin altında yatan ticari amaçlar tarafından şekillendirilmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Ulusötesi medya, Türk dizileri, izlerlikle etnografisi, Amerikan izleyicileri, kültürlerarası iletişim

Introduction

New communication technologies have made geo-cultural media activities possible with increasing population mobility. Thus, Spanish, Korean, Turkish, and French become increasingly prominent in transnational societies and geo-cultural markets, while the media creates entertainment programs in these languages (Netflix, 2023; The Economist, 2024). While these geo-cultural and transnational networks contribute to media diversity by creating alternative flows to mainstream content, they enable content to circulate beyond national borders, challenging dominant, hegemonic media currents and offering a counter-narrative that sustains cultural plurality (Darling-Wolf, 2014).

Globalization discourses are one of the discursive effects of the construction of the epistemological field of the 'West.' The formation of multinational capital takes place in this discursive space, and new forms of capital domination are no longer legitimized by the direct colonial subjugation of the subject, but rather by the overexpansion of interpretive discourses and representations (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001, p.700). The dominant paradigm equates Westernization with globalization, arguing that hybrid identities emerge from the dominant culture's influence over minorities (Ackermann, 2012). However, even if this point of view could be accurate, it ignores the influence of non-Western cultures on the West. Because the interaction of cultural identities in a limited space makes it inevitable for them to be affected by each other in a certain temporal process. Thus, introducing cultural encounters to people through the media can enable them to get to know the 'other' who is foreign to them. Les Essif (2009) emphasizes that identities formed by different cultural backgrounds are relational. Particularly in the United States of America (USA), these encounters have created rhizomatic identities that evolve through lateral connections to other roots (p.101). Korean-Mexican fusion restaurants in Los Angeles, the widespread adoption of sushi in American dining habits, and the evolution of 'American Chinese food' demonstrate how cultural identities develop through multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points. Similarly, the integration of K-pop aesthetics into American popular culture, the influence of Japanese anime on American animation, and the incorporation of Bollywood-style dance sequences in American music videos exemplify how American cultural identity continuously evolves through its interaction with diverse cultural influences, creating new hybrid forms rather than maintaining rigid boundaries.

The fact that transnational media systems make everything that happens in the world instantly visible everywhere has a great role in the increase of cultural encounters (Young, 2020). The internationalization of television series enhances the recognition of actors, screenwriters, and directors while promoting national culture internationally. Thus, audiences in different countries become members of the imaginary transnational audience created by encountering new cultural values. Audiences in various countries become part of an imagined transnational audience, integrating new cultural experiences into their daily lives (Lopez, 1995, p.258). Reception studies on serials also show that serials are effective in promoting different lifestyles and creating a change in the audience (Pastina et al., 2003, p.9). From Jin and Yoon (2016) on the impact of Korean soap operas on transnational viewers' behaviors and cultural preferences, to La Pastina and Straubhaar's (2005) contribution of Latin American soap operas to viewers' social perspectives, and Yanardağoğlu and Karam's (2013) impact of Turkish soap operas on Arab viewers' cultural attitudes - enabling them to renegotiate the gender roles offered by Arab modernity - cross-border effects of different television cultures have been observed.

The increasing circulation of transnational media contents in the global market – especially with digital platforms- has allowed the audience to encounter different cultures. So much so that, until the beginning of the 2000s, the global circulation direction of television dramas was moving in a line from the West to the East, with the emergence of different transnational connection points, there has been a flow from East to West (Kim, 2013). The international recognition of the Turkish TV series industry has increased with the industrialization trend after the 2000s. In this respect, Turkish series, which first became increasingly popular in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans, expanded their audience in the following years and started to be watched in South America, Europe, and North America. They now rank third in the export of scripted series, with global demand for Turkish series increasing by 184% between 2020 and 2023 (The Economist, 2024). The rising popularity of Turkish TV series in recent years and their consumption by audiences beyond national borders have increased interest in reception studies. There has been an increase in studies examining the reasons behind the growing popularity of Turkish series in Latin America, Asia, the Balkans, and the Arabian Peninsula from textual, political economy, and reception perspectives (Berg, 2017a; Yanardağoğlu & Karam, 2013; Çaylı Rahte, 2017; Aslan, 2019; Khan & Won, 2020; Kaptan, 2013; Arda et al., 2021).

The adaptation of Turkish TV series in the USA from 2015 onwards marks a significant turning point. In 2015, *Runner*, an adaptation of the Turkish series *Son*, was produced by ABC, one of the world's largest TV production companies. In 2016, the series *Suskunlar* was aired by the major media company NBC under the title *Game of Silence* (Patten, 2016). Following these two Turkish TV series, although Turkish TV series have not reached as many viewers in the USA as in Latin America, the Middle East, and Europe, they have started to attract an increasing number of American viewers. It can be said that the interest of American viewers in Turkish series has increased year by year. USA demand for Turkish series increased by 24% compared to the previous year, with a surge observed in late 2022. This rising demand for Turkish content is particularly visible in the performance of series like *Family Secrets (Yargi)* (Parrot Analytics, 2023).

This research examines the global spread of Turkish TV dramas and their cultural impact on international viewers, particularly in the USA. It analyzes how non-Western media affects Western audiences, contributing to discussions on globalization and cultural exchange. It also presents concrete findings on how media, as seen through Turkish TV dramas, play a part in building cross-cultural understanding and dialogue. Our study on the reception of Turkish TV series by USA audiences reveals that TV series viewers span a wide demographic spectrum, but there is a clear trend of older female viewers' interest in the series. Although there was initially no specific focus on this demographic group, due to the voluntary distribution of participants, the sample was dominated by older and mostly female viewers. This tendency led the study to focus on the experiences of this group in order to understand the cultural impact of the *dizi*.

International, multinational, and transnational media

Transnational media production should be distinguished from international and multinational media production. International media sell commodities and services produced by workers in their own national factories to consumers in other nations (e.g., Comcast exports *Fast and Furious* films to China). Multinational media produce and sell commodities and services produced by workers in their own national factories and by factories owned by a subsidiary of the same corporation in another nation. (e.g., Disney produces television programs for its wholly owned *UTV India*, while production decisions and profits remain with *Disney US*). Transnational media are much different. Transnational media jointly own two or more companies from two or more nations. Transnational media companies (TNMCs) may exist through short-term joint ventures

or more permanent partnerships with majority and minority shares owned by two or more companies from two or more nations. For example, *Disney* is a TNMC as 26% co-owner of Canada's *Vice Media*, co-producer of *Dangal* (2016) with *Aamir Khan Productions*, and 1/3 owner of the Argentine film studio, *Patagonik* (Artz, 2022, pp.30-31).

Turkish transnational media companies (TNMCs) have both joint ventures and co-production partnerships with media on every continent. Turkish TNMCs produce Turkish dizi that are popular around the world. It is estimated that the export of Turkish dramas to more than 150 countries may reach about \$1 billion in sales (Medit, 2024), surpassing US exports to the Middle East and North Africa (Navani, 2021). In fact, Türkiye is now the fastest growing TV series exporter in the world and the second largest TV exporter after the US (Daily Sabah, 2024a).

Medyapim, *Bocek Yapim*, *Pana Film*, *Mind-Made*, *TIMS Production*, *Ay Yapim*, and other Turkish TNMCs have co-productions deals in the USA, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. For example, *Panamerica TV* in Peru imports more TV productions from Türkiye than Latin America. In Chile, *Mega TV* increased its audience share from 4 to 29 after airing more Turkish dramas. Although the Turkish government provided some support for TV exports, recently censorship and declining subsidies have interfered with TV drama production. (Artz, 2023).

In 2020, *Viacom* coproduced *El asesino del olvido* with *Medyapim* and *Ay Yapim* and Chile's *Mega TV* coproduced *20 Minutos* with the same Turkish companies (Cabrera, 2019). Likewise, Turkish dramas are also popular with Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and Greek audiences, and some actors have become celebrities in those countries (Tuncell, 2011). In Eastern Europe, *Calinos Entertainment* coproduced the Romanian hit *Fructul Oprit* with *Antena 1*.

In short, the political economy of current Turkish media production and distribution, including internet and streaming, identifies an emerging transnational model of coproduction, joint venture, and shared content. Have struck lucrative coproduction alliances with TNMCs in the USA, Europe, and Latin America (Iturri, 2021, p.117).

Content themes in Turkish *dizi*

Importantly, similar thematic content appears in all Turkish TNMC productions, encompassing programming aired on *Netflix*, *Disney*, *Sony*, *Saudi Arabia's Middle East Broadcast Corporation (MBC)* (Vivarelli, 2022). Spain's *Mediapro* (Balaga & Hopewell, 2023). Italy's *Mediaset* (C21, n.d.), Pakistan's *Dot Media* (DRM, 2023), South Africa's *e.tv* (Ferreira, 2022). *MegaTV* in Chile (Hurriyet, 2022), *GrupoATV* in Peru (ttvnews, 2012), and on *O Globo* in Brazil (Balaga & Hopewell, 2023). Thus, consumerist messages promoting wealth and fashion are prominent in several Turkish transnational productions, with representations of affluent lifestyles appearing across various genres, including historical dramas.

In particular, *dizi* often relate stories of poor, beautiful girls rescued from bad relatives by handsome, rich men, all set amid the rich cultural tapestry of Istanbul and the Bosphorus. 'Family stories with big talents and directors, and great music' attract audiences globally, according to Izzet Pinto from Istanbul distributor Global Agency. Arab viewers also enjoy the Turkish modern life depicted in *dizi*, which still feature the poor in scenes highlighting traditional values and narratives. Such stories attract viewers across the Middle East and globally (Navani, 2021).

In the Arab world, Latin America, and the Balkans, Turkish TV series are quite popular. More than half of viewers in the Arab world have seen at least one Turkish TV series (Ottasilver, 2022). Moreover, as an emerging contributor to a transnational culture of consumption, Turkish *dizi* feature luxurious mansions, royal palaces, and other attractive settings—with most of the TV series produced in Istanbul, a city full of beautiful natural landscapes and well-known historical sites. Actors are attractive and wear the latest fashion. Additionally, following Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (JDP) regulations over content (Radio and Television Law of Türkiye No. 2954), Turkish *dizi* expresses the cultural values of family and Islamic traditions, which are prevalent across the Arab world.

Gabrielle Ferreira (2022) found that what interested viewers most in Turkish TNMC *Ay Yapım's Fatmagul* (2015) fit several categories: Fatmagul's overcoming adversity, her fight for justice, the romance between Fatmagul and Kerim, and the opportunity to get to know another culture (p.80). Besides the opportunity to learn about Turkish culture, *Fatmagul* offered many individualistic narratives—her personal resolve, her

individual romance, and her tragic self-interest. Ferreira concluded, "*Fatmagul's* audience seems to be mainly made up of women... reflecting conservative moral values through melodrama's classical structure." Viewers of *Fatmagul* were mostly interested in the protagonist overcoming obstacles, the fight for justice, and the romance—all elements of melodrama, a genre people relate to despite their culture (p.82).

While "themes of forbidden love, impossible love, and treason attract attention and create excitement for viewers... in Turkish TV dramas, tensions related to traditional social and cultural norms are used to complicate the scenario" (Ottasilver 2022). Ahu Yigit (2013) suggests, "The main appeal of Turkish television series seems to be the 'modern' lifestyle they present," which is nonetheless always packaged in traditional relationships. From the Arab perspective, modernity is especially inherent in certain types of gender relations and gender equality. Despite the strong patriarchal narrative, recently in Turkish series, "women enjoy a freer standing in society compared to most of their Middle Eastern counterparts, take part in professional life and have rather liberal relations with men" (Yigit, 2013, p.292). Arab women have also expressed strong appreciation for the romantic male characters featured. Further contributing to the series' appeal is the fact that all of this is presented in a setting of wealth and luxury enjoyed in mansions near the Bosphorus.

Many transnational Turkish-American media partnerships have recently increased the ratings of Turkish TV series both in the USA and globally. For example, the TV series *Suskunlar* was remade as *Game of Silence* on NBC and aired in many countries (Fitzpatrick, 2016). Transnational *Ay Yapim's* Turkish drama, *Son* (2018-2019) was sold to *20th Century Fox Television* and adapted into *Runner for ABC* (Goldberg, 2015). *Ay Yapim* also partnered with media in Russia (Franks, 2013), Spain (Roxborough, 2015), Netherlands (Anadolu, 2016), and France (Señal News, 2020). In 2017, *Kara Sevda (Endless Love)* won an Emmy for Best Telenovela of the Year (Daily Sabah, 2017). Turkish actor Haluk Bilginer was selected as 'Best Actor' for TNMC *Ay Yapim's* series, *Şahsiyet (Persona)*, 2018, 2020) at the 47th International Emmy Award (Daily Sabah, 2024b). In 2020, Türkiye's *BluTV* partnered with *FX* on *Alef*, winning the 'best crime drama' award at the New York Festival. As the first Turkish crime drama, *Alef*, was also selected for *Variety's* "Top 15 International TV Series" (Lang, et.al., 2020). *MF Yapim* coproduced *Sen Çal Kapımı (Love is in the Air)* (2020-21) with *Fox* in the USA. Meanwhile, *MF Yapim* also struck broadcasting partnerships in some 40 countries (MIP China, 2022).

Recently, the Turkish transnational *Birtaff* and *Netflix* coproduced *Make Me Believe* (2020), which reached #10 in *Netflix* USA audience ratings. One critic confirmed the romantic appeal of the film: “*Make Me Believe* created a world that the viewer can get lost in. The dreamily-paced romantic developments which build between the beautiful actors are supported by stunning visual backdrops of sparkling seas, sun-dappled quaint towns, and ancient rocky coastlines” (Edwards, 2023). Turkish *Tims & B Productions* partnered with *Netflix* on *Shahmaran* (2023), which included some nudity which challenged Turkish traditions, but ranked #9 in *Netflix* USA Top 10 (Jay, 2023). Another Turkish *Netflix* crime drama *Who Were We Running From?* (2023) ranked #4 on the USA Top 10—becoming the #1 non-English show on *Netflix* (Meek, 2023).

Overall, given the transnational partnerships sought after and forged by Turkish media, Western cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1976; Mirrlees, 2015) appears to have been replaced by an emerging transnational global culture of consumption (Artz, 2022) with the participation of media in almost every nation. In short, a materialist assessment of global media practices indicates we have entered a new era of transnational media co-production, dissemination, and viewer consumption featuring themes of wealth, romance, crime, and fashion while accepting existing traditional values of gender and class inequality. These themes remain attractive to both US viewers and Turkish immigrants to the US, with intercultural impacts on both audiences.

Narratives without boundaries: Transcultural dialogue through Turkish television in the United States of America

Many studies have explored how series and dramas broadcast on transnational media platforms shape viewers’ perceptions of new cultures and lifestyles. These studies emphasize how audiences construct their cultural identities, understand otherness, and interact with global cultures through television narratives (Ang, 2013; Iwabuchi, 2002; Kraidy, 2010; Kumar, 2006; Straubhaar, 2007).

The acceleration of media globalization has transformed cultural interactions and created a more interconnected global media landscape. In this process of transformation, the rapid spread of digital distribution technologies and streaming platforms has affected the cross-border circulation of cultural content (Lobato, 2019). While satellite television facilitated cross-cultural media flows to a certain extent, the emergence of streaming services radically transformed content access (Wayne, 2020). Digital platforms

make it possible for content to reach different audiences quickly by removing traditional distribution barriers (Lotz, 2017). This new media landscape offers significant opportunities, especially for non-Western productions, while platforms like *Netflix's* investment in local stories and global distribution strategies have created new connection points for Turkish, Korean and other national productions to reach international audiences (Jenner, 2018). The popularity of Turkish dramas among American audiences exemplifies this shift, indicating a move towards a more inclusive global culture. This media-driven cultural exchange reflects mutual cultural influences, matching recent debates on how non-Western media shapes global narratives, challenging the traditional dominance of Western media (Jin & Yoon, 2016). Turkish dramas offer American viewers a particular mediated representation of Turkish society, one that combines contemporary storytelling with specific cultural elements and social dynamics, reflecting traditional family values or local social issues not typically covered in Western media. While these series, like any media product, present selective and sometimes idealized portrayals of their cultural origins, they provide American audiences with alternative narratives to predominant Western media representations. Although series can challenge certain preexisting stereotypes (Akser, 2014; Bayraktaroğlu, 2019) about Turkish culture, they may simultaneously construct new, potentially romanticized expectations/perceptions. Such encounters with foreign cultures via media can reduce stereotypical thinking and promote appreciation of cultural complexities (Kim & Song, 2019).

The storytelling's effectiveness comes from its depiction of universal human experiences and emotions, supporting theories of narrative transportation that show how storytelling can build empathy and change attitudes (Slater & Rouner, 2002). The shift in American viewers' perceptions of Türkiye demonstrates the media's power in shaping cross-cultural understanding through parasocial interactions (Tukachinsky et al., 2017). American audiences' embrace of Turkish dramas signifies a shift in global media consumption patterns, giving rise to an inclusive cultural dialogue that challenges Western narrative hegemony. This diversification of the media ecosystem enriches global cultural interactions, leading to a pluralistic exchange of ideas and perspectives (Appadurai, 1996).

Aim and methodology

To explore the conditions and consequences of Türkiye's transnational television production, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating audience

ethnography and reception analysis. By examining the reception of Turkish television dramas among American viewers, the research aims to understand how these media products influence and reshape cultural perceptions and strengthen transcultural dialogue in a globalized world.

Aim

In a globalizing diasporic world, the problems caused by the perception of different cultures as foreign, and/or the positive impact of creating a favorable view of the foreign/other/immigrant, highlight the importance of intercultural communication. The main goal here is to prevent conflicts arising from the encounters of different national cultures and/or to eliminate prejudices related to different ethnic elements or sub-cultures within the same culture. The increasing success of Turkish TV series in the market underscores the significance of understanding the flow of media products from East to West and how new cultural products are received within the framework of dominant and dependent cultures. In this regard, is there a chance for non-dominant cultures to influence the dominant culture in a globalizing cultural environment? Do people in the host culture experience these cultural products and accept the newcomers more easily? These questions demonstrate that cultural flow is bidirectional and mutually influential.

By examining the distribution and reception of Turkish TV series in the USA, the research explores the implications of transnational media flows on intercultural communication and global cultural encounters. It analyzes how Turkish dramas function for cultural exchange, improving cross-cultural understanding while challenging existing stereotypes and cultural hegemonies. Through audience ethnography and in-depth interviews, this research offers concrete evidence of how Turkish *dizi* contribute to a more interconnected and inclusive global media landscape.

RQ1: How do Turkish television dramas influence American viewers' perceptions of Turkish culture?

RQ2: In what ways do Turkish TV series challenge and reshape existing stereotypes about Türkiye and its people among American audiences?

RQ3: What are the key themes and narratives in Turkish dizi that appeal to American viewers?¹

Method

This study employs a mixed-methods approach incorporating ethnographic observation notes and in-depth interviews within the frameworks of critical theory and audience reception studies. The primary aim of audience ethnography is to analyze how viewers engage with media texts within their societal contexts, rather than merely focusing on media technologies or content. Media ethnography examines the reciprocal interaction between audiences and media representations, exploring how these interactions influence viewers' perspectives (Peterson, 2003). Therefore, it is crucial to conduct such ethnographic studies in the natural environments of the viewers, ensuring the authenticity of the data collected.

In conducting ethnographic research, the researcher should set aside personal values, attitudes, and judgments. The objective is not merely to obtain numerical data but to analyze how individuals' behaviors and thoughts are shaped by their interactions with their sociocultural environment (Taylan, 2012). Adopting an audience ethnography perspective is essential for such academic studies, as it encompasses the socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts of the region where the research is conducted, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the audience-media relationship (Algan, 2009).

Welsch (1999) argues that the multicultural structure of the USA, coupled with globalization, has transcended homogeneous cultural frameworks, resulting in highly interconnected and intertwined cultural interactions. Given the study's focus on the reception of Turkish television dramas by Turkish immigrants and local American citizens, and how these cultural encounters impact daily life, audience ethnography is deemed the most appropriate method. Audience ethnography emphasizes the changes in daily life resulting from individuals' interactions with media content, focusing on how cultural values confront dominant cultural norms.

This methodology follows the traditions of audience ethnography as defined in the cultural studies framework, influenced by the works of Morley and Brunson (1999) and Radway (1991). In addition to these traditions, the researcher spent time with

participants not only watching TV but also engaging in their everyday lives. Following Morley (1992), the audience sample is considered as unfinished subjects, where the meaning of TV drama content is realized through viewers' interpretations. The interaction between viewer and text is continuously rewritten with each reception, forming an ongoing chain of relationships. This research aims to understand and interpret the sociocultural perspectives of audiences engaging with Turkish television dramas in a transcultural context, providing insights into how new cultural values are perceived and integrated.

Sampling

This study employed a comprehensive and multifaceted sampling strategy to explore the conditions and consequences of Türkiye's transnational TV production on American viewers. Initially, New York, Indiana, and California were selected due to their diverse socio-cultural landscapes and significant immigrant populations. These states provided a backdrop to examine cultural encounters and media reception from multiple perspectives.

Table 1. Profile of participants in ethnographic study

Interview	Age	Gender	Location
Interview 1	69	Female	Tennessee
Interview 2	75	Female	Washington DC
Interview 3	75	Female	Connecticut
Interview 4	69	Female	New Jersey
Interview 5	52	Female	Indiana
Interview 6	56	Female	New York
Interview 7	19	Female	Indiana
Interview 8	69	Female	Massachusetts
Interview 9	66	Female	Michigan
Interview 10	20	Female	Illinois
Interview 11	75	Female	Boston
Interview 12	81	Female	Georgia
Interview 13	80	Female	Virginia
Interview 14	65	Female	Oklahoma
Interview 15	79	Female	Washington
Interview 16	53	Female	Illinois
Interview 17	47	Female	Oklahoma
Interview 18	34	Female	Michigan
Interview 19	68	Female	New York
Interview 20	72	Female	Arizona
Interview 21	50	Female	Texas
Interview 22	44	Female	California
Interview 23	60	Female	Missouri
Interview 24	32	Female	Illinois
Interview 25	68	Female	California
Interview 26	70	Female	Texas
Interview 27	60	Female	California
Interview 28	75	Female	Texas
Interview 29	75	Female	New York

Recognizing the limitations of a confined geographic sample, the researcher expanded the research scope through an extensive road trip covering over 20 states and 100 cities across the USA. This journey aimed to capture a broad spectrum of American experiences and attitudes towards Turkish TV dramas. During this trip, the researcher engaged with individuals in their everyday environments. This approach allowed for ethnographic observations and authentic interactions, providing a richer understanding of viewers' perceptions and cultural engagements.

Participants were recruited through various online platforms such as *Facebook* and *WhatsApp* groups, *Reddit*, *LinkedIn* and *Quora*. The participant pool was then expanded using a snowball sampling technique, with existing participants referring to others who were already watching Turkish TV series. In this study, none of the participants were directed to watch Turkish TV series; instead, individuals who were already watching Turkish TV series were interviewed.

A total of 29 in-depth interviews were conducted, with the majority of respondents being over 60 years of age, followed by a moderate proportion in the middle age group, and a small minority of young people. Although the research did not specifically target the elderly, this group dominated the sample, as it is this age group that actively watches Turkish TV series and volunteered for ethnographic observation. Younger viewers are also interested in Turkish TV series; some of them like the romantic elements and the attractiveness of the male characters. However, despite efforts such as e-mail announcements to the university network, younger viewers were less willing to participate in the interviews. The study does not claim that older respondents are representative of the attitudes and experiences of the entire population, but recognizes that this demographic makes an important contribution to understanding the appeal of Turkish TV series. Interviews, lasting between 45 minutes to 2.5 hours, were conducted to examine topics such as cultural authenticity, emotional connection, and the influence of Turkish dramas on perceptions of Turkish culture. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. The researcher read through all transcripts, took notes, and identified key themes considering the study's aims. Despite efforts to include male viewers, only one American male who watched *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* was identified, but he was unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts. To protect participant identities, codes such as P1, P2, etc., are used in this article. By spending time with participants in their environment and having conversations, the researcher was able to gather data that provided observations into their viewing habits and cultural reception pattern.

Findings

The data collected in the analysis phase of the research reveals the impact of Turkish TV series on American viewers and different aspects of intercultural interaction. The findings obtained as a result of the interviews and audience evaluations are categorized according to the following themes.

Cultural authenticity and appreciation

Turkish TV series have created a space of cultural dialogue in the transnational viewer's world that transcends a mere viewing experience (Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013). The depth of this cultural interaction is especially evident in American viewer evaluations. Series such as *Şahmaran* and *We Were Running Away From Who, Mom?* have been included in the *Netflix US Top 10* list, a remarkable achievement among non-English content (Netflix Tudum, 2023). Rotten Tomatoes (2023) reviews of *Şahmaran* reveal the sensitive attention paid to the series' cultural texture and narrative language. Viewers particularly emphasize that the series maintains its cultural authenticity by avoiding unnecessary dramatic elements (Rotten Tomatoes, 2023; BGR, 2023). While American viewers are accustomed to individual decision-making, they encounter extended family structures where three generations share living spaces and non-individual decisions shape daily life. Similarly, traditional practices, such as tea ceremonies and religious festivities, offer American audiences a window into formal social customs that differ from their casual social interactions (BGR, 2023). This may also be related to the interest and satisfaction that discovering different cultural richness creates in viewers. The fact that Korean and Spanish dramas have also attracted large audiences around the world in recent years demonstrates their ability to reach global audiences by blending local cultural elements with universal themes (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Ibarra & Navarro, 2022).

Turkish dramas provide American audiences insight into the complexities of Turkish culture. As P29 noted, "The cultural aspect of that movie really grabbed me... We learned about the Roman Empire... but we never learned about the Ottoman Empire ever. So that's very new to Americans. That's why I was so mesmerized by this." Through Turkish dramas, audiences are introduced to often-overlooked elements of Turkish heritage, sparking an interest in its rich culture, history, and language, bringing new perspectives to light. P1 expressed this growing interest, saying, "When the Ottoman Empire... And I started learning the real meaning of Islam. And I was so moved and attracted to it. I

think Islam is a beautiful, beautiful religion. I have a Koran on my Kindle." By moving beyond stereotypes, this curiosity inspires a greater respect for cultural differences and transforms storytelling into an educational experience that promotes awareness and understanding through authentic and engaging depictions. As P14 stated, "I like and appreciate so much of it. We have differences but by far we have more similarities and I respect their culture very much." Participant feedback reveals how global media consumption enhances cross-cultural understanding, reminding us of Iwabuchi's (2002) concept of "cultural odor." The unique cultural elements of media content act as an attraction rather than a deterrent, suggesting that Turkish dramas serve as conduits through which American viewers can explore the rich cultural landscape of Türkiye—its values, traditions, and historical context—thereby cultivating an appreciation for its culture.

Narrative and emotional engagement

American audiences are interested in the stories of romance, historical narratives and moral conflicts presented in Turkish TV series. Turkish TV series frequently feature themes that are important in Turkish culture, such as family loyalty, social values and moral dilemmas (Kocamaner, 2017). While many American productions are more individualistic and action-oriented, Turkish series offer stories centered around character development and relationships, allowing viewers to form an emotional connection (Ökmen, 2023). By interweaving cultural and historical elements, Turkish TV series offer viewers a different perspective, thus contributing to a meaningful connection between different cultures (Larochelle, 2021). This kind of narrative transforms TV series from being just entertainment products and creates an opportunity for viewers to get to know different cultures. P19 emphasized, "Turkish TV has the best trained actors, production, and plots like no other countries I know of... I prefer Turkish TV because nothing else beats it for total substance and intelligence."

The emotional context of Turkish dramas, exploring vulnerability, familial ties, love, and loss, creates a deep connection with audiences. This deliberate projection of multifaceted human experiences invites viewers into a shared space of engagement and reflection, enriching the viewing experience with emotional depth. Supporting this idea, P24 comments, "I love the emotion that they show in the Turkish series. They're not afraid for the men to cry. They're not afraid for the men to show their temper. They're not afraid to show strong women... It's just a very emotional base." These layered

narratives and rich characterizations prompt viewers to reflect on their own lives and relationships. The compelling visual storytelling in *dizi*, marked by landscapes, historical authenticity, and cultural aesthetics, enhances narrative engagement. These visual elements serve not merely as backdrops but as integral components that enrich the emotional narrative, inviting viewers into a more immersive and appreciative viewing experience. Additionally, the attractiveness and talent of Turkish actors and actresses play a major role in captivating audiences: “Turkish actors are amazingly talented! The characters they play are done so well that you’re drawn into their storylines. The number of emotions I feel while watching these shows only proves how brilliant these actors are!” (P21). Most viewers are more likely to engage with and feel empathy for characters acted by attractive and talented performers, these qualities enhance the overall viewing experience and emotional connection. As P16 expressed,

and then I was hooked in this picture shows and I now I only watched Turkish shows. A lot of the Turkish actors are very handsome. But no, I just like, they’re so dramatic. And the storyline was so good. It just felt like a true love story. It felt like a real, honest, old fashioned love story. So that’s why I fell in love. Yeah, that guy is. He’s very handsome.

The contrast in storytelling pace, emotional depth, and portrayal of relationships and gender roles between Turkish dramas and their American counterparts offers viewers a refreshing alternative. Turkish series’ slower pacing and emotional richness provide a contemplative space, diverging from the fast-paced, action-focused narratives common in American media.

Building empathy & perceptions of Türkiye, Turkish people, and Turkish culture

The consumption of Turkish dramas by American audiences results in some shifts in their perceptions of Türkiye and its people. *Dizi* challenge existing stereotypes, promoting an understanding of Türkiye’s social diversity and complexity. Universal themes such as love, family, struggle, and resilience, along with complex character portrayals, lead viewers to see beyond surface-level judgments. This storytelling approach promotes understanding, as viewers connect with characters’ experiences despite cultural differences. For example, P14 remarked,

Before my image of Türkiye was of a 3rd world country with violent fundamentalist citizenry. I thought it was a poor unsophisticated and clannish people. My current perception is very different. From what I have seen it is a beautiful country with welcoming warm people and many cultural treasures.

This evolution in outlook illustrates how the media can reshape perceptions and foster an appreciation for the complexity and richness of Turkish culture.

Turkish dramas also serve an educational purpose by exposing viewers to historical and cultural contexts they might not be familiar with. Through storylines that address historical events, cultural practices, and social issues, these shows provide insights into Turkish heritage and contemporary life, thereby inducing cultural exchange. Initially, some viewers harbored stereotypical perceptions of Türkiye, but the depiction of Türkiye's landscapes, architectural marvels, and historical treasures significantly alters these perceptions. P4 shared,

I think it's beautiful. I think it's lovely... I love the way you get married. Love that with the TV, I love it... I just think the culture I love... I love hearing the call to prayer. Very, very comforted. I don't know why.

Dramas screen Türkiye's beauty, cultural richness, and historical depth, transforming the nation from an abstract location to a desired destination enriched with stories.

Stereotypes often result from a lack of knowledge and exposure to different cultures. By presenting complex characters, Turkish dramas challenge these stereotypes. They screen strong, independent women and caring, emotional men, which can contradict the often simplistic and negative representations of gender roles in the Middle East. By showcasing Turkish society's diversity and cultural richness, these narratives prompt viewers to question their biases, as P.14 shared:

My only previous impression of Türkiye was one that is stereotypical and, in my experience, in no way accurate. I did not envision them as gentle, pleasant, and warm people prior to being exposed to Turkish entertainment and sources of information. They seemed 'other' to me, but I feel closer to them now.

The dramas introduce audiences to a comprehensive view of Turkish culture, from family bonds and social customs to culinary arts and historical milestones. One participant remarked,

It's beautiful. Beautiful. I love when I see the young people within the old people's home. It's just like for a week, as we always say, this film which is, you know, and on a very good day, God bless you, is asking for the blessing. And I think it's beautiful. The music is very good. I like, you know, different music. I love the bands. I loved the guys dancing.

The participant's comments on family dynamics, music and traditions show that Turkish TV series reduce cultural distances through shared human experiences and values. Instead of seeing Turkish culture as foreign or 'other,' viewers begin to recognize elements that intersect with their own cultural experiences and values.

Cultural promotion, consumption, and self interest

The complex narratives and authentic representations spark heightened curiosity for cultural landscapes beyond their familiar confines, illustrating the universal appeal of storytelling in bridging emotional and cultural divides. P16 noted that American audiences' inherent self-centeredness limits their exposure to diverse cultures, and they expressed a desire for greater integration of Turkish cultural aspects in American society: "Americans are very arrogant and self-centered. We pretend like no one else exists in the world... I wish we had more aspects of Turkish culture in our society."

Turkish dramas serve as powerful paths for transcultural dialogue, effectively narrowing the chasm between Eastern and Western cultural spheres. The engagement with Turkish series demonstrates the capacity of international media to create connections across cultural rifts, advocating for a more inclusive global perspective. This sentiment is echoed by P19, who observed, "My view from *Facebook* is that more people from different ethnic groups are watching Turkish television shows instead of the American shows... I feel in time Turkish shows will definitely impact the cultural flow of Americans." Since American viewers mostly watch Turkish TV series with subtitles, they have a different viewing experience by interacting with visual and textual elements simultaneously. As Participant 6 noted below, while subtitles encourage the viewer to make a more active effort to understand the story, sometimes may require 'rewinding

and trying to understand' scenes. This experience feels more like watching a book than opening and reading it, as subtitles involve the viewer in interpreting cultural details on their own. By allowing viewers to actively participate in the process of translation and contextualization, subtitles create a space of escape that is both novel and intellectually stimulating.

...Because there are subtitles. They forced me to sit and watch, one episode a week of each week of the show. So, I mean, obviously. I don't sit there for the whole time, but. I like the fact that I can sit and I'm reading and, and I still have to figure it out... And now rewind it to try to figure out because it doesn't match what I think is happening. Because they're not there. Some of them aren't that good. The the, subtitle. So, it's it's escapism into a world. It's like almost like it's almost like opening up a book, but instead of reading it, you're watching it. Okay. So it's very exciting. So there you go. (P6)

By transcending geographic and cultural boundaries, these dramas not only entertain but also educate, leading to a more interconnected and empathetic world. They reinforce the importance of diverse narratives in the global cultural ecosystem, promoting global cultural exchange and counter-cultural flows. As P14 reflected, "I believe that the more exposure Turkish TV series receive in the USA, the more their culture will be received favorably."

The reception analysis of this research, derived from participant interviews, underscores four key themes: cultural authenticity and appreciation, narrative and emotional engagement, building empathy and perceptions of Türkiye, and cultural promotion. These themes highlight how American audiences perceive Turkish TV dramas, reflecting a fascination with and appreciation for the representation of Turkish culture, traditions, and social values. However, it is important to note that these perceptions are shaped by representations rather than real encounters with Türkiye and its people. The portrayals in Turkish dramas provide a mediated understanding of Turkish culture that may not fully align with the complexities of the actual Turkish experience. Unlike the past, where Turkish representation in the USA was largely mediated by American media, the current portrayal is directly crafted by Turkish media. After examining the implications of the research findings, the following section presents a critical analysis of audience reception based on ethnographic observations.

Discussion and conclusion

The rise of non-Western content, especially Turkish TV series, in Western markets may seem like a break from Western cultural hegemony, but it reflects a more complex cultural interaction. The melodramatic narrative tradition that characterizes today's Turkish TV series - with its intense emotions, moral conflicts and sometimes seemingly unrealistic plots - is actually present in the history of Turkish cinema itself. Frequent "rich man-poor woman" narratives, over-dramatized character expressions of emotion, or unrealistic plots are meant to reinforce the impact of a universally appealing melodramatic narrative rather than reflect the social structure that exists in Turkish culture (Berg, 2017b). Long before Western media gained widespread access in Türkiye, the Yeşilçam era (1950s-1970s) had already adopted similar themes - impossible loves, class conflicts and family dramas - that we see in TV series today (Yüksel, 2011, pp.93-99). In short, rather than simply adopting Western narrative traditions, Turkish TV series combine modern production values with this rich melodramatic heritage. While productions such as *Muhteşem Yüzyıl (The Magnificent Century, 2011)* or *Kara Para Aşk (Black Money Love, 2014)* employ sophisticated cinematography and production techniques associated with Western television, the core of their narratives - with their emphasis on complex family dynamics, fateful coincidences and emotional intensity - is distinctly rooted in the Turkish melodramatic tradition. In this context, even if Turkish TV series offer cultural authenticity, the fact that they are shaped by Western narrative patterns does not completely distance them from the content forms of Western media and makes them dependent on these narrative forms to a certain extent. This hybrid form indicates that the global media landscape continues to be shaped by transnational capitalist norms, even while superficially embracing diversity which manifests as the inclusion of non-Western stories and characters while maintaining Western storytelling conventions and production values. The cultural exposure through media often leads to a superficial appreciation rather than a deep, transformative understanding of the "other" (Cruz et al., 2024). The appeal of these narratives to Western audiences should not be mistaken for a genuine cross-cultural exchange or a challenge to transnational entertainment influence. The difference between what is shown and what actually happens is a reminder that watching these stories does not imply a genuine cultural mix. Instead, non-Western narratives presented in Western formats suggest that cultural products are shaped in a consumption-oriented way to adapt to transnational market demands, and that this adaptation creates a consumption-oriented effect rather than an authentic cultural exchange. The critical view lies in examining not only the content

but also the structural dynamics of transnational media production, which is evident in several aspects of Turkish TV series. While *The Magnificent Century* presents Ottoman history, it does so through heightened drama and visual spectacle designed to appeal to international audiences rather than historical accuracy. Besides, contemporary Turkish series like *Black Money Love* maintain their melodramatic elements but package them with glossy production values and universal themes that align with global market expectations. Cultural elements are often modified or amplified to meet commercial demands as traditional family values are dramatized for effect and cultural conflicts are simplified for broader appeal. Transnational media production often prioritizes marketability over authentic cultural representation, transforming cultural elements into consumable entertainment products.

Regarding the relation between the conservative culture appreciation of Türkiye and the tendency of a conservative society in the US nowadays, the interviews suggest that the conservative elements in Turkish TV series appeal to some American viewers who are either part of or sympathetic to conservative values in the USA. These viewers appreciate the representation of a society where individualist, family, and ironically, communal values are prioritized, which they find refreshing and lacking in American entertainment media. This does not necessarily mean a direct influence of Turkish culture on American viewers but rather an appreciation for narratives that echo existing values or a nostalgia for such values. The concept of “cultural odor” (Iwabuchi, 2002) can help to explain why American audiences are drawn to Turkish dramas. It highlights the distinctive cultural characteristics embedded in media content. The prominence of traditional norms and conservative social values in Turkish dramas corresponds with the preferences of American audiences who value such, making these productions more engaging for them. While traditional norms and conservative social values in Turkish TV series are portrayed in modern stories through moral conflicts centered around love, loyalty and family ties, in historical TV series social values are portrayed through conservative perspectives of the Ottoman or Seljuk period, where elements such as social hierarchy, gender roles and male authority remain unchanged. Thus, Turkish TV series, whether dealing with historical or contemporary themes, present a distinctive identity that attracts Western viewers through the consistency of cultural norms and values. Among the participants, the majority of individuals from different age groups show a strong commitment to religious and family values in their daily lives. These range from regular visits to church to volunteer work in religious organizations. P24, 32 years-old, said, “Yesterday I went to church, then I visited a lady who will be 90

years old... She prepared me a delicious meal of pork loin, green beans, carrots and potatoes," illustrating how religious and friendship values are intertwined in everyday life. Quality time spent with family is also of particular importance for these viewers; family meals, attending children's school events or watching sporting events together are essential elements of everyday life. Family-oriented practices are also reflected in television viewing experiences. As a matter of fact, university student P17 stated, "When *Sultan* [TV series] was on, my family would get together every night to watch it. It was a big event where everyone gathered and watched it together," revealing that family ties are strengthened through media consumption. It is precisely at this point that the interest in conservative values portrayed in Turkish TV series among American viewers gains meaning.

Ethnographic observations and interviews reveal that most participants, regardless of age, have a nostalgic longing for traditional American values and lifestyle (American Dream). While older participants draw from lived experiences, younger and middle-aged viewers express this nostalgia through their critique of contemporary American media content. P24 stated that "American TV shows are all about sex, there is no real connection between people. They also belittle women. This disturbs me," captures the underlying tension between traditional values and contemporary media content. Similarly, a young viewer (P10) who turned to Turkish TV series with nostalgic feelings said, "Sweet love stories like in *Heartbeats*, slow-building romance... I really like these," expressing her longing for traditional narratives.

Nostalgia, which emerges as a reaction to social change and instability, provides a kind of comfort to viewers by reminding them of a simpler and idealized past (Pickering & Keightley, 2006). For American viewers of different age groups, the conservative values, strong family ties and traditional lifestyles portrayed in Turkish TV series evoke a sense of familiarity and longing for values that they perceive to be weakened in today's society. Interviews reveal the prevalence of this feeling across generations: A 47-year-old viewer (P17) said: "The dramas are wonderfully written. Reminds me of romance novels I read as a teenager minus the sexual content," while a 52-year-old participant (P5) said, "I think the older stuff is more romantic... of course, and, remind you of things you might have forgotten and let you see different perspectives." These views, together with P26's observations that community and family-centered narratives recall her own home and neighborhood experiences, illustrate how audiences of different ages connect with these narratives through their own memories and ideals.

This multigenerational nostalgia, rather than age-related nostalgia, points to a broader cultural response to the perceived shift towards individualism and the weakening of community and family ties.

When participants talk about their youth and how it differs from today, they often recall a time when outdoor play was the norm, neighborhood relationships were strong, and entertainment was found in community gatherings and family activities. The link between this nostalgic longing and Turkish TV series can be seen in the viewers' appreciation of the series that transports them to a world where these values are still alive. In a rapidly changing world, media offers audiences the opportunity to connect with an idealized past (Boym, 2008; Niemeyer, 2014). By emphasizing traditional values, respect for elders and the importance of family and community life, Turkish TV series offer an escape from the materialistic and fast-paced lifestyle that viewers associate with modern American society.

American interest in Turkish TV series has developed through a cultural perspective where Western audiences meet unfamiliar traditions, histories, and beliefs, creating new ways of seeing the Muslim world and Middle Eastern culture. The appeal stems from how these series present Islamic faith, Ottoman history, and Turkish customs—elements often oversimplified or misrepresented in American media through stereotyping of Muslim identity in USA media (Pennington, 2003). As P19 remarked, "I used to think they're uneducated low class middle eastern looking people."

Through these encounters, viewers discover and appreciate cultural elements that challenge their prior assumptions about Muslim societies. P29's comment about learning Ottoman history and peaceful aspects of Islam points to how these series help transform long-held misconceptions:

We learned about the Roman Empire. We learned about the Greek Empire... we never learned the Ottoman Empire ever. So that's very new to Americans. That's why I was so mesmerized by this. And again, the introduction to Islam, was also very, very interesting because I didn't know the piece of peaceable religion.

In the context of post-9/11 American media (Alsultany, 2012), where Muslims often appear through negative stereotypes (Bleich & van der Veen, 2022), Turkish series create alternative ways of understanding Islamic culture and Middle Eastern traditions through daily life stories and relatable characters.

The appeal of the “exotic” is not just a fascination with cultural differences but often involves a process of othering, where the foreign culture is romanticized and consumed as an entertainment commodity rather than fully understood in its own context (Said, 1978). The interest of Turkish cultural elements, while genuine in its attraction, often stops short of meaningful engagement with Türkiye’s social complexities. What emerges instead is a kind of cultural window-shopping, where distinctive aspects of Turkish life become consumable entertainment rather than windows into authentic cultural understanding.

American viewers’ attraction to Turkish TV series is part of a broader trend in global media consumption, where audiences are increasingly drawn to narratives that showcase cultural, ethnic, or racial elements perceived as exotic or distinct from their own norms. Such attraction to unfamiliar cultures reflects global media’s tendency to present differences through familiar storytelling frameworks, balancing exotic appeal with comfortable accessibility (Iwabuchi, 2002; Appadurai, 1996). In the context of transnational media production, the fascination of the foreign is both constructed and consumed within specific cultural and media ecosystems. For American viewers, Turkish TV series serve as a portal to a culture that is simultaneously familiar in its universal themes of love, family, and struggle, and exotic in its distinct cultural practices, values, and historical narratives. This dual nature of Turkish dramas—both exotic and relatable—enhances their appeal but also frames the viewers’ engagement through the lens of their own cultural backgrounds and media expectations (Appadurai, 1996).

As American audiences watch Turkish TV series, they make sense of new cultural elements by relating them to their own experiences and knowledge. Based on viewers’ responses to perceived similarities and differences, these cultural negotiations manifest through various levels of understanding. For instance, some viewers express immediate recognition based on appearance, as P23 notes “That Turkish people look just like us. That they aren’t all dark-skinned and hair.” Others engage with cultural parallels while acknowledging distinctions, as shown in P27’s observation “They are very kind people. They’re just like us. They just have different, they, you know, traditions.” However, as evidenced in these viewer responses, statements like “You are like us” can subtly position the speaker’s own culture as the standard or norm against which others are measured. Such comparisons reflect viewers’ attempts to bridge cultural gaps through recognition of shared human experiences, while consciously or unconsciously reinforcing a cultural hierarchy where the American way of life becomes the benchmark for accepting and validating different cultural experiences.

Turkish dramas have adapted to the digital medium by embracing a format that mirrors the episodic-narrative familiar to audiences of traditional American soap operas. Based on the established narrative structure of American soap operas—with their extended episodes, complex character developments, and emotional storytelling—these series attract viewers through recognizable formats while offering fresh cultural perspectives. A viewer articulates this connection, observing “It’s kind of like to me, they’re like telenovelas... like 60 episodes, 80 episodes, really long. But I can watch them because they’re good soap.” As these dramas find their place on digital platforms, they transform traditional narrative patterns into binge-worthy experiences, where familiar storytelling meets contemporary viewing habits. “*Netflix* was becoming a big thing. And they have like a whole bunch of different shows from different countries... And I saw this one show... *Love Bird* in English,” explains one viewer, illustrating how streaming platforms facilitate this cultural convergence. Streaming platforms turn these cultural encounters into daily routines, as viewers slip easily between familiar stories and fresh perspectives.

The blend of digital access and viewer experience creates new connections to American television’s past. A viewer’s reflection on past viewing experiences—“At least in the 70s and 80s, there was a little bit more of a story... I love the music in Turkish series. Older American shows and movies used to have more music”—reveals how Turkish dramas evoke nostalgic elements of American media culture. In the context of digital streaming, where content increasingly transcends national boundaries, these cultural resonances suggest how traditional storytelling techniques maintain their appeal while adapting to new media environments, creating what Banet-Weiser and colleagues (2007) describe as an expansion of viewers’ horizons through established viewing preferences.

Closing observations

This ethnographic study aims to understand the dynamics and limits of the intercultural dialog realized through Turkish soap operas. First, the family values, traditional lifestyles and community relations popularized by the series fulfill a nostalgic longing in viewers for values that American society has lost. Second, while the series transform prejudices about Turkish culture, Islam and Ottoman history, this transformation is limited within the commercial dynamics of transnational media partnerships. Third, while Turkish TV series create opportunities for genuine cultural dialogue, this interaction is shaped by the consumption-oriented structure of global capitalism.

Current TNMC production and distribution has consequences for the perceptions of global viewers in every nation and culture. Given the shared profit motives of transnational media partners, content available for global viewers conforms to the entertainment narratives appealing to consuming audiences and advertisers. While Turkish TV series have achieved international success primarily through productions produced in Türkiye, emerging transnational co-productions in Europe, the US and Latin America provide additional distribution channels for these series. With almost immediate access to digital streaming on computers, laptops, and cell phones, viewers almost everywhere are drawn to entertainment promoting individualism, consumerism, and other ideological themes such as militarism, austerity, and patriarchy necessary for global capitalism.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the broader discourse on transnational media flows, offering a replacement for cultural imperialism theory with more concrete and valuable insights into the actual dynamics of cultural cooperation resulting from transnational joint ventures and partnerships. Ironically, in the process of seeking global audiences and advertisers, transnational media contain some potential for narratives fostering mutual understanding and appreciation between disparate cultures. However, conditions for transcultural exchange remain limited by the political economic structures of transnational media partnerships and joint ventures primarily intended for profiting TNMCs and promoting a global culture of consumption—rather than real cultural exchange. The reception of Turkish TV series by American viewers exemplifies the complex interplay between transnational media and consumerist culture in a globalized world, highlighting media's capacity to integrate geographical and cultural boundaries for the narrow purpose of media profit.

ENDNOTES

¹While these research questions are framed for 'American viewers' in general, it should be noted that the study participants were all women. This was not by design but a result of the participant recruitment process. The findings should be viewed with this context in mind.

²This study was reviewed and received approval from the Purdue University Human Research Protection Program (HRPP). It was deemed exempt from IRB review on March 2, 2023 (IRB-2023-311). The study was classified under exemption categories 2(i) and

2(ii), which cover research involving surveys and interviews where participant identities are protected and responses do not pose risks to participants.

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The influence of Turkish TV series on Generation Z in South Africa: An exploratory study

Türk TV dizilerinin Güney Afrika'daki Z Kuşağı üzerindeki etkisi: Keşifsel bir çalışma

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Abstract

The worldwide popularity of Turkish TV series has been steadily growing. TV series, which became increasingly popular in geographies close to Türkiye, especially in the early 2000s, reached a worldwide reputation in the following years, and this success made positive contributions to public opinion about Türkiye. This study examines the popularity of Turkish TV series around the world and Türkiye's relations with South Africa within the framework of Türkiye's changing African policies in the last quarter century. The aim of the study is to investigate whether Generation Z in South Africa watches Turkish TV series, to determine which series are popular among them, to determine how their perception of Türkiye changes after watching these series, and to contribute to the academic literature on Türkiye's soft power in South Africa. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with audiences from various ethnic groups and genders living in different cities in South Africa. The study clearly showed that the participants generally had positive impressions about Türkiye's culture, nature, fashion and people through Turkish TV series. Moreover, many expressed a desire to visit Türkiye based on information from Turkish TV series, indicating a positive change in perceptions among Generation Z in South Africa.

Keywords: TV series, Türkiye, South Africa, perception of Türkiye, soft power

Öz

Türk TV dizilerinin dünya çapında popürlüğü her geçen yıl artmaktadır. Özellikle 2000'li yılların başlarında Türkiye'ye yakın coğrafyalarda giderek popüler hale gelen TV dizileri, sonraki yıllarda dünya çapında bir üne ulaşmış ve bu başarı Türkiye'nin dünya kamuoyundaki algısına olumlu katkılar sağlamıştır. Bu çalışmada öncelikle Türk TV dizilerinin dünya genelinde yakaladığı popürlük ve Türkiye'nin son çeyrek asırda değişen Afrika politikaları çerçevesinde Güney



Afrika ile ilişkileri ele alınmıştır. Çalışmanın amacı Güney Afrika'daki Z kuşağının Türk dizilerini izleyip izlemediğini araştırmak, hangi dizilerin onlar arasında popüler olduğunu belirlemek, bu dizileri izledikten sonra Türkiye algılarının nasıl değiştiğini tespit etmek ve Türkiye'nin Güney Afrika'daki yumuşak gücüne dair akademik literatüre katkı sağlamaktır. Bu amaçla, Güney Afrika'nın farklı şehirlerinde yaşayan, çeşitli etnik grup ve cinsiyetten izleyicilerle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Çalışma sonucunda katılımcıların genel olarak Türk TV dizileri aracılığıyla

Türkiye'nin kültürü, doğası, modası ve insanları hakkında olumlu izlenimler edindikleri açıkça görülmüştür. Ayrıca, katılımcıların büyük bir kısmının Türk TV dizilerini izledikten sonra öğrendikleri bilgilere dayanarak Türkiye'yi ziyaret etme arzusunu dile getirmeleri, Güney Afrika'daki Z kuşağının Türkiye'ye ilişkin algılarında olumlu yönde bir değişim yaşandığını işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: TV dizileri, Türkiye, Güney Afrika, Türkiye algısı, yumuşak güç

Introduction

Turkish TV series (*dizi* in Turkish) have a worldwide reputation that extends from the Balkans to the Middle East, from Central Asia to Russia, from South America to Africa (Algan & Kaptan, 2023; Aslan, 2019; M. H. Bilgin et al., 2016; Cassano Iturri, 2021; Ferreira, 2023; Rakhmani & Zakiah, 2020; Ruiz-Cabrera & Gürkan, 2023). The TV series can serve as a powerful form of mass communication that can infiltrate people's lives and influence their perceptions, behaviours, and preferences. The popularity of foreign TV programs in a country can influence the viewers' perceptions of the country of origin and the related products (Köksal & Gjana, 2015). Turkish series have transcended their initial financial and entertainment purposes to become an important tool for Türkiye's soft power and play a significant role in the country's foreign policy strategy. These series have not only captured global audiences, but have also enhanced Türkiye's cultural diplomacy, particularly under the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government, which strategically aligned the global success of these series with its broader foreign policy goals (Berg, 2017, p. 49). Soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye (1990), is the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion, relying on cultural and ideological appeal rather than military or economic force.

TV series stand out as a significant instrument within the cultural resources of soft power. Because they not only provide information to the audiences about the culture and lifestyle of the country of origin but also contribute positively to the image of the country. This phenomenon underscores the effectiveness of soft power in shaping international relations and highlights the potential of cultural sources to change or strengthen national images (Gallarotti, 2011).

Turkish foreign policy has experienced significant changes during the past twenty-five years. Türkiye has expanded its diplomatic relations through numerous institutions and organizations, with a special emphasis on Africa. In this context, 1998 was a significant turning point in Türkiye's relations with Africa. The African Action Plan, released in 1998, clearly sets out Türkiye's goal of strengthening economic, political, and cultural ties with African countries. The Year of Africa, declared in 2005, is another important development that shows that Turkish-African relations are entering a new phase (Oğurlu, 2017, p. 48; Öztürk & Duman, 2023). With this new approach of Turkish foreign policy, Türkiye's influence has expanded beyond the North Africa, which was the part of Ottoman Empire, and has actively sought to build closer relations with the countries

in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). During this period, Türkiye's endeavours towards South Africa, one of the prominent nations in SSA, has gained significant momentum.

In fact, the relations between Türkiye and South Africa can be traced back to the 19th century, especially in terms of cultural contacts. According to Sıradağ (2017) the impact of Abubakr Effendi, an Ottoman scholar sent to South Africa in 1862 to provide religious education, in South Africa was substantial in comprehending the depth of enduring historical connections between the two nations. The bilateral relations between the two nations declined in the years after the formation of the Republic of Türkiye. However, towards the end of the 20th century, they began to develop again in accordance with Türkiye's evolving policies towards the African continent. As a matter of fact, Türkiye continues to attempt to increase its sphere of influence in South Africa through its diplomatic and commercial efforts and numerous institutions (Çetinkuş et al., 2018, pp. 93-116). For this purpose, Yunus Emre Institute, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TCCA), and Maarif Foundation, which are Türkiye's main public diplomacy tools, have started to operate in South Africa (Bilgin & Karaman, 2020, p. 272). In addition, Turkish Airlines started flights to eliminate the physical distance between two countries.

Starting from the assumption that TV series play a decisive role in creating a positive perception of the country of origin, this study examines if the perceptions of the Generation Z age group in South Africa about Türkiye as a country have changed after watching a Turkish TV series. Within the theoretical framework of the study, the focus is on the popularity of Turkish TV series worldwide, Türkiye's presence on the African continent, especially in South Africa, and the contribution of popular culture products such as television series to the image of Türkiye in the minds of audiences. Furthermore, this study aims to contribute to the growing academic literature on Türkiye's recent and increasingly prominent involvement in the African continent. To achieve this aim, information was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using qualitative methods. The significance of the study lies in its uniqueness in examining Turkish TV series in South Africa and their impact on perceptions of Türkiye.

Turkish TV series with rising popularity around the world

It is known that television series with international popularity help the countries of origin to gain a positive perception in the eyes of the other nations and to increase the

soft power potential of origin countries (Berg, 2017; Ruiz-Cabrera & Gürkan, 2023). Therefore, cultural productions such as TV series are important tools to create a favourable image of the origin countries in the international arena. Türkiye has been one of these countries and utilizing TV series to improve its image since the mid-2000s on a worldwide scale.

According to Kaptan and Algan (2020, p. 12) the internationalisation of the Turkish TV industry started as a temporary measure against content theft abroad. After the success of the Turkish TV products in the world market, Turkish TV executives endeavoured to sustain the growth and global expansion. Accordingly, to remain globally competitive, the industry has engaged in participating in cross-border TV fairs, collaborating with global distributors, allocating large budgets for marketing and publicity, conducting marketing research to understand what is in demand in the market, and partnering with multiple content carriers such as *Netflix* to make its contents available to more people, both in the country itself and around the world (Algan, 2020).

Since then, a growing number of Turkish TV series have been exported to different markets and have also reached high prices and ratings from watchers worldwide (Yesil, 2015). The *Gümüş* (Noor in Arabic) TV series represents a tipping point for the transnationalization of Turkish TV series. *Gümüş* has not been the first Turkish TV series to be retailed to the foreign market but has become a hit on Arab television. ('Inside Islam's Culture War,' 2012). In fact, approximately 80 million people in the Arab world watched the final episode of the *Gümüş* series in 2008 (Nosratian, 2015).

Millions of viewers in over 150 countries watch Turkish TV series each year. The first Turkish TV series to be exported was in 1981, when the series *Aşk-ı Memnu* was shown in France (Uştuk, 2019). Since then, Türkiye's TV series have seen a remarkable rise in global demand, particularly between 2020 and 2023, establishing Türkiye as the world's third-largest exporter of TV series, closely following the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (Keskin, 2024; The Third-Largest Exporter of Television Is Not Who You Might Expect, 2024). This achievement marks a historic milestone in which Turkish media content has reached a broad global audience for the first time (Özarlan, 2020). With international sales and a strong global following, Turkish series are particularly popular in Latin America, Korea, China and Russia (Bhutto, 2019). Recently, the global distributor Echo Rights concluded agreements leading to the licensing of the Turkish drama series *Yalı Çapkını* (Golden Boy in English) in more than 100 countries (*Golden*

Boy sold to more than 100 countries, 2023). Türkiye earned approximately \$600 million from the export of its TV series in 2022. This significant revenue reflects the increasing global demand for Turkish TV series and shows that the country has become a major exporter in the international television industry (Alakent, 2022; Keskin, 2024; The Third-Largest Exporter of Television Is Not Who You Might Expect, 2024).

Within slightly more than ten years, Turkish media has been exerting influence in regions that are both geographically and culturally distant from Türkiye. As a result, Turkish TV series have emerged as an alternative to the prominent (Western) media flow (Ferreira, 2023). According to Aslan's (2019, p. 47) research on Latin American TV viewers, the cultural sources of the media come from the West, especially from the USA. However, considering the impact of Turkish TV series in Chile, she states that Turkish TV series have the capability to alter the mainstream media flow. Similarly, Berg (2023, p. 22) states that the Western-centred media flow is losing its dominance and that a diversified and decentralised media environment may gradually gain power. The intense interest in Turkish TV series around the world is one of the most significant proofs of this trend. These series have spread Türkiye's influence across political, economic, and cultural spheres worldwide, including in Africa, where their growing popularity has fostered deeper cultural ties (Khalid, 2023). The fact that they are watched with admiration in African countries, for example Sudan (Donelli, 2019, p. 128), is an important indicator that Türkiye is expanding its soft power capacity in Africa as well.

Relations with South Africa in the context of Türkiye's changing African policy

With the swift elevation of Africa's prominence in global politics, there has been a corresponding escalation in competition for influence over the continent (Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu, 2019, p. 2). In addition to China, India, and Russia, Türkiye made the strategic decision to enhance its economic involvement with Africa, coinciding with the ascension of the current ruling JDP. Simultaneously, Türkiye has been strengthening its soft power in Africa via the construction of infrastructure, expansion of its military footprint, active involvement in humanitarian assistance, and the global dissemination of cultural products (Ruiz-Cabrera & Gürkan, 2023).

As discussed above, the Turkish presence in Africa has a lengthy historical background due to the Ottoman dominion in the northern part of the continent. Nevertheless, since the formation of contemporary Türkiye, the Ottoman legacy has undergone a

significant process of fragmentation (Sıradağ, 2017, p. 9). The perception of modern Türkiye on the African continent has changed since 1998. Türkiye implemented a new policy named the 'Opening up to Africa Policy' in 1998. Afterwards, Türkiye aimed to enhance its economic, political, and cultural connections with African nations under this framework (Ozkan, 2010, p. 534). Türkiye is a relatively new extra-regional player, with its active and consistent involvement since 2005, referred to as the 'Year of Africa' in Türkiye. Over the past fifteen years, Türkiye has established a notable position as an extra-regional partner, aligning itself with the growing powers that have deepened their connections with African nations (Donelli, 2021, pp. 2–3). In the last two decades, Türkiye has established and maintained its connections with African nations through diplomatic missions, bilateral agreements across various sectors, and the operations of prominent institutions such as TCCA, Turkish Airlines, the Turkish Maarif Foundation, and the Yunus Emre Institute (Kavak & Aktas, 2021).

South Africa is one of the countries that Türkiye is trying to improve its relations with as part of its African policy. Although the Turkish Embassy in South Africa opened in Pretoria in 1994, the diplomatic ties between Türkiye and South Africa originated from the 19th century (Gençoğlu, 2022). Nevertheless, during the past eight decades since the inception of the Republic of Türkiye, this association has remained limited. The accession of the JDP in 2002 has brought about significant transformations in Türkiye's foreign policy including utilizing several economic, political, and social means to enhance its ties with South Africa (Sıradağ, 2017).

Prior to Türkiye's engagement with Africa, South Africa was the sole sub-Saharan African nation to open a diplomatic mission in Ankara (Wheeler, 2011, p. 49). Türkiye's initial diplomatic travels to SSA at the level of the prime minister was to South Africa or Ethiopia, highlighting the bilateral connections between Türkiye and South Africa. Prime Minister Erdoğan's visits marked a significant advancement in Türkiye's evolving Africa strategy (Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu, 2012, p. 86).

In Türkiye's Africa strategy, South Africa is acknowledged as a significant nation on the continent, while for South Africa, Türkiye holds a crucial position as a partner in the Middle East. Both countries have a common perspective on the importance of maintaining peace and promoting progress in African continent, as well as addressing the sophisticated situation in Palestine and Israel. Additionally, the trade and investment links between Türkiye and South Africa are particularly striking (Bishku, 2019). Trade

links between Türkiye and South Africa have increased approximately tenfold in the last 15 years (Yetkin, 2018, p. 137). In addition, the mutual diplomatic visits by heads of state have also contributed to the development of relations (Bishku, 2019).

The coming together of the two countries' leaders at the BRICS¹ summits played a crucial role in the development of a shared agenda for the future. Türkiye has substantially increased its involvement in a variety of sectors in South Africa. The Yunus Emre Institute, which is in Johannesburg, South Africa, is actively engaged in cultural and artistic activities. TCCA provides technical and development support, the Turkish Maarif Foundation is involved in education, and the Red Crescent and Green Crescent are involved in humanitarian assistance activities. Furthermore, Turkish and South African non-governmental organisations are collaborating to enhance cultural links. Attempts have been made to enhance the economic collaboration between the two nations, building upon their political, military, and cultural ties (Bilgin & Karaman, 2020, p. 280).

The media also plays an important role in strengthening Türkiye's influence and image in South Africa. Turkish TV series are broadcast on e.tv, one of South Africa's most important independent media outlets. As a result, South African viewers gain a deeper understanding and interest in Türkiye as a country. Bengü Okur Erdoğan, the Commercial Counsellor at the Embassy of Türkiye in Pretoria, emphasised the popularity of Turkish films and TV series in South Africa. She specifically highlighted the interest in productions that portray both contemporary and historical themes, and which are even translated into the Afrikaans language (Türkiye-Güney Afrika Ticaret Hacminde Rekor, 2023).

Aim and methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate if, after watching Turkish Television series, the Generation Z age group in South Africa experience an increased positive opinion of Türkiye and Turkish people. In line with this purpose, the research questions of the study were determined as follows:

1. What percentage of Generation Z individuals in South Africa regularly watch Turkish Television series?

2. Which Turkish Television series are most frequently watched by Generation Z in South Africa, and what factors contribute to their popularity?
3. How have the perceptions of Türkiye and Turkish people among Generation Z in South Africa changed after watching Turkish Television series?
4. How does the consumption of Turkish Television series by Generation Z in South Africa reflect and contribute to the understanding of Türkiye's soft power on the African continent?

These research questions lead to the following objectives of the study:

- To establish if the Generation Z age group in South Africa watch Turkish Television series.
- To identify which of the Turkish Television series are most popular among the Generation Z age group in South Africa.
- To determine if and how the perceptions of Generation Z in South Africa about Türkiye had changed after watching Turkish Television series.
- To contribute to the body of scholarly literature on the influence of Türkiye's soft power on the African continent.

In line with the purpose of the study, questions were asked to Generation Z. According to Seemiller and Grace (2019), Generation Z is defined as those born between 1995 and 2010. People in this age group do not limit themselves to traditional media when it comes to watching TV series and they also prefer new media and social media tools. Hardey (2011) defines this age group by emphasizing the state of being connected to the internet and calls them Generation C. These factors were considered when selecting a group to study, because of their chances of accessing and watching these series compared to other groups. Therefore, the study focused on Generation Z because they are more likely to watch Turkish TV series on different platforms than other generations in South Africa.

The study adopts a qualitative method research design, incorporating an interpretative constructivist research approach to comprehensively examine the research problem as stated above. Interpretivists argue that knowledge is created internally within different settings by human interpretation of the world, which is influenced by personal experiences and interactions with others (Coetzee, 2015, p. 110; Kop & Hill, 2008, p. 5). The constructivist approach is a perspective that is generally utilised in qualitative research. Research conducted with this approach is based on the views of the participants on the subject being analysed as much as possible (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 45–46).

This study employs semi-structured interview questions to delve into the perceptions and opinions of participants to seek answers to the questions of what role Turkish TV series play in influencing South African Generation Z viewer's perception of Türkiye and its culture; and whether Turkish TV series can be seen as a source of information about Türkiye as a country. Structured survey questions are used to provide demographic information of participants, including age, race, gender, and geographical location in South Africa. The participant responses were numbered and their identities not revealed. In addition, ethics committee permission for the interviews was obtained from Central University of Technology (CUT), Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa (Resolution number: 23/01/2024/1).

The study's population was based on the Generation Z age group living in South Africa and random snowball sampling was used to find respondents willing to participate in the study. Snowball sampling refers to an iterative process in which respondents were asked to identify and motivate other available respondents (Brettle, 2003, p. 3; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006, p. 87). Qualifying respondents were asked to forward the information about the study to their friends, asking if they are willing to participate in this research. If the person agrees, they sent an email with their cell number and the answers to the demographic information to the researcher in South Africa, who then phoned them for the interview, which was based on the open-ended questions. The response rate was very low, but the researchers take the 24 positive responses as representative of the Generation Z age group, representing black, coloured and white people between ages 18 and 26 in South Africa from a variety of locations in the country. Unfortunately, the amount of people not willing to participate in the study could not be established as respondents did not indicate exactly how many other people they asked to participate who responded negatively.

Copilot AI and ChatGPT, which are generative artificial intelligence tools, were used to categorise the responses obtained from the participants into themes. These tools, which provide significant time savings especially in entering data, coding and determining themes, facilitate better analysis of the data with in-depth comments and nuances of the researchers (Morgan, 2023; Perkins & Roe, 2024). In this study, artificial intelligence tools were utilised to categorise the data obtained from the interviews into themes.

The research analysis consists of thematic qualitative data analysis to identify common themes and patterns within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6; Gray, 2014, p. 675), as well as quantitative data analysis using cross-tabulation with contingency tables to determine statistically significant demographic information about the respondents (Given, 2008, p. 212).

Findings

This study proposes that Turkish TV series plays a crucial role in creating a positive opinion of Türkiye and Turkish people among the Generation Z age group in South Africa. Firstly, demographic information about the respondents were asked, including their age, gender, race and where in South Africa they reside. The 24 respondents were aged between 19 and 26, mostly female (17), with six (6) male respondents and one (1) who identified as other. Of the 24 respondents, eleven (11) were of the white race group, eight (8) were coloured and five (5) were black (see Table 1).

As seen in the previous paragraph, all respondents belong to the Generation Z group and Table 1 below provides the rest of the demographic information. Nine (9) of the respondents reside in Bloemfontein and it is assumed that the reason is because CUT is located in Bloemfontein. Most respondents (17) are female, which can be attributed to the snowball sampling the researcher relied on to find respondents. As mentioned above, most of the respondents (9) are from Bloemfontein, while the rest of the respondents reside either north of Bloemfontein, or to the far west of the country.

Table 1. Demographic information of respondents

RESIDENCE CITY/TOWN	RACE (24)			GENDER (24)		
	BLACK (B)	WHITE (W)	COLOURED (C)	FEMALE (F)	MALE (M)	OTHER (O)
Bloemfontein	2	4	3	6	3	
Cape Town		1	1	1	1	
Fouriesburg		1		1		
Johannesburg			1	1		
Kimberley	1		2	3		
Kroonstad		2		2		
Pretoria		1		1		
Springbok			1	1		
Thaba Nchu	1				1	
Welkom	1	1			1	1
Worcester		1		1		
TOTAL	5	11	8	17	6	1

The next question asked respondents if they watched Turkish television series. Nineteen (19) of the respondents answered yes, while five (5) indicated that they do not watch Turkish television series. From the five (5) respondents who indicated that they do not watch Turkish television series, eight (8) reasons were given; not interested (3); do not watch TV (3); not sure (1); and too busy (1). Cross-tabulation found that four (4) of the five (5) respondents live in Bloemfontein and one (1) in Kimberley. Four (4) are 23 years of age and one (1) is 22, and that there are three (3) males and two (2) females in this group, of which three (3) are coloured, one (1) is white and one (1) is black. From this analysis it can be assumed that these five (5) respondents are a group of friends or students who completed the forms together and, in the process, influenced each other.

The next question asked respondents to indicate the platform or platforms they use to access Turkish television Series. The nineteen (19) respondents listed 53 platforms, which are grouped into the following twelve (12), of which *YouTube* was the most popular (20.75%), while *Netflix* and *e.tv* second most popular, at 15% each. Figure 1 below shows that *OpenView*, *Turkwood*, *Turkish 123.com* and *ePlesier* are also popular platforms on which respondents watch Turkish Television series.

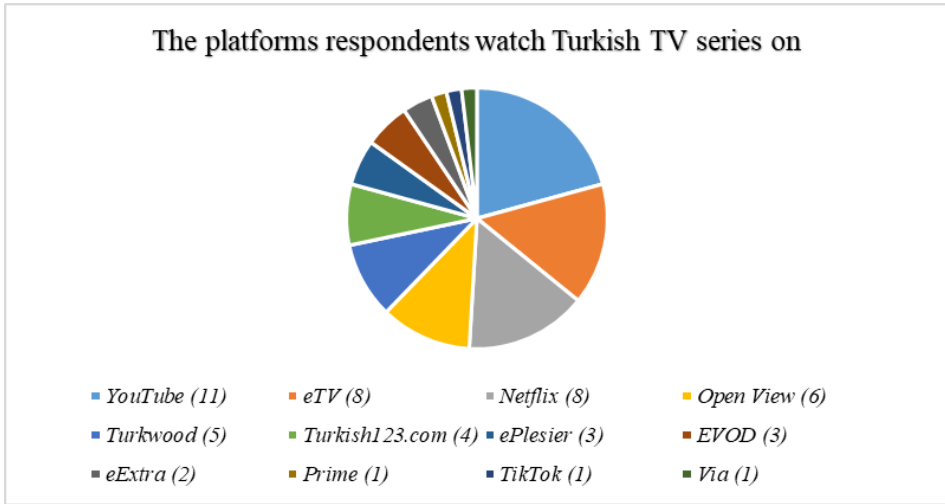


Figure 1. The platforms where respondents watch Turkish TV series

As explained by Bengü Okur Erdoğan, the Commercial Counsellor at the Embassy of Türkiye in Pretoria, there are many Turkish television series translated into other languages, including Afrikaans (Türkiye-Güney Afrika Ticaret Hacıminde Rekor, 2023). The Facebook page of Turkish series ZA, dated 12 August 2023, announced that 44 'outstanding Turkish series' have been dubbed into Afrikaans, while many online Turkish series are available in English and in other languages. Respondents were asked to list their favourite Turkish television series on a list from Favourite 1 to Favourite 4. Most respondents listed more than one series, with one respondent mentioning that all seven (7) titles she gave, were her favourites. A total of 61 responses were summarised into 29 titles. The number of times a title was mentioned, was taken as an indication of the popularity of the series. Table 2 below provides an indication of the titles of the Turkish TV series respondents mentioned, listed from most to least popular. For the purpose of this article the Turkish title and the title in Afrikaans and/or English are provided. Titles in red are the series mentioned, indicating that fifteen (15) series are watched by the respondents in the Afrikaans language, and fourteen (14) other titles are watched in English.

Table 2. Turkish TV series as listed by respondents

Number of TV Series	Number of Participants	Afrikaans Title	English Title	Turkish Title	Genre	Gender	Race
1	6	<i>Dis Complicated</i>	<i>Love is in the Air</i>	<i>Sen Çal Kapımı</i>	Romance	FFFFMF	BCWWCW
2	5	<i>Elif</i>	<i>Elif</i>	<i>Elif</i>	Family	FFFFM	CWWWC
3	3		<i>My Left Side</i>	<i>Sol Yanım</i>	Drama	FFF	CBB
4	3	<i>Roekelose Dade</i>	<i>Life Song</i>	<i>Hayat Şarkısı</i>	Romance	MFF	BWW
5	3	<i>Die Vreemdeling</i>	<i>Brave and Beautiful</i>	<i>Cesur ve Güzel</i>	Romance	MFF	WWW
6	3	<i>Annekan' Die Swa 'Kry</i>	<i>For My Family</i>	<i>Kardeşlerim</i>	Family	FMF	WCW
7	2		<i>Endless Love</i>	<i>Kara Sevda</i>	Romance	FF	CB
8	2		<i>Establishment: Osman</i>	<i>Kuruluş: Osman</i>	Historical Drama	FF	CB
9	2	<i>Gebroke Harte</i>	<i>Broken Pieces</i>	<i>Paramparça</i>	Romance	FF	WW
10	2	<i>Dokter Ali</i>	<i>Miracle Doctor</i>	<i>Mucize Doktor</i>	Medical Drama	FF	WW
11	2		<i>Black Money Love</i>	<i>Kara Para Aşk</i>	Crime	OF	BC
12	2	<i>Moederhart</i>		<i>Kanatsız Kuşlar</i>	Drama	FF	WC
13	2		<i>Heartbeat</i>	<i>Kalp Atışı</i>	Romance	FF	WC
14	1		<i>Oath</i>	<i>Yemin</i>	Drama	F	B
15	1	<i>Deur Dik en Dun</i>	<i>Evermore</i>	<i>İstanbullu Gelin</i>	Romance	F	W
16	1		<i>Black Pearl</i>	<i>Siyah İnci</i>	Romance	F	B
17	1		<i>Love Trap</i>	<i>Afli Aşk</i>	Romance	F	B
18	1			<i>Senden Daha Güzel</i>	Romance	F	W
19	1	<i>Daai Crazy Somer</i>	<i>Last Summer</i>	<i>Son Yaz</i>	Mystery	M	B
20	1	<i>Wie Laaste Lag</i>	<i>Love, Reason, Get Even</i>	<i>Aşk Mantık İntikam</i>	Romance	M	C
21	1	<i>Om Elke Draai</i>	<i>Everywhere I go</i>	<i>Her Yerde Sen</i>	Romance	F	W
22	1		<i>Chrysalis</i>	<i>Camdaki Kız</i>	Mystery	F	W
23	1		<i>Resurrection: Ertugrul</i>	<i>Diriliş: Ertuğrul</i>	Historical Drama	O	B
24	1		<i>20 Minutes</i>	<i>20 Dakika</i>	Thriller	O	B
25	1		<i>The Ambassador's Daughter</i>	<i>Sefirin Kızı</i>	Romance	F	W
26	1	<i>Skerpioen</i>		<i>Akrep</i>	Crime	F	C
27	1	<i>Stiletto Vendetta</i>	<i>Stiletto Vendetta</i>	<i>Ufak Tefek Cinayetler</i>	Mystery	F	C
28	1	<i>In die Put</i>	<i>The Pit</i>	<i>Çukur</i>	Crime	F	C
29	1	<i>Wrede Stad</i>	<i>Cruel Istanbul</i>	<i>Zalim İstanbul</i>	Crime	F	C
TOTAL	53				8 Genres	M 7, F 43, O 3	B 13, W 24, C 15

As indicated by Table 2, Generation Z respondents are watching both Afrikaans and English versions of Turkish Television series, with *Dis Complicated* (Sen Çal Kapımı in Turkish) as the most popular Afrikaans series and *Elif* the most popular Turkish TV series in English. According to Smith (2023), *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* (Diriliş: Ertuğrul in Turkish) is currently the most popular Turkish TV series in the world, *Black Money Love* (Kara Para Aşk in Turkish) is the fourth most popular and The Ottoman Empire series is number seven on the world list. Not one of these top three series are currently available in Afrikaans.

Table 2 further illustrates that the 29 Turkish TV series respondents watch can be grouped into eight (8) genres, namely Romance, Family drama, Mysteries, Crime, Thrillers, Medical dramas, Historical Dramas and Historical Action. Of the respondents, females (80.3%) watch most of the series, excluding historical action and thrillers. Males (14.8%) watch Romance, Mystery, Family dramas and Crime, while the gender group Other (4.9%) watch Romance, Thrillers and Historical Action. According to race, 45.9% of the respondents who watch Turkish TV series are White, 31.2% are Coloured and 22.9% are Black. The reason for this analysis of the watching behaviour of respondents (see Figure 2), is to illustrate and understand the analysis of the themes discussed in this study.



Figure 2. Respondents' preferences based on gender and race.

The next three questions asked respondents to indicate if they search for information about Turkish actors online, if they search for information about Türkiye online, and if they, since beginning to watch Turkish TV series, would like to visit Türkiye? Nineteen (19) respondents searched for information about Turkish actors online, eighteen (18) searched for information about Türkiye online and expressed a desire to visit Türkiye. This is a clear indication of the effect of the soft power of Turkish TV series on people, also on the Generation Z group in South Africa.

The respondents watching Turkish TV series, also spend time searching for more information about the actors, the country and various aspects of the culture of Türkiye (see Figure 3). Most of the respondents indicated that they are interested in Turkish music, fashion, clothes, tradition and food, and to a lesser extent in Turkish religion, hospitality, language, art and history. But although watching Turkish TV series stimulates these interests, only eight (8) respondents believe that the Turkish TV series they are watching, portray Türkiye as life in Türkiye really is.

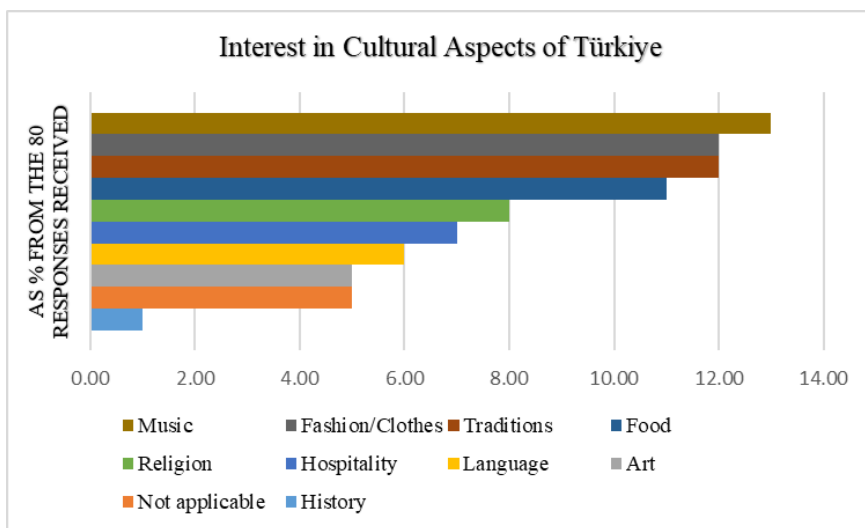


Figure 3. Respondents' interests in Türkiye's culture.

To investigate the perceptions of the respondents about Türkiye as it was before they watched Turkish TV series, how it changed while they watch Turkish TV series, and what their perception about Türkiye currently is – after watching Turkish TV series – respondents were asked to explain to the researcher their answers to the following questions:

- 13. What was your opinion about Türkiye as a country *before* watching Turkish TV series?
- 14. Can you explain how watching Turkish TV series has influenced your perception of Türkiye and its culture?
- 15. What is your overall opinion about Türkiye as a country *after* watching Turkish TV series?

During the interviews with the respondents who are watching Turkish TV series, the researcher realised that some of the respondents repetitively gave the same responses to Questions 14 and 15, and also rephrased their original answers to Question 13 by adding for example phrases like “I did not know that” or “I previously had no idea.” Therefore, the researchers decided to combine the answers of the three questions into one list for the objective of the analysis and to identify themes and sub-themes from these lists of responses as a whole.

The purpose of the data analysis was to establish if the genre of the series and the gender and/or race of respondents played any significant role in the comments from which themes were established. Although most of the respondents were females and therefore most of the data were retrieved from their comments, cross-tabulation showed no significant difference based on either gender or race in the preferences of the respondents in regard to the genre of the series they prefer, or in their opinions regarding Türkiye as a country.

The comments of the nineteen (19) respondents were typed into one document, each comment as a separate entry. This first list contained 53 comments, mostly consisting of one or more sentences each. The next step was to divide the comments into separate sentences, and the sentences into individual statements. For example, one lengthy comment in answer to Question 14 (consisting of five sentences) was:

The biggest part of Turkey [Türkiye] is modern and developed in all areas. They have good universities and schools. Their traditions are still very strong, and most people are conservative in their behaviour. Some men from rural areas still mistreat their wives and believe they must be served by women who don't have an opinion. They love to live together in big houses – all family members – parents, children, grandchildren live together.

This response was divided into the following eight (8) statements:

1. The biggest part of Türkiye is modern and developed in all areas.
2. Türkiye has good universities and schools.
3. Turkish traditions are still very strong.

4. Most Turkish people are conservative in their behaviour.
5. Some Turkish men from rural areas still mistreat their wives.
6. Some Turkish men from rural areas believe they must be served by women.
7. Some Turkish men from rural areas believe women don't have an opinion.
8. Turkish people love to live together in big houses – all family members – parents, children, grandchildren live together.

In this way, the original 53 comments from the 19 respondents delivered 128 statements, each reflecting the respondents' perspectives and impressions of Türkiye. Making use of the analysis capabilities of both Copilot AI and ChatGPT OpenAI, the list with the 128 statements was twice analysed to identify general and repetitive themes. Ten (10) themes were identified and listed. Questions were then posted to ChatGPT regarding each specific theme, followed by the complete list of statements. For example: "Identify statements from the following list reflecting respondent's knowledge of Türkiye." The original lists of statements under each theme thus retrieved were manually examined and only applicable statements for each theme were selected. The short list of selected statements was again evaluated and compared and only five (5) statements, deemed representative of all the other statements reflecting the specific theme, were selected to be included in the ten (10) themes indicated in Table 3.

The next step in the analysis process was to summarize the statements listed under each theme into one general and representative statement reflecting the general opinion derived from all the responses. In this way, the original 53 comments from the 19 respondents reflected the respondents' diverse perspectives and impressions of Türkiye, ranging from no knowledge or limited knowledge at first (Themes 1 to 4), to emerging realizations and shifts in perceptions about Türkiye based on increased exposure to information about the country and its people through watching Turkish Television Series (Themes 4 to 9), and lastly to a need to gain more knowledge about the country and a desire to visit Türkiye in the future (Theme 10).

Table 3. Increased knowledge of, and interest in, Türkiye based on watching Turkish TV Series

Theme 1: General lack of knowledge	Little to no knowledge about, or interest in, Türkiye as a country prior to now
Theme 2: Lack of geographical knowledge	General misconceptions about Türkiye's geography, development level, and place among other countries
Theme 3: Negative perceptions/misconceptions	Stereotypical beliefs about Türkiye's history, political situation, economy, and development
Theme 4: Impressions of Turkish clothes	From limited knowledge about Turkish traditional garments to admiration for the clothes they wear now
Theme 5: Perceptions of Turkish culture	Türkiye cherishes family, traditions, its cultural richness, and diversity while evolving and maintaining its identity
Theme 6: Opinion of the religion in Türkiye	Türkiye has a society characterized by religious devotion alongside openness to other cultures and religions
Theme 7: Impressions of Turkish people	Turkish people are affluent, attractive, kind-hearted, morally upright, caring- also towards animals, and educated
Theme 8: Perspectives of natural scenery	Türkiye is a beautiful country with rivers, seas, mountains, stunning landscapes, amazing visuals and attractive scenery
Theme 9: Opinions of Türkiye in general	Türkiye has modern cities and shops, formal education institutions, a culture of freedom and innovation, and many opportunities
Theme 10: Interest to learn more about Türkiye	I have gained extensive knowledge about Türkiye, its culture, history, religion and social dynamics after watching its TV series

By combining the ten (10) themes into three (3) groups: 1) No knowledge or limited knowledge about Türkiye and its people (themes 1 to 4), 2) Perceptions gained about Türkiye and its people after watching Turkish TV Series (themes 4 to 9), and 3) The need to gain more knowledge about the country and a desire to visit Türkiye in the future (theme 10), a summary of the perceptions was created which clearly answers the third objective of this study, namely to determine if and how the perceptions of Generation Z in South Africa about Türkiye had changed after watching Turkish Television Series.



Figure 4. The perceptions of Generation Z in South Africa about Türkiye after watching Turkish television series.

Figure 4 illustrates that from having little to no knowledge about, or interest in Türkiye, respondents now have a variety of opinions about Turkish traditions, culture, religions, Turkish people and about Türkiye as a country like all other developed countries and a desirable travel destination. For example, while one of the respondents stated that he did not have the slightest knowledge about Türkiye like many others before watching Turkish TV series, he expressed how his perception of the country changed after watching the series as follows:

I did not know anything of Turkey [Türkiye] before my mom start[ed] watching the shows. Now I am also watching them. Then I google Turkey [Türkiye] and I learn that they are not the same as us, but also, they have nice cities and nice places. They have many historical places to visit, and they are religious in their Islam religion.

Similarly, another respondent, who had very negative opinions about Türkiye before watching Turkish TV series, describes his changing views on the country as follows:

I think I like the people. They are good-looking and wear expensive clothes. They are not poor people. I do not know how they feel about foreigners, but I think people can go there and see their towns and cities. I think they have many shops with nice clothes.

The study's most fundamental question finds its answer in the findings presented in Figure 4. Just like the respondents' statements shared above, the perceptions of Generation Z in South Africa toward Türkiye have changed positively after watching Turkish TV series. This also shows that TV series are a highly strategic tool for Türkiye's soft power.

Discussion and conclusion

Turkish TV series have achieved global fame by captivating viewers from the Balkans to Africa, marking a significant milestone as the first productions from a predominantly Muslim country to attain such widespread international appeal. These series have not only infiltrated viewers' lives as powerful mass media outlets, but have also influenced their perceptions, behaviours, and preferences regarding Türkiye and its cultural products. Beyond their entertainment value, Turkish series have significantly bolstered Türkiye's soft power and have aligned seamlessly with the JDP government's foreign policy, particularly in Africa. This study aims to investigate whether similar dynamics are at play among Generation Z in South Africa and to examine the potential relationship between their consumption of Turkish series and their increased positive perceptions of Türkiye and its people. The research will contribute to the broader academic discourse on Türkiye's expanding influence and soft power in Africa.

Semi-structured interviews with respondents from various cities and ethnic groups in South Africa revealed that they watched 29 different Turkish TV series across 12 different platforms. *Dis Complicated*, *Elif*, and *Daai Crazy Somer* (Son Yaz in Turkish) were the most popular shows aired in both Afrikaans and English on numerous platforms. The series in question encompass a variety of genres including romance, family drama, mystery, crime, thriller, medical dramas, historical dramas, and historical action.

The data from the respondents revealed that those who watched the TV series expanded their limited knowledge about Türkiye and developed positive opinions about the country's culture and society. In other words, after watching Turkish TV series, the participants gained a lot of information about Türkiye and started to see it as an important centre of attraction in many respects. One of the respondents emphasizes this situation by stating, "It is a country with an interesting culture, with breathtaking scenery, and very beautiful people." Similarly, another participant expressed her changing views on Türkiye with the expression: "Turkey [Türkiye] is a land with rivers and seas, red rooftops, white walls, and impressive mansions, but also with a rural life with amazing visual sights." From this perspective, it's clear that Generation Z in South Africa greatly appreciates Turkish TV series, and these series have positively shaped their perceptions of Türkiye.

Türkiye is gaining significance as a prominent player in the African continent (Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu & Tepeciklioğlu, 2021). Not just Türkiye's diplomatic actions, but also numerous components of soft power have contributed to the acceleration of this growth. Turkish TV series are highly renowned in this category. This study, similar to the research conducted by Ruiz-Cabrera and Gürkan (2023) in Kenya, Mozambique, and Senegal, confirms that Turkish TV programmes have a role in fostering a favourable image of Türkiye in Africa. In other words, as Berg (2017) states, Turkish TV series function as an important soft power tool for Türkiye.

Overall, it is obvious that the respondents portrayed positive sentiments about Türkiye's culture, beauty, and people, although there are acknowledgments of socioeconomic disparities and ambivalence towards certain aspects. These mixed perceptions reflect the complexity of individuals' experiences and observations after exposure to Turkish TV series. Taking into consideration that 79% of respondents express the desire to visit Türkiye based on what they saw and learned about Türkiye after watching Turkish television series, the study reflects a very positive change in the opinion of respondents regarding Türkiye as a country.

The quantity of scholarly research examining Turkish television series is steadily growing. Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of research on the dissemination of Turkish television shows in African nations. Considering the African opening in Turkish foreign policy, conducting more studies on TV series and revealing the effects of TV series on Türkiye's presence on the continent from different perspectives can make significant contributions to the literature.

Endnotes

¹BRICS, an international organisation, takes its name from the acronyms of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. As of 2024, BRICS has grown to nine members, with the inclusion of Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, making it an important geopolitical bloc.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee permission for the interviews was obtained from Central University of Technology (CUT), Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa (Resolution number: 23/01/2024/1).

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Author Contributions: Conception/Design of study: M.C., F.B., Z.F.B.; Data Acquisition: M.C.; Data Analysis/ Interpretation: M.C., F.B., Z.F.B.; Drafting Manuscript: M.C., F.B., Z.F.B.; Critical Revision of Manuscript: M.C., F.B., Z.F.B.; Final Approval and Accountability: M.C., F.B., Z.F.B.

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Populist styles and meanings in Acun Medya reality shows

Acun Medya realite showlarında populist stil ve anlamlar

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Abstract

This article reflects on the relationship between popular culture and populism through Acun Medya reality shows that are influential in the popular culture realm. Inspired by populism scholars and television studies framework, the article considers populism as 'style' (us vs them, mobilizing emotions/emotionality, personality cult) and political meanings informed by conservative ideologies. This paper will first review the populist hegemony of right-wing ideologies and interventions on television content. Then it will situate the reality television and factual entertainment in the Turkish television landscape. Through multimodal discourse analysis of three factual entertainment shows of the latest seasons, *MasterChef* (2023), *O Ses Türkiye- New Years Special* (2023) and *Survivor* (2024), the article discusses populism both enabled and generated by the formats, the production company and ordinary people participating. In the findings section, the populist style in the shows is explored through us versus them dichotomy, emotional style and personality cults. Then, assumptions and constructions of family, audiences, fans, and nation are discussed. In the discussion and conclusion section, the article briefly highlights the differences between these programs and other reality shows and argues that in all programs, the ideals of nation and family are revisited and reaffirmed in various ways.

Keywords: Reality television, Turkish television, Acun Medya, populism, cultural hegemony

Öz

Bu makale, popüler kültür ve popülizm arasındaki ilişkiyi popüler kültür alanında etkili olan Acun Medya realite programları aracılığıyla ele almaktadır. Makale, popülizm düşünürlerinin ve televizyon çalışmalarının önerdiği çerçevelerden yararlanmakta, bu sayede popülizmi bir stil (biz ve diğerleri, duyu uyandırmak/duygusallık, kişilik kültürü) ve muhafazakar ideolojinin sağladığı politik anlamlar olarak ele alarak, bu stil ve anlamların izini realite programlarında sürmektedir. Makalede öncelikle sağ muhafazakarlığın populist hegemonyası ele alınmakta

ve televizyon içeriğine bu doğrultuda yapılan müdahaleler değerlendirilmektedir. Sonrasında, realite showlar ve eğlence realite programları Türkiye televizyon ortamına konumlandırılmaktadır. Eğlence-realite programlarının en güncel sezonlarının çoklu söylem analizi aracılığıyla *MasterChef* (2023), *O Ses Türkiye-Yılbaşı Özel* (2023) ve *Survivor*'ın (2024) incelendiği makale; formatların, prodüksiyonun ve katılımcıların sağladığı ve ürettiği haliyle popülist tartışmaktadır. Analiz kısmında, öncelikle programlardaki popülist stil (biz ve diğerleri, duygu uyandırmak/duygusalılık, kişilik kültü aracılığıyla)

keşfedilmekte; sonrasında halk, izleyici, hayran, aile ve millet hakkındaki varsayımlar ve inşalar, birbiriyle ilişkisi içinde tartışılmaktadır. Son olarak, tartışma ve sonuç bölümünde, programların kendi aralarındaki ve diğer realite programlarıyla aralarındaki farklarına kısaca değinilmekte ve programların tümünde millet ve aile ideallerinin çeşitli yollarla tekrar konu edildiği ve tekrar onaylandığı iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Realite televizyonu, Türkiye televizyonu, Acun Medya, popülist, kültürel hegemonya

Introduction

Although an ambiguous term, populism has been increasingly used to refer to illiberal politics and authoritarian turns worldwide. Putting forward a coherent criterion is challenging due to the differences among countries in which it is experienced. However, literature offers an overall characterization: Populism has been effectively examined and theorised as a style of politics rather than a doctrine (Moffitt, 2016; Müller, 2016) and is characterised by the construction of 'us' while creating an 'other,' mainly corresponding to the dichotomy of ordinary and elite. In that sense, Mudde refers to populism as a thin ideology that positions two homogenous groups in society, pure people and the corrupt elite (2004), in a moral hierarchy. What distinguishes populism from democratic movements is that the others/elites are not simply criticised but situated as illegitimate (Müller, 2016). The moral distinction attributed is generally constructed through affect. Thus, populism in scholarly literature is mainly characterised as emotion-driven and based on mobilising emotions rather than reason. Therefore, populisms are analysed through frequent uses of emotions such as fear, anxiety, and resentment across different countries (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2023). Another populist characteristic Laclau (2005) emphasised is the leader's cruciality: a symbolic unification around an individual is inherent for forming "the people" or "us." This unification is sustained by approving specific personalities/leaders as "superior" to others, namely personality cults (Türk, 2014).

The strong personalities in populism are frequently sustained through performances of the ordinary and spectacle, which are pioneer undercurrents of reality television. Both reality television and populist politics require personas that present themselves as 'one of us' and ordinary, while also showcasing some elements of extraordinariness that attract attention. Thus, the recent success of populist politics and politicians is considered primarily a result of the mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni, 2008; Esser & Strömback, 2014), entailing a "blurring of the lines between politics and spectacle" (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 77-78). This convergence is explored through "politicians as entertainers" (Danielson & Rolandsson, 2020), celebrity politicians (Street, 2019), celebrity politics (Van Zoonen, 2006), and populism as performance and spectacle (Brandt, 2020). Western-centred political figures have been dominantly investigated, such as Trump and his aesthetic style (Brandt, 2020), Palin's reality television ventures and affect as a political branding project (Ouelette, 2012), or Trump and Berlusconi's utilizations of media genres (Doyle, 2017). This group of research indicates that the media use by politicians contributes to their personality cults in the political scene.

Since spectacle and politics are moving closer and reality performances by politicians have been focused on and analysed, this article suggests that a relatively underexplored aspect of this convergence is also relevant and worth analysing: Populist styles and meanings can also be reproduced or challenged in reality shows. The crucial intersections between populism, popular culture and, specifically, television studies are the 'ordinary people' and 'culture of the people.' While all political movements endeavour to articulate the people, 'the people' are also traceable in reality television as discursive articulations, social categories and empirical subjects, such as audience, fans, and nation. Hence, informed by both populism scholars and television studies, the present study discusses an often overlooked or at least fragmented scholarly subject in the Turkish context: factual entertainment. This investigation also offers insight into how populism is experienced, rearticulated, reacted to, reproduced and navigated in popular culture in a non-Western context.

The study will first set the political scene, providing insights into recent examples of interventions on TV content and representations, which offer a deeper understanding of the thick populism (in Mudde's terms): the conservative ideology. The discussion then moves to reality TV, specifically focusing on factual entertainment formats in Türkiye. After explaining the data and method, the study first traces the 'us vs them' dichotomy, emotions, and the personality cult. It then discusses the assumptions and articulations of 'audience,' 'fans,' and 'nation' on the shows, which inform on the populist meanings that are inevitably linked to the specific sub-theme of 'family.' The discussion and conclusion section considers the particularities and differences among these shows regarding populism and their position among other reality shows.

Right-wing conservative hegemony and populist interventions on TV content

The scholarly literature emphasises three stylistic manners to depict populism: us vs them dichotomy (manifesting itself as anti-elitism, anti-Westernism or other contextually-bound dichotomies), emotions, and personality cult. These characteristics are also valid for the Turkish political context since melodrama and emotions have always been relevant as a narrative style, from Yeşilçam to television fiction (see Akbulut 2012; Akınerdem & Sirman 2018) literature to the political field (Gürbilek, 2018; Türk, 2014). Complementing this is Erdoğan's performance of resentment against the cultural elite and his personality cult built on frequent melodramatic tone (Türk, 2014; Aslan, 2021; Çay, 2022 among others). Turkish populism of the 2010s might be best defined as "anti-elite, anti-Western and religiously conservatist" (Yesil, 2020).

The conservative ideology is highly compatible with populism since it offers a traditional view of society and relies on older structures, such as the nation and the family, which are easily articulated by the us vs them dichotomy. However, conservatism in action became more assertive with the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in the 2010s on the boundaries of public morality and family life. The referendum on the new constitution in 2010 and the Gezi protests in 2013 as a result of the oppression of secular lifestyles are frequently taken as key moments signifying this authoritarian, populist turn. This turn is also evident in regulations and governments' stance on popular culture products. The conservative 'nature' of policing television content did not start with the governments of JDP since the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTSC) was founded in 1994, and control over content has been present since then. Nevertheless, legal and structural changes strongly intensified during the JDP era, suggesting interventions on the ideal meanings of the family and nation. A new article of law passed in March 2011 (6112/32) enabled a more conservative ideology, consisting of arbitrary terms such as 'the moral and spiritual values of society' and 'protecting family' as grounds for fines. The right-wing notions of the family dominated television in this era, excluding and stigmatising other representations of it, such as various gender identities in romance plots¹. This specific policy was accompanied by pro-family regulations and policies implemented by the government in the early 2010s, primarily evident in the establishment of the Ministry of Family and Social Services in 2011, responsible for 'preserving the integrity of the family'. In the same vein, Türkiye's withdrawal from the İstanbul Convention in 2021 was operationalized through the discourse on "securitization of family and the nation" (see Unal 2023).

The populist conservative agenda has been situating "us" as the nation through buzzwords and phrases like "our culture," "our values," "our sensibilities" among many others (Bora, 2017). These conceptualizations are also apt to be explored in the interventions on TV content and popular culture. These sensibilities relate to the women's clothing or "misrepresentation of our history" on a historical TV drama, as in the case of *Muhteşem Yüzyıl/Magnificent Century* (see Algan & Kaptan, 2023). Meanwhile, the changing of the rating system in 2012 caused the dominant Western tastes of the urban middle-upper classes (AB group) to lose its privilege as audience, in favour of more rural, conservative families, "including electoral districts dominated by JDP supporters and the Muslim bourgeoisie" (İlçir, 2023, p.91). This change in the rating system might also be considered as a populist move: the rearticulation of the people and the audience in terms of the ordinary over the tastes of the educated, who are explicitly/implicitly

pointed to as 'elitists' and 'others' by populists in power. The populist cleavage of 'us vs them' (mostly as conservative vs secular) deepened consequently among the cultural signifiers/products. Enabled also by the new rating system, specific serials became cultural hits and were favoured as 'ideologically appropriate.' The emergence and positioning of *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* by government and pro-government media as "the show of the people" against the cultural elite signifies this deepened dichotomy (Özçetin, 2019).

Thus, since the early 2010s, censorship and self-censorship on TV have been apparent and in cases of fiction, the "Turkish TV industry has resorted to include crafting storylines in line with the JDP governments' conservative ideologies" (Algan, 2020, p.451). Alcohol drinking, cigarettes, nudity, sex and even kissing scenes have been increasingly avoided. Television fiction mainly found safe grounds in telling stories on "family values" (Algan, 2020). Traditional gender regime and conservative gender positions are thus heavily encouraged by such media representations. The conservative oversight on mainstream television also led the platformization and streaming services to be considered a potential to overcome these narrative obstacles in the late 2010s (İlçir, 2023), and new approaches to *dizi* flourished in Video on Demand (VOD) sites, "pos(ing) a variety of alternatives to the path of 'New Türkiye' through a host of strategies" (Carney, 2024).

Other legislative and structural changes driving a more authoritarian shift have been the emergency decrees following the attempted coup (2016), changing of the parliamentary system to the presidential (2017), which curtailed the freedom of speech further. In line with the conservative political hegemony, when daytime reality shows and marriage shows were criticized on the grounds of misrepresentation of the family or harmful effects on youth and society through audience complaints, these shows were included in the decree law (number 690, 60/4) with increased fines, in 2017. The most popular one, *Esra Erol'da Evlen Benimle* (2007-2017), was cancelled following the emergency decree (Hürriyet, 30 Apr 2017, see also Akinerdem, 2020, pp. 109-110; Algan & Kaptan, 2023). However, these shows and hosts did not entirely discontinue on television; instead, the shows were restructured and transformed into crime-reality shows.

Reality formats in Turkish television in terms of ideological hegemony

Turkish reality television might be considered through two prominent groups of shows and thus the scholarly work on them: daytime reality shows and factual entertainment shows. Although this article specifically focuses on the second type of shows, scholarly work on both helps situate the scene.

Daytime reality television gained considerable scholarly attention. *İzdivaç* (marriage, matchmaking) shows followed by crime procedural investigation shows such as *Müge Anlı* have been dominating the scholarly work on Turkish reality television. After becoming staples of daytime, the marriage shows' role in ideological construction has been scrutinised: Redefining and negotiating the meanings of marriage (Algan, 2010; Akınerdem, 2015, 2020), gender roles and women participants' gender talk (Burul & Eslen Ziya, 2018) as well as family "as a mediated fantasy" were explored both in reality and fiction (Sirman, 2019). A more recent case featured in *Müge Anlı* concerned both the media and government, enabling a moral discussion on the 'family.' The Palu family case, which involves various criminal activities, including murder, missing persons, fraud, and theft, has sparked a social conversation (see Tetik & Özgüven, 2021). These studies all consider ordinary talk and its function in the modernization project, media affordances and political hegemony. Hegemonic gender positions and family relations are dominantly reproduced and justified in many of the daytime shows (Çavdar, 2019), such as in another prominent show *Seda Sayan*, where the talk about responsibilities to parents and children coincides with the discourse of the ruling party on specific issues, such as abortion (Burul & Eslen Ziya, 2018, pp.8-9). However, "the subversive nature of the banal" (Öncü, 2000) also manifests itself in daytime reality formats, since idealized meanings of the family "as a unit of love and unity in the cultural imagination" (Sirman, 2019) are shattered. They underline other possibilities and complexities of the family by revealing actual experiences of ordinary people, which enclose abuse, violence and fraud, such as in the Palu family, or prioritizing material gains of marriage and negotiating personal interests in matchmaking shows (Akınerdem, 2020).

Factual entertainment, on the other hand, has closer ties to global formats. The talent shows and game shows that this article focuses on are mostly the ones that entered the European broadcast market in the 1990s and the Turkish market in the late 1990s, while most of the same/alike formats are still pursued worldwide. Since Acun Medya productions have been dominating television viewing in Türkiye, more recent

work acknowledges these shows' sustained position in popular culture, with more specific focuses on the shows: competition individualism in *Survivor All-Star* (Kırmızıer, 2019), melodrama and class relations in *O Ses* (Ak, 2019) the everyday nationalism operating through food and cuisine in *Masterchef Türkiye* (Çoruk, 2022), gender and nationalism in *Survivor* (Erman, 2022) and the meanings of celebrity (Baydar Çavdar, 2024) have been explored. Although these contributions focus on a particular season of a particular Acun Medya production or a specific aspect of the shows, they are informative for documenting discourse and overall structural evolutions of the genre.

Reviewing these structural changes and the scholarship on daytime TV and fiction is informative for the tensions and narratives that the television industry experienced during hegemonic populist conservatism. However, the political meanings and hegemony in factual entertainment and talent shows have not yet been efficiently explored. Considering that the restrictions on entertainment and secular lifestyles in urban areas leading to the Gezi protests (2013) and the restrictions on operating hours of restaurants, bars, and nightclubs during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020) partly continued even after the pandemic, 'entertainment' might be increasingly understood in terms of indoor activities, among which television (and also, streaming services) stand out, including factual entertainment shows.

Aim and methodology

This is a qualitative study utilizing critical discourse analysis (CDA). Discourse analysis is practised in various ways and there is a certain vagueness to the term, as it can suggest a large territory, "between 'providing accounts of connected stretches of language in use' and 'uncovering salient social, political (...) features in text-like entities'" (Kress, 2023, p. 139). In line with CDA's emphasis on discourse as a part of critical social analysis and focus on power (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2002), this study traces populist style and meanings in the shows, aiming to account for how power is articulated and performed. Focusing on a television genre, one needs to consider multimodality which "asserts that 'language' is just one among the many resources for making meaning," and thus pay attention to the varied "resources which enter into meaning, some way or another" (Kress 2023, p.140). The study considers multimodality to account for "the textual threads that are materially diverse: gesture, speech, image (still or moving), writing, music" (Kress, 2023, p.140). Thus, the strategies and techniques involved in the meaning-making process of the shows, such as music (aimed for suspense), teasers

(for seriality, curiosity) and visual modes as close-ups (evoking emotions and familiarity) give insight into how populist styles and meanings are articulated and performed.

The populist style and meanings of family and nation and their implications for audience, fans are specifically searched for to discuss them as both linguistic and social constructs. Although style and meanings are not mutually exclusive in a given performance, for better flow, they are discussed in two sections. Thus, the two main research questions are:

RQ1: Is the populist style inherent in the political field enacted, reproduced or challenged in factual entertainment shows?

RQ2: Is the corpus of populist meanings enacted, reproduced or challenged in factual entertainment shows?

Accordingly, the paper examines whether and how these concepts relate to one another and intersect.

To scrutinise the second question, the theoretically-informed position calls for a brief clarification of the concepts. 'The people' is utilised here according to the characteristics of populism detailed in the previous sections: mainly as a reference to the ordinary in the ordinary-elite dichotomy. 'The nation' is explored as a community that constantly needs to be imagined and identified with, in Benedict Anderson's terms (1983/2006). 'Family' is explored through its position in right-wing politics as the essential part of the 'nation,' and the hegemonic tool for gender norms, as briefly mentioned in the previous section on conservative interventions. However, other patterns that emerged regarding the uses and functions of 'family' and stood out in the process will be detailed. Although 'the audience' consists of empirical subjects, it is explored here as an articulation presupposed by the production team. 'Fans' refer to viewers who engage deeper with the shows than the audience and are specifically visible on social media. However, this study does not explore fan activity but how the production team navigates its position regarding their presuppositions about fans.

Given the vast amount of episodes for the latest seasons of each show (*Masterchef* 2023, n:198 episodes, *Survivor Türkiye* 2024, n:141, *O Ses* 2021, n:30), the whole seasons of the shows were followed in real broadcast time, then specific episodes were revisited

on *YouTube* official channels. The scope is the latest seasons of three Acun Medya productions, and the processes of sampling, scoping and analysis are as follows: In the initial phase, episodes that have the best potential to represent the themes of the research questions were marked with date, episode numbers and the type of narrative arcs. Several different subtypes of episodes were included to represent all of the narrative arcs. To represent the whole course of the seasons as much as possible, at least one narrative arc of every month was targeted. Ten episodes of each show were marked as possible material concerning the research questions. However, the discussion was carried out with reference to only some of them. First episodes were included for informing the structure, rules and the initialization of the narrative, and finales were included because they revisit earlier significant moments and function as recap. As in *Masterchef*, the team gatherings, immunity and reward games, blind tasting, and elimination nights were all included at least once, similar to *Survivor*. Despite full episodes of the shows being present on the official websites, possibly due to copyrights of the performed songs, access to full episodes of *O Ses* was limited. Instead, the official website includes several parts of specific episodes in short videos and reels, allowing for a brief look at the blind auditions, duels, solos and overall structure. Only an entire episode, a New Year's Special in *O Ses*, is included as material in this study, since it offers fruitful discussion on populism in action, through the concepts of people and nation, directly related to the second research question.

Since the stylistic undercurrents have been already explored in the scholarly literature as briefly reviewed in the first section, and are frequent in the shows, they were easier to detect. Revisiting the marked episodes online enabled the detection of the concepts of populism and patterns of intersections between these concepts. When interdependence between concepts was detected (as done in fans-audience-nation), those instances were discussed in more detail. Specific teasers and promotion videos available online are also included since they offer information on the presuppositions of 'fans' and 'audience.' The episode is listed as material if a particular interaction or instance stood out and was appropriate for discussing the concepts in question. The utilised episodes are as follows:

Table 1: Episodes included as material

Show	Date of air/episode number	Narrative type of the episode
<i>Masterchef</i>	14 June 2023, Episode 1	First episode
<i>Masterchef</i>	19 July 23, Episode 30	Individual games & weekly elimination
<i>Masterchef</i>	10 August 2023, Episode 52	Start of the weekly games
<i>Masterchef</i>	7 Oct 2023, Episode 110	A visit to Şanlıurfa, open-space cooking and team elimination game
<i>Masterchef</i>	28 Nov 2023, Episode 162	Team competition game and blind tasting
<i>Masterchef</i>	8 Jan 2024, Episode 198	Finale
<i>O Ses Türkiye</i>	31 Dec 2023	New years special
<i>Survivor 2024</i>	1 January 2024, Episode 1	First episode, arrival
<i>Survivor 2024</i>	27 Feb 2024, Episode 44	Emergency council, Sema's disqualification
<i>Survivor 2024</i>	19 March 2024	Team reward game, team immunity game
<i>Survivor 2024</i>	22 March 2024, Episode 65	Communication reward: friends' phone calls
<i>Survivor 2024</i>	4 April 2024, Episode 74	Discussion on possible disqualification
<i>Survivor 2024</i>	14 June 2024, Episode 142	Finale

Short message service (SMS) voting was essential for the contestants to perform populist styles since they had the chance to directly address the viewers as potential voters and fans, but it was recently overthrown. The crucial personas who used it successfully in the shows' history were visited to reflect on the possible dis/continuities.

Findings

In this part of the study, the populist style of the shows will be explained, followed by populist meanings.

Populist style

The populist style section includes the dichotomy of us versus them, emotional style and personality cults.

Us versus them

While all the shows offer some inner-group interaction, *Survivor's* "experimentation with group governance" as in localizations of this format elsewhere (Ouelette & Hay, 2008, p. 414) enables an inner-group conflict to inevitably flourish. The ordinary versus the elitist dichotomy evident in the political realm is potentially in action since casting involves people from different education levels and class backgrounds. The contestants occasionally enunciate real-life social categories such as class, in a similar manner to

anti-elite, anti-western, anti-intellectual connotations in the political field. The so-called 'college kids' as they came to be known, have been ridiculed by their proper manners and sometimes provoked. This dichotomy has been echoed by commentators in *Survivor Panorama* and *Survivor Ekstra*, as 'people's kid' ('halk çocuğu') for humble or even lower-class backgrounds versus 'college kids' who were born and raised in metropolises and had prestigious educational credits². Another similarity to the anti-western rhetoric implicitly operates in *O Ses*, when Western styles are positioned by the jury as out-of-reach or "difficult to decide on" (see Ak 2019, p.114). Despite covering a variety of music genres, Western styles have been compartmentalised and mostly allocated to a specific jury member, namely Hadise, a Belgian-raised pop singer. Previous winners of the *O Ses* indicate that the local and national genres are favored more.

However, the populist style has been most evident during (now overthrown) SMS voting talk, through a bond with people, stating a moral dichotomy (of I vs others), present in populist political rhetoric. Previous contestants who gained nationwide popularity culminated this dichotomy consistently: Starting from the first day of the 2016 season, Semih positioned himself as the righteous one, often stating that he resists the evil and ill-mannered group of people in his team³. His talk helped him acquire a devoted group of fans, carrying him to the finals. However, this style persists in the councils and elimination nights where drama and personalities are still performed through their explanations of the unfolding of events, which will also be detailed through a particular example in the 'Family' section (see *Survivor*, Episodes 44 and 74). *Masterchef* includes similar embodiments as moral dichotomies: after being nominated for elimination, Çağatay's remarks include "I dont understand these people's (other team members) sense of fairness and justice... I know I am right and believe in divine justice" (see Episode 52). Yet, in *Masterchef*, the emphasis on moral dichotomy is not as determining as in *Survivor*, since outcomes in *Masterchef* depend more on talents and jury members' decisions. This means any dispute can be constructed in moral terms, embedding and normalising conflict.

These disputes inevitably are accompanied by emotions and personalities that are the essential aspects of spectacle and reality television.

Emotional style and personality cults

Personality cult is best exemplified in the personality of Ilıcalı, who is continuously affirmed by his on-screen inner circle, the contestants, commentators of *Survivor* and the audience alike (Baydar Cavdar, 2024). Since contestants' authenticity is a prominent key to winning (van Zoonen & Pantti, 2010), they also try to invest in personality cults in a similar manner. Several techniques of reality shows such as personal interviews are useful for opening up selves and emotions, transforming television from "mass-medium to a first-person medium" (Aslama & Pantti, 2006, p. 167). While openness is a dominant ideal, this should be filled with appropriate emotions to validate the contestants' personalities, such as their anger towards team members over their cautious preparations of a menu under their leadership, or unease about their possible elimination (see Kerem in *Masterchef* Episode 110, or Çağatay in *Masterchef* Episode 52, as stated above). Enabled by inner group tensions, they frequently speak of their personal traits as just, humble, ambitious, depending on the specific situations enabled by dramatic narrative arcs. Being open to progress as one "who only aimed to learn more during the show" is also frequently put forth (Esra in *Masterchef* finale). Personal traits do not necessarily have to be spelled out, but are nonetheless performed continuously. Drama and masculinist performances such as physical fights or even threats of violence are also tools of personality cults (of audience favourites), despite the production's unease on the subject⁴.

As television is an efficient tool for familiarity, celebrity juries in *O Ses* also perform a sense of sincerity and 'superior' personalities. Personalities under the spotlight are not specifically the contestants but rather the celebrities in *O Ses*. They constantly present themselves as humorous (Beyazıt Öztürk- a talk show host and comedian), flirtatious (Murat Boz- pop singer), the arabesk diva (Ebru Gündeş), overall forming and performing a jury cast on various 'types' of celebrity. Emotions and life stories of jury members are spontaneously revisited, reproducing the personality cult: when her years-old song is performed on stage, Ebru Gündeş tears up remembering her brain hemorrhage from those years, and other jury members stand and hug her in support (*O Ses*, 31 Dec 2023).

Reality television thus relies on emotions and personalities simultaneously and mutually: The contestants' personalities are understood through the emotions they express. These stylistic undercurrents are adapted by contestants, moderators and even

jury members, which might suggest a convergence with the political field. However, to suggest that there is a convergence between political field and entertainment through style and meanings, one needs to also consider the meanings; conceptual articulations and performances of populism.

Populist meanings

Populist meanings are observed in two themes. First, various utilizations of the term family, then the themes of audience, fans and the nation will be explained.

Family

Although several scholarly works on both populism and reality television discuss family in relation to right-wing politics, various utilizations of the term family are observed in this study: as a metaphor for the production/show, as an emotional support system and as a narrative tool for the show, and as a facilitator for the values and personal traits. These utilizations enable the family's persistence in the cultural imagination.

In accordance with Oren Livio's observation on several *Idol* shows (2010, pp.175-6), contestants and workers (commentators, presenters) describe the shows "as a family" in all Acun Medya productions (see Ogeday in *Survivor* finale). This is a common phrase in the company lingo indicating a friendly environment; however, it is also informative on the structure and power relations. The family suggests protection, is accompanied by rules and is subject to a legitimate power (often the patriarch). The shows operate similarly. Even though the contestants are called upon as individuals with talent and ambition, they are also situated as functional parts of a whole, ruled by a structure (the production) as embodied in Ilıcalı. The variety of contestants and returning contestants as personas serve several narrative arcs that Ilıcalı has control over. Also, their celebrity status is enabled primarily by Ilıcalı's oversight and opportunities pursued in Acun Medya (see Baydar Çavdar, 2024, p. 12).

The second utilization of family relies on contestants' own families, glorified or affirmed in various ways. In *Survivor*, family is not just a valid emotional unit, but a strategic narrative tool. This is evident when twin sisters Sema and Seda race as opponents (in 2022 and 2024). The fantasy of the family is challenged by production, only to affirm it as a perfect unity and support system between siblings. Despite being on competing

teams, they emotionally cared for each other in times of turmoil. The events culminating in Sema's disqualification showcase this: The professional athletes Sema and Pinar already had a silent dispute long before *Survivor*, since their teammate years on the national athletics team. This dispute seems to have originated 2011 about their participation in the national team during the Olympic Games. The seasons of 2017 and 2024 present moments of Pinar making her claim and Sema counterarguing it. The tension increased in the latest season, and when Pinar drew a snake symbol on Sema's name during the council, Sema came in to confront Pinar at night, ending in a physical commotion. The production initially suspended Sema as they assessed the situation, followed by an emergency council where Sema was disqualified. Since Sema and Seda's camping sites were on different islands, the absence of Sema in the playing field enabled the surprise and drama elements of the narrative: Sema's absence puzzled Seda at the opening ceremony, and her anxiety unfolded in a close-up (*Survivor*, Episode 44, min 25.27). After the disqualification, Sema's final request to visit Seda was accepted by the company where they hugged each other, cried and exchanged items as souvenirs (*Survivor*, 1 Mar 2024, min 1.10.50)

The format in *Survivor* enables a terrain of emotions through family: Once a week, they play a 'communication reward' game, facilitating some form of communication with their friends and then families upon winning (see Episode 65). Thus, putting in effort to get in contact with their families is crucial in the narrative. 'Family rewards' carry tears and boost of emotions, which also enable the contestants' presentation of their personalities as good fathers, good mothers, good brothers, overall reinstating the ideal of the family. 'To represent their family best' is also a duty frequently stated (Erman, 2022, p. 44). Similarly, in *O Ses*, the camera follows the excitement and tension of the performer's family members; sometimes, they are interviewed backstage, followed by the contestants' walk to the stage (Ak, 2019, p.100). Thus, the performers are situated not only as emotional beings but also as family members once again. Families are directly in conversation and present, whenever guest families are shown as the studio audience or whenever the families participate in the guessing games in *Survivor* or blind tastings in *Masterchef* during the season.

Besides families' presence as studio audiences, family is a valuable and vital tool for self-narrativization for the participants. When asked to prepare a Turkish cuisine menu, being aware of the family and nation as commonsense values, the two finalists (Esra and Tahsin) perfectly adapt to this narrativization on *Masterchef* finale (Episode 198),

with their own-curated menu with the names of the dishes: Anatolia, Toprağın İkrâmı (Gift of the Soil), Çocukluğum (My Childhood). Family becomes a deeply felt memory: the reason to choose sesame in the dessert for Esra is that it is how her mother used to do when she was a child⁵. Tahsin more specifically narrates his signature dish as follows: “a father is the one who is always there when you fall down, as this part of the plate does. This is me, and mother...” He gives certain qualities to family members, represented in the dish, and situates them as a perfect emotional support system, overall idealising the family (and his family) in the most career-defining moment of the show (*Masterchef*, Episode 198).

Especially in dramatic moments, family is referred to as the enabler of ‘personality traits’ and good upbringings (*aile terbiyesi*). This is evident in the particular example of the emergency council that culminates in Sema’s disqualification⁶. Sema states she was provoked by Pinar’s constant molestation about her family life, her motherhood, that “(Pinar) claims she is raised well by her family (*aile terbiyesi*), yet she still can do this” (pointing to the cut-bruise on her face she got during their argument, we move to a close-up on her face). Then she continues: “I was raised well by my family too, (...) all my sisters and I have university degrees (...) yet this, the anger happens (...) I am very ashamed” (covering her face, in tears). Additional dramatic music accompanies this sequence (*Survivor*, Episode 44, minute 1.49.10 - 1.52.10).

All these examples demonstrate that the ideal of family is sustained, defended, and firmly entrenched in the cultural imagination. Family is portrayed as a cohesive unit, a nurturing environment, and the foundation for developing good personalities. The shows frequently confirm the family as a functional and relevant unit. The shows rely on the presentation of contemporary mainstream ideologies of family as common sense, even though they do not explicitly address the ruling party’s agendas or issues.

Family also becomes a direct functional part of the nation, as discussed in the following section.

Audience, fans and the nation

Firstly, the shows analysed in this study differ in terms of audience voting. While the voting systems in reality shows are considered an experience of democracy by some scholars such as Hartley, this has been criticised by Andrejevic as pseudo-democracy

since reality shows do not influence the laws of the society (Andrejevic, 2010, pp. 59-61). For many years, finale audience voting was cast in *O Ses*, and weekly SMS voting was implemented in *Survivor*, particularly determining the course of the show through eliminations. *Masterchef* highly depends on the juror's decisions; audience voting is absent. The audience voting in the shows has been a means of the production's strategy for effectively casting it as the legitimate voice of 'the people'.

Not exclusive to the seasons of 2023 however, Ilıcalı and the production team (*Panorama, Ekstra*) have emphasized 'the audience' as legitimate voters, rather than fans who organize and continuously vote regardless of the events and performances occurring on the show. This emphasis might suggest the production's effort to keep the show relevant for a general audience, since fandoms' dominance in audience voting has been controversial in some instances and considered unfair by some fans and contestants alike (Atay, 2017a, p.179). Finally, in 2024, the SMS voting was overthrown by the production and a new strategy was promoted via a teaser (*Survivor*, 31 Dec 2023), where contestants' declarations include "no one will play the victim" ("kimse mağdur edebiyatı yapamayacak") by Nefise, "no more votes for the ones who cry" ("ağlayan daha fazla oy almayacak") by Hakan and "now more fair" by several contestants. This teaser indicates the program's stance that the populist tool for audience voting was misused by populist gifted rhetors in the show. The first episode ceremony includes Ilıcalı's specific address to the returning member Nagihan as "her dreams came true, SMS votings will not be responsible for her elimination if it happens," accompanied by Nagihan's approval and cheer (*Survivor*, Episode 1).

The choice of more conservative clothing by the company -continuously over the years- also informs how 'the audience' or 'our sensibilities' are presupposed and how populist decisions are played out. This choice manifests the production's projection of populism, similar to self-censorship implemented in Turkish dramas. Even the water parkours are played with almost full clothes on, male and female alike, shorts and t-shirts on a tropical island. A look at previous seasons on *YouTube* illustrates that the production opted for this decision over time. This shift seems to have occurred during the early 2010s, when production upgraded in scale, and the populist turn depicted in the first section occurred. Despite Atay mentioning the show as "an opium for the seculars" in 2017 (2017b), the show was already under conservative self-adjustment. The stark difference is also still on display in the shows, when international contestants guest appear for special events on *Survivor Türkiye*, from Romania, Greece or other

countries where Acun Medya produces *Survivor* or *Exathlon* formats: International contestants race in their swimwear, on sand or in sea-pool parkours, while *Survivor Türkiye* contestants have more clothes on⁷. Through this specific self-censorship, *Survivor* production functions in a populist fashion, in accordance with the hegemonic agenda, presupposing its 'audience' as conservative. Even when a T-shirt is completely torn apart after many days, a male contestant (Yaman) goes far from the cameras to change the already torn t-shirt, explained by the host Murat Ceylan as "a respect for the audience" (*Survivor*, Episode March 19).

Besides the presumptions on the sensibilities, the shows regularly and implicitly revolve around the concept of 'nation.' Not pronounced explicitly as the 'nation,' it becomes a silent signifier to position the superiority of 'our' culture, mentioned as "Anatolian culture, their politeness and attentiveness" (Chef Somer in *Masterchef* Episode 110). Nation as a whole is identified with through its mosaic-like components. When they visit a city and prepare local food, such as in the Şanlıurfa episode (Episode 110), guests representing the local authorities of the city of Şanlıurfa explain the culture and the cuisine, as well as their service to the community, thus the show operates as a reaffirmation of the local authorities⁸. Some specific pro-government or government actors are explicitly mentioned affirmatively: Not to waste any ingredient while cooking was advised to the contestants, reminded by Chef Mehmet that "Emine Erdoğan also has been focusing on ZeroWaste (SıfırAtık) for a few years, a project which we support" (*Masterchef*, Episode 110).

The first episode of the season in *Masterchef* is also the first episode that was broadcast after the earthquake disaster that occurred in Türkiye on February 6, 2023. In this first episode of the season, extraordinarily, the contestants join together and identify as part of the nation, and via photos and short videos accompanying their talk, they explain their relief efforts, all done together or in small groups in the region. Danilo adds, "you are not just contestants anymore, but a *family*" (Episode 1). In this specific instance, family is bound tightly with the nation, as a useful and essential component, also ironically stated by the half-outsider of the nation⁹. Similarly, Tanya, a northern-Cypriot contestant, when asked, states that she mourns for the northern-Cypriot girls volleyball team, who lost their lives in Adıyaman. The first half of the first episode takes place as a tribute, with everyone speaking standing up.

Another extraordinary event takes place when the 100th year of the republic coincides with the season of *O Ses* and the march *Parla/Shine* composed by Norm Ender (a pop-rap artist) is performed on the new year's special event (31 Dec 2023). The performance includes rapper Norm Ender, a children's choir, and almost everyone among the jury lip-syncing to the newly composed march, including German Turkish actress Meryem Uzerli as the guest jury. With studio audience's applause, the song is performed once more, with jury members joining them on stage. The show inevitably becomes a corpus for nationalistic discourses, even encompassing foreigner-Turks who appreciate and show respect for the republic. Phrases such as "a great nation and new youth of the new century" are emphasised by the host Beyazıt (with their extending historical connotations), similar to the current government officials' choice over the terms used: *Millet* is more conservative throughout the history (than the republic or demos/halk), since it is defined ambiguously as the authentic, unchanged by the new modern order (see 'Bu millet' in Bora, 2017). However, a celebrity performing (Evrım) specifically underlines the Republic and Atatürk, in contrast to more conservative (or ambiguous) term choices by Beyazıt. Norm Ender specifies the march as a celebration of Atatürk and the Republic, defining himself as 'the youth of the Republic.' When Ender tells how moved he is by the reactions, 'I can not further define it', interrupted by Murat Boz by 'but we get it.' Nation is constructed as an ineffable emotion and a spectacle, despite different emphases placed on it by the subjects.

'Nation' is constantly reimagined as a community to be identified with. On ordinary and extraordinary occasions in the shows, this is achieved through food, self-narrativization, and emotion by different actors, such as jury members and contestants. Additionally, the production's choices influence the discussions surrounding the 'sensibilities' that connect to the populist expressions of the nation and conservatism promoted by the ruling party.

Discussion and conclusion

This study contributes to the relationship between popular culture and hegemony, mainly discussed through daytime reality television and television serials, from a factual entertainment perspective.

The previous work on reality television and the shows analysed here are various, thus dispersed in the field. None of them deals specifically with populism as a style

and corpus of meanings as this study operationalizes the concept. The scholarly field largely consists of analysis on singular seasons of one of the shows, mainly through a sole conceptual focus. Despite its challenges, this study aimed to account for three different shows throughout the year, to consider factual entertainment in a more holistic manner. The stylistic manners depicted in the initial sections are traced in the shows where the populist tools of us versus them, mobilising emotions and the pursuit of personality cults were frequently adapted. These similarities and continuities suggest an overlap and a convergence between politics and popular culture. The stylistic undercurrents are similar to the studies of Çelenk (2009) and Ak (2019) since they both explore the melodramatic tone and the significance of constructing unique identities.

However limited and dispersed, previous studies also analyse or give insight into what this study operationalized as 'populist meanings,' specifically on nation, audience, family and fans. Prior to this study, the discursive constructions of nation have been explored in factual entertainment, mostly through *Survivor*. However, since they deal with seasons of Türkiye-Greece (2009, 2022) (see Yıldırım 2009, Erman 2022), the otherization strategies and 'us vs the other' are discussed through a national 'other.' Both studies discuss discursive strategies of nationhood, nationalism and the constructions of Turkish and Greek identities. Although nationalism and populism frequently align, this group of work does not directly deal with populism in the way that the present study does. The present study differs from them in context, and focuses on regular seasons which do not forefront national 'others' in the construction of identities. This study also inevitably informs on how crises and extraordinary cases in the social and political scene are handled and reacted to: The earthquake disaster called for a unified voice and a shared emotion, while a commemoration enabled identification with the nation through different emphases related to the concept. What might be considered novel is that various and competing emphases on the nation such as millet, Atatürk, and the Republic are mutually at play.

Considering three significant shows in factual entertainment suggests a more comprehensive reading of the reality television field. Discussing their similarities and differences between one another might highlight the data to further investigate the field of popular culture: In every show, nation, family, and the ordinary are effectively and continuously affirmed, not just by the jury but also by the contestants, in an everyday manner. Family is frequently glorified in all shows examined, while *Masterchef* opened up a more creative articulation (via the contestants' plates). Family is a buzzword

with all its connotations: as the production, as the backbone of the nation, as the facilitator of individual personalities, as the unit responsible for the education of cultural values, and as an emotional support system. Similar to Sirman's exploration (2019), family is utilised as a tool for drama, to be affirmed, mostly in *Survivor*. Yet, in factual entertainment, the tools and narrative arcs differ from daytime and serials, such as family rewards or family members racing for opposing teams. All formats analysed utilise family and its idealised meanings. Contrary to the occasional subversive nature of the banal in daytime or marriage shows, factual entertainment reconsolidates the meaning and the fantasy of the family and reinstates its position for the nation.

This study, among others, stands out for suggesting the populism in the shows are also related to the presumptions about the audience and fans: It suggests that a conservative self-adjustment and self-censorship are at play, in line with the populist interventions on television content. Populism as a style has been mostly facilitated via audience voting since the contestants spoke to the audience as voters, yet considering that the latest seasons also rely on populist style of the contestants, this suggests that populist style and meanings still persist despite the absence of a voting system. The format, production, and contestants continually learn from one another, operating on populist style and meanings, ultimately creating a cohesive structure. Since this occurs not among politicians or in formal political arenas, but in the media landscape where the central focus is on ordinary experiences and everyday life, it also encourages us to reconsider the ways and channels the commonsense operates through. The populist style's persistence in factual entertainment supports the claims on the convergence between politics and entertainment, while the formats work through key concepts of conservatism.

Although previous studies mentioned above discuss politics and popular culture, they do not delve into the convergence of the two fields as the present study does. This study traced populism to account for a convergence, both through style and meanings. This is inevitably a limited effort yet offers a terrain to further explore the convergence between populism and entertainment. A meticulous historical approach would be significant for justifying -or challenging- the arguments presented in this study. The continuities and discontinuities in the history of Turkish factual entertainment still need further consideration. Fans' direct involvement and activities would be beneficial for assessing the interaction and conservative adjustments in the shows. A more particular focus on family and gender norms might accumulate knowledge on right-wing politics and reality television.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For a more detailed history of the representations of family and love on television serials and the conservative break (see Uğur-Tanrıöver, 2022, p. 20).
- ² Such as Boğaziçi, Galatasaray graduates Poyraz, Anıl among others. See a conflict from 2021, discussed in *Panorama*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CY-bl1qulc> Poyraz is an AllStar contestant in 2024.
- ³ Semih thanks the people who voted him “against the ill mannered and evil ones in the team”, adding that “the people (*millet*) have decided”, starts at 2.30: <https://www.tv8.com.tr/survivor/sms-oylamasinda-birinciolan-isim-belli-oldu-11183-video.htm>
- ⁴ Following an implicit violence threat by Atakan to Poyraz, Ilıcalı warns that “this is not a safe ground (they can allow” (*Survivor*, Episode 74). Atakan won in 2016.
- ⁵ A typical explanation for the dishes, best exemplified in şekerpare, in episode 162.
- ⁶ Sema’s one-to-one talk with Ilıcalı can be found in *Survivor*, Episode 44, min 1.37.10.
- ⁷ Previous seasons of 2020, 2022 should be revisited for this particular matter. In terms of scope, it is not further detailed.
- ⁸ Çoruk (2022) also mentions this.
- ⁹ Since Danilo is an Italian chef living in Türkiye, he is included in the national ‘us’ only from time to time during the show (Çoruk, 2022, p. 360).

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A cultural analysis of Generation Z's perception of individualism and collectivism in Turkish television commercials through a Hofstedian lens

Hofstede'nin kültürel boyutlar kuramına göre Z Kuşağının TV reklamlarındaki bireycilik ve kolektivizm mesajlarını alımlaması üzerine bir inceleme

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Abstract

Advertisements function as cultural texts that interact with society. A crucial factor influencing advertising and consumer behavior is generational culture. Generation Z, born into a digital age, exhibits distinct cultural characteristics and consumption patterns compared to previous generations. For this reason, understanding how younger generations interpret cultural codes in the digital age is a significant issue in communication studies. Türkiye, with its youthful population and extensive media consumption, offers a valuable context to explore this relationship between Generation Z and advertising. It is seen that the theme of individualism, which was prominent only in Western societies in the predecessors of intercultural studies, has evolved into a general characteristic in current studies on Generation Z. This study aims to understand how Generation Z growing up in Türkiye, which Hofstede defines as a collectivist society, perceives individualist and collectivist messages in advertisements, a cultural text. Television commercials of all Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) brands serving in the country were determined as the research population. The research was designed in two stages. First, the advertisements identified through purposive sampling were coded as individual/collective through descriptive content analysis. The interactions of the focus group participants, selected by criterion sampling to represent Generation Z, with the advertisement messages were described according to their reception of individualism/collectivism codes. According to the results of the research; contrary to Hofstede's prediction, the participants' preferences, tendencies and approaches were found to be in common in the qualities belonging to individual culture.

Keywords: Advertising, Hofstede, individualism, collectivism, Generation Z

Öz

Reklamlar, kültürel metinler olarak işlev görür. Reklamcılığı ve tüketici davranışını etkileyen önemli bir faktör de kuşak kültürüdür. Dijital bir çağda doğan Z kuşağı, önceki kuşaklara kıyasla farklı kültürel özellikler ve tüketim kalıpları sergilemektedir. Bu nedenle, genç kuşakların dijital çağda kültürel kodları nasıl yorumladıklarını anlamak iletişim çalışmalarında önemli bir konudur. Genç nüfusu ve yoğun medya tüketimiyle Türkiye, Z kuşağı ve reklamcılık arasındaki ilişkiyi keşfetmek için değerli bir bağlam sunmaktadır. Kültürlerarası çalışmaların öncüllerinde sadece Batı toplumlarında öne çıkan bireycilik temasının, Z kuşağı üzerine yapılan güncel çalışmalarda genel bir karakteristiğe dönüştüğü görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, Hofstede'nin kolektivist bir toplum olarak tanımladığı Türkiye'de yetişen Z Kuşağının kültürel bir metin olan

reklamlardaki bireyci ve kolektivist mesajları nasıl alımladığını anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Ülkede hizmet veren bütün Mobil İletişim İçin Küresel Sistem (GSM) markalarının televizyon reklamları araştırma evreni olarak belirlenmiştir. Araştırma iki aşamalı tasarlanmıştır. Öncelikle amaçlı örnekleme ile belirlenen reklamlar, betimsel içerik analizi ile bireysel/kolektif olarak kodlanmıştır. Ölçüt örnekleme ile Z Kuşağını temsilen seçilen odak grup katılımcılarının, reklam mesajları ile etkileşimleri, bireycilik/kolektivizm kodlarını alımlamalarına göre betimlenmiştir. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre; katılımcıların tercihleri, eğilimleri ve yaklaşımlarında Hofstede'nin öngörüsünün aksine, bireysel kültüre ait ortak özellikleri olduğuna dair bir izlenim elde edilmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Reklam, Hofstede, bireycilik, kolektivizm, Z Kuşağı

Introduction

Culture is a dynamic and influential force that shapes individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. This influence is particularly pronounced in the behaviors and tendencies of emerging generations. In the contemporary context, where globalization is increasingly driven by advanced digital technologies, a pertinent question arises: Is it still sufficient to rely on traditional intercultural communication frameworks that emphasize geographical differences (Hofstede, 2001; Sivakumar & Nakata, 2001; Steenkamp, 2001), or are cultural distinctions becoming progressively homogenized within the digital-native generation? This study aims to expand the existing body of knowledge by critically examining these issues from a fresh and innovative perspective.

Social scientists widely acknowledge that culture is the defining characteristic that differentiates societies from one another. Consequently, understanding the homogenizing impact of mass culture, propagated by mass media, is crucial for comprehending the transformation of original and authentic cultural identities (Beck, 2014; Giddens, 1998; Simmel, 2003; Adorno & Horkheimer, 2010). Culture and communication are intrinsically interconnected. With the rise of multinational corporations driven by globalization, production-oriented market policies have shifted toward a consumption-driven framework, which, in turn, has facilitated the proliferation of uniform cultural forms, further reinforced by digitalization (Baudrillard, 1996; 1997; Jameson, 1984). The relationship between large-scale transformations in political economy and everyday experiences is shaped by the power of global culture, which serves as the conduit for the symbolic language of communication technologies (Giddens, 1998). Unlike local economic constraints that limit exchanges spatially, cultural symbols can be created and transformed at any time and place (Ritzer, 2002; Castells, 1997; Hardt & Negri, 2011a). This notion that universally derived culture spreads beyond geographical boundaries is further emphasized by the digitalization of the globalized world.

Globalization theories that emphasize the role of culture in shaping meaning within cultural, political, and economic practices suggest that "everything that is symbolized is meaningful" (Mattelart, 1995, pp. 90-98; Tomlinson, 2004, pp. 40-44; Williams, 1995, p. 111). The symbolic structure of language in advertisements leads to the transformation of cultural texts (Williamson, 2001; Saussure, 1990; Rutherford, 2000; Barthes, 2008; Jhally, 2014). Advertising, as a central element in the global circulation of ideological values, serves as a potent tool for disseminating global policies and promoting a

homogeneous culture (Jones, 2004; Wernick, 1996). This is due to the fact that “the exchange of goods localizes, politics internationalizes, and symbols globalize” (Tomlinson, 2004, pp. 33-35). Consequently, the influence of globalization is often more significant in the cultural sphere than in the economic or political domains (Smith, 2022).

Cross-cultural advertising studies provide a valuable perspective through which to examine the transformation of global culture. An analysis of contemporary global advertising strategies reveals a shift in consumer expectations (Kotler, 2021). Advertising is increasingly oriented toward strategies that align with the new consumer profile—one that is attuned to universal issues, aware of global events, and holds specific expectations for brands (Mattelart, 1998; Vinerean, 2017). Therefore, understanding the transformation in intergenerational consumer reception within the context of globalization-driven neoliberal policies is of critical importance.

Globalization engages with a variety of academic disciplines, and this study specifically focuses on its cultural dimension. Many globalization theories argue that the West, as the primary driver of technological and economic progress, has shaped the dominant global order, creating distinctions between “developed,” “developing,” and “underdeveloped” nations (Toffler, 1996). In response to this divisive categorization, the term ‘Global South’ has emerged as a more critical and inclusive alternative. The countries of the Global South constitute a socio-economic group that reflects evolving dynamics in international relations (Tekin & Dolu, 2020). The term ‘South’ functions as a conceptual marker of disparities in socio-economic development between countries. Historically, many nations within the Global South have been labeled as ‘third-world countries’ by industrialized nations. However, with the rise of development studies, these nations are increasingly recognized as “developing countries” or, more broadly, as part of the Global South (Connell, 2007; 2010). The question of whether Türkiye belongs to the South remains contentious, as does the positioning of countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, South Korea, and Argentina within this framework. Nonetheless, Türkiye is frequently grouped with these nations, collectively referred to as the BRICS or, more broadly, the G20² (Çelik, 2016; Demir, 2013; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2010; The Royal Society, 2011).

While Türkiye is primarily included in the Global South due to its geopolitical context, economic characteristics, young and dense population, and developing infrastructure, it is also sometimes classified as a Global North country because of its military alliances

and industrialized social structure (Cabana, 2014; Vincenzo, 2014; Dinkel, 2016; Aydın, 2018). Türkiye, as a representative of the Global South, offers a influential case study to examine the homogenizing cultural transformation driven by digital globalization, particularly given its youthful demographic and high levels of media consumption.

Understanding how Generation Z, raised within the digital culture, avoids from regarding advertisements as cultural conveyors represents a critical entry point for analyzing the transformation of cultural dimensions between generations. In this context, Hofstede's 'cultural dimensions theory,' a foundational framework in intercultural studies, is examined. Hofstede categorizes Türkiye as a 'collectivist' society. However, recent cultural research indicates that individualism, a characteristic previously dominant in Western societies prior to digitalization, has increasingly permeated the defining traits of Generation Z, influenced by the homogenizing forces of globalization in the digitalized world (De Mooij, 1998; De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010; Okazaki & Mueller, 2007). The individualism-collectivism dimension remains a central subject of inquiry, particularly in cross-cultural marketing research, as it elucidates the relationship between cultural influences and consumer behavior (Leung & Bond, 2004).

This study is centered around the question: 'How do members of Generation Z, who are raised in a collectivist society like Türkiye, respond to individualist and collectivist messages in advertisements?' The research is designed descriptively, with the aim of closely examining the changes in intercultural communication theories.

A re-discussion of the collective/individualistic cultural distinction in intercultural communication in the context of Generation Z

To delve deeper into the cultural nuances of Generation Z, it is essential to revisit Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, a foundational framework in intercultural communication which also included Türkiye (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1990; Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede's theory, particularly the dimension of individualism-collectivism, provides a useful lens for understanding cultural differences. (Triandis, 2001). Because these values seem to be the most determinant cultural difference (Pham, 2022, p.30). This distinction focuses on the importance of individual or group interests. Individualism prioritizes the interests of the individual over the interests of the group. It is related to societies where ties between individuals are loose (e.g. America, Australia, England, the Netherlands, Italy, Scandinavian countries) (Sargut, 2001, p. 185). Collectivist societies

are structures in which people are incorporated into strong and cohesive groups from birth, and these groups continue to protect them in return for loyalty throughout life. Group interests often take precedence over individual interests (e.g. Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Pakistan, Latin America and Türkiye) (Hofstede, 1990, p. 51). While some scholars, such as Schwartz (1994), have critiqued Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, numerous subsequent studies, including those by Yoo, Donthu, and Lenartowicz (2011) and Saylık (2019), have supported its validity and relevance. The theory's dimensions have been further developed and refined over time (Hofstede, 1980; 1983; Schwartz, 1994; Steenkamp, 2001). The study remains the most comprehensive empirical study with 60.000 subjects consisting of International Business Machines employees in 70 countries and 116.000 structured questions (Hofstede 1990, 2001).

Several studies, such as those by Göregenli (1995) and Wasti & Erdil (2007), have applied Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory to the Turkish context. Çelik (2012) further explored the relationship between Hofstede's dimensions, particularly individualism-collectivism, and advertising appeals identified by Pollay. The results of the thesis indicate that the adaptation of language and visual symbols by considering the cultural context increases the effectiveness of advertising. A study examining advertisements from 1929 to 1960 found that these ads often emphasized nationalism, a core principle of the Republic of Türkiye, to foster a sense of national identity and emotional connection with consumers (Aşçı & Çapraz, 2022). Another national study suggests that national symbols and emotions are frequently used especially in domestic brand advertisements (Gündüz Kalan, 2021). The fact that social interests are more important than individual interests in Türkiye has led to the use of the theme of nationalism as an advertising strategy. In other countries with collective characteristics, there are also studies highlighting that the use of nationalism in advertising has a positive effect on purchase and image perception (Li et al. 2020).

A comparative study of USA (United States of America) and Korean magazine advertisements by Han and Shavit (1994) revealed significant differences in cultural messaging, with USA ads emphasizing individualism and Korean ads emphasizing collectivism. However, a study by Zhang (2009) suggests that globalization may be influencing cultural shifts, even in traditionally collectivist societies like China. This study concluded that younger, urban Chinese individuals, exposed to global influences, are increasingly adopting individualistic values, despite the country's collectivist cultural heritage.

Aim and methodology

In the context of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, a descriptive analysis was designed and applied on the reception of individualism and collectivism messages in television advertisements by Generation Z.

Aim

To understand this evolving cultural landscape, it is essential to examine Generation Z, the most populous and digitally native generation, born after 2000 (Spitznagel, 2020). The generation also constitutes $\frac{1}{4}$ of Türkiye's population (Orun, 2020). The phenomenon of generation, which is related to the concept of consumer, which develops depending on production and consumption relations, defines groups of people born in a certain period of time and affected by similar social, cultural, economic and technological developments. Since the conditions, values, habits and ways of thinking of individuals belonging to the same generations are similar, it gives clues about the behavioral patterns of the group. The rapid pace of technological advancement has led to shorter generational gaps, especially in recent decades. Born into the digital age, Generation Z, often referred to as the "social media generation," values individuality, freedom, advanced technology, and speed more than previous generations (Goessling, 2017). They are characterized by traits such as pragmatism, realism, entrepreneurship, social consciousness, technological proficiency, and a willingness to embrace change. Additionally, they are often described as materialistic, creative, open-minded, flexible, self-confident, educated, liberal, and career-oriented (Çetin & Karalar, 2016; Milotay, 2020; Dolot, 2018; Oral, 2023). Generation Z defines itself as 'worldly' and attaches importance to having global values. In this aspect, it aligns with the nature of global culture. This generation, left precarious by neoliberal policies, loves entertaining content and uses humor as a way to balance their anxieties in the face of difficulties (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). They are sensitive and aware of global issues related to social policies such as ethnicity, gender, animal rights, climate, and environmental issues.

Advertising research focusing on Generation Z reveals a significant shift in consumer expectations compared to previous generations. Grow and Yang (2018) suggests that traditional television content often fails to capture the interest of Generation Z. Munsch (2018) further highlights the importance of engaging digital ads that leverage music, humor, and influencer content to effectively reach this demographic. Hazari and Sethna

(2023) underscore the significance of high-interaction content on platforms like Instagram for influencing the choices of Generation Z.

As the new generation of consumers in a globalized market, Generation Z, the “neo-liberal subject” as described by Foucault (2015) and Hardt & Negri (2011a-2011b), is aware of their role as both consumers and products. They define themselves as entrepreneurs in this new world order, recognizing that their only capital is themselves. Seeking economic security, they believe in the power of individual opportunity and risk-taking.

While neoliberal discourse positions them as unique individuals, Generation Z also expresses resistance and critique through their consumption choices. Influenced by the works of Beck (1992) and Bauman (2020; 2023), this generation reflects a decline in trust in societal institutions, particularly the weakened social state of the postmodern era. This cultural shift has contributed to the development of their individualistic character.

The aim of the study is to understand how Generation Z, who grew up in a collectivist society in Türkiye, perceives individualist and collectivist messages in advertisements. As in all descriptive study designs aimed at making sense of cultural processes, the study focuses on the participant’s perception, experience and meaning of life. In order to reflect the cultural formation of the society, all GSM (Vodafone, Türk Telekom and Turkcell) operator brands serving in Türkiye with user profiles in all demographic categories were selected as the research population. The advertisements used in the research were selected from the post-2020 advertising campaigns of these operators through purposive sampling.

The research was designed in two stages. Firstly, the adverts identified through purposive sampling were coded as individual/collective through descriptive content analysis. The six adverts selected based on the relevant references were categorised into themes by descriptive content analysis according to individualist and collectivist symbols. The selection of which cultural codes the adverts contain was made accordingly (Triandis, 2001; Singelis, et al. 1995; Pollay, 1984; Çelik, 2012; Gündüz Kalan, 2021).

Commercials used in the research were shown to the focus group participants selected within the scope of criterion sampling and their interactions were evaluated.

Thus, it was described how the participants perceived the cultural codes of individualism/collectivism in the advertisement messages.

The main questions of the research are as follows;

- How do Generation Z, raised in a traditionally collectivist society like Türkiye, perceive and respond to individualistic messages in advertisements?
- How do Generation Z, raised in a traditionally collectivist society like Türkiye, perceive and respond to collectivist messages in advertisements?
- Is there a correlation between the cultural codes embedded in advertisements and the evolving characteristics of Generation Z?

Method

To delve deeper into the research design, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was employed (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). Initially, a descriptive content analysis was conducted on advertisements, categorizing them based on established theoretical frameworks. Subsequently, focus group discussions were utilized to explore the tacit and subjective interpretations of Generation Z regarding these advertisements. Purposive sampling was employed to select a diverse group of participants representative of Generation Z. Given the exploratory nature of focus group discussions, which prioritize in-depth understanding over generalization (Edmund, 2000; Fern, 2001), qualitative analysis methods were applied.

To ensure the effectiveness of the focus group discussions, a sample size of eight participants was selected. Participants were chosen based on diverse demographic characteristics, including gender, educational level, and school type (state vs. private) to provide a heterogeneous representation of Generation Z. Due to the physical limitations of the study, although all participants were urban dwellers, their family connections in different cities and their ties to their hometowns were taken into consideration. Participants who resided in cosmopolitan metropolises such as Istanbul, yet had the opportunity to experience the cultural codes of rural life through family relationships, were specifically selected for the study. The same heterogeneity was observed in socio-cultural factors including ethnicity, beliefs and political views as in

demographic and socio-economic factors. To ensure a diverse range of perspectives, participants were selected to reflect the cultural mosaic of Türkiye. This diversity was aimed to foster a sense of inclusivity and democratic engagement among the participants. To ensure the focus group discussions were effective and ethical, participants were limited to the 18-22 age range. The following table provides a demographic overview of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

Participant	Age	Education	Gender	Residence	Hometown
P1	19	University	Male	Istanbul	Denizli
P2	19	University	Male	Istanbul	Ordu
P3	20	University (State)	Female	Istanbul	Artvin
P4	18	High School	Female	Istanbul	Edirne
P5	21	University (State)	Female	Istanbul	Kocaeli
P6	22	University (State)	Male	Istanbul	Konya
P7	20	University (State)	Male	Istanbul	Erzincan
P8	18	High School	Male	Istanbul	Nigde

During the application of the research design, appropriate reliability and validity criteria for qualitative research were ensured. Initially, a 'focus group interview flow' was created in the light of the literature and basic questions were determined. The interview questions were reviewed by two field experts to ensure their clarity and relevance and necessary changes were performed. The focus group sessions were facilitated by a moderator and a note-taker. The necessary approvals were obtained from Istanbul University Ethics Committee with the letter dated 10.05.2024 and numbered 2556942 before the research. Before the research commenced, informed consent was obtained from all participants. An observer researcher was present during the 120-minute focus group session to capture additional observations. Participants were shown selected advertisements one at a time, and discussions were facilitated after each viewing. The video and audio recordings, which took place in a special meeting room tailored to the needs of the participants, were edited by the researchers themselves. The recorded information was transcribed in the order of the advertisements and the participants' words. The transcripts, along with the focus group protocol, are available for further analysis and presentation.

The advertisements were categorized based on the following themes:

A1. Vodafone-“The world of red experience is full of privileges!”

The advertisements featured themes such as personalized offers (concert tickets, coffee discounts, internet memberships), product promotions, celebrity endorsements, and campaigns tailored to specific interests (e.g., *Netflix*, *Instagram*, or internet packages). These ads often employed a dynamic and fun aesthetic to appeal to young consumers. Given the emphasis on individual opportunity, privilege, and limitless possibilities, these advertisements were identified as examples of individualistic advertising.

A2. Turkcell “Celebrating a Century of the Republic: A Love That never ends”

The celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Türkiye was chosen as an example of collective advertising because the themes of Atatürk, flag, nation, patriotism, unity and solidarity were used in the visuals and discourse.

A3. Turkcell - “Türkiye’s couples: Nature lovers”

The advertisement promoted a new product (Lifebox service) and emphasizes technological superiority, targeting a younger demographic. It highlighted themes of opportunity, seizing the moment, and the benefits of embracing new technology.

A4. Türk Telekom “Eighty-five million all together”

This advertisement, which emphasized the brand’s ability to connect people across the country and highlighted themes of national unity, patriotism, flag, longing and reunion, was selected as an example of collectivist advertising

A5. Türk Telekom Prime - “Prime thinking and privileged living”

Advertisements featuring themes like concerts, vacations, parties, personalized gifts from popular coffee brands, and discounts on flights and hotels were selected as examples of individualistic advertising, as they emphasized personal benefits and privileges.

A6. Vodafone “We are here to help you achieve your dreams”

Family phenomenon, social responsibility campaigns (helping stray animals, violence against women, digital inequality, etc.) were selected because they included the participation and cooperation of different segments of society, as well as collective messages such as technological superiority, progress and solidarity emphasis.

The findings of the study were categorized using a thematic analysis framework informed by Korostelina's social identity model (2007, p.41), which provides a relevant theoretical foundation for examining the impact of culture on individual identity, particularly in relation to individualism and collectivism.

Table 2. Differences between individualism and collectivism (Korostelina, 2007:41).

Differences	Individualism	Collectivism
The content of the concept of "own"	Individual differences	Social categories
Form of self-actualization	"I do what I want"	"I am not a burden for my relatives"
Values	Independence and individual achievements	Interdependence and group success
Rules	Self-expression, individual thinking, personal choices	Obedying rules, respect for authority, group consensus
Behavior regulation	Personal attitudes and cost-benefit assessment	In-group norms
Roles	Equality in relationships and flexibility in roles	Stasis, hierarchical roles based on age and gender
Goals	Personal goals are more important than group goals	Group goals are more important than personal goals
Differences between groups	Insignificant	Significant
Making sense of the world	The meaning of life is understood in individual formation	Human life is understood in terms of its "meaning"
Property	Private property, individual ownership	Common ownership, group ownership
Form of relationship	Horizontal	Vertical (hierarchical)

During the analysis, participants were coded numerically (P1-P8) based on their seating arrangement, with the camera's perspective serving as the starting point (numbered from left to right). To align with the coding of advertisements (A1, A2, etc.), participants' comments were also coded numerically (P1, P2, etc.).

Findings The descriptive data obtained from the focus group are thematised below.

Individuality

The data on the theme of Individuality obtained from the focus group study are given below.

Person- centered approach

In individualistic societies, the individual's personal experience and satisfaction, as well as the pleasure derived from a product or service, are paramount. Consumers base their decisions on their own experiences rather than those of their family or society, and they expect the brand to cater to their individual needs. It was also observed that participants generally expected the opportunities offered by the brand to align with their own desires and experiences (exploration, excitement, travel). For instance, regarding Ad 6, Participant 6 stated, "I was interested in the concert and the hotel... But there's always a limitation to the information. It seems to be valid only for selected hotels and some concerts. This might not suit me." In the same advertisement, Participant 7, who emphasized the importance of entertainment and socializing, said, "Interestingly, I enjoyed the ad. The emphasis on phonetics, dynamics, and sociability attracted me. I prefer face-to-face communication in my daily life. The visual emphasis on socialization caught my eye."

On the other hand, it was observed that participants expressed dissatisfaction with advertising content that did not align with their personal interpretations of experience, leading to a decline in engagement with the advertisements. For instance, regarding the representation of "living in the moment" in A3, participant P6 conveyed discomfort with content emphasizing restriction and categorization, stating: "They categorize thematically, but in doing so, they invariably alienate a particular audience; for example, am I not capturing the moment if I'm walking in the forest with my hands in my pockets and not taking a photo?" This statement reflects a sense of discomfort with content that imposes limiting classifications. In general, participants exhibited a strong tendency to reinterpret and adapt offered opportunities to align with their personal preferences. For example, P4 stated, "With the money I'd spend on *Prime*, I would purchase a coffee of my choice, not the cheap filter coffee they provide—I'd get a coffee I genuinely enjoy."

Personal freedom/independence

In individualistic societies, it is important for the individual to be able to make choices freely. Similarly, Generation Z does not like their freedom to be restricted. Participants were uncomfortable with the limited campaigns in all six advertisements with individual and collective messages. It was observed that they distanced themselves even from advertising messages that they sympathized with and thought appealed to them due to 'campaign limitations' and focused on written and verbal messages explaining campaign limitations. Following an advertisement that he liked and perceived as appealing to him, participant P1 commented: "... But these restrictions ruin everything. Everything has a limit; they say free coffee, but they offer the cheapest coffee, and then charge more for the coffee than for the *Prime* membership." In reference to advertisement A5, which promises exclusive opportunities for young people, P4 remarked, "I wondered why it was limited to just Wednesdays and a quota of 150 TL. After seeing the subtitles, I never felt valued!" Similarly, regarding the same advertisement, P5 noted, "In the scene where it states that there are privileges for all routes, it then specifies 'limited hotels.' It's the same with the coffee—it's always limited."

A similar observation was made by participant P8: "In the message above, it appears as though you move from concert to concert and journey to journey without limits, but then you're disappointed because everything offered is extremely limited." Participant P1 reinforced this emphasis on boundlessness, stating, "The focus on unlimited access and privileges is important to me; the advertisement should have highlighted the concept of unlimitedness earlier, and the ad itself was unnecessarily long."

Individual products/services and opportunities

Another recurring theme in participants' responses was the desire to seize opportunities, a notable trait of both individualism and Generation Z. For example, regarding advertisement A3, participant P3 remarked:

I focus on what the advertisement offers me... Listening to what it might say to me on October 29 (Republic Day) it offers 10 GB 'shake and win,' but they already give 5 GB every week. They end the ad with 'this love never ends,' but why are they so stingy?

Through humor, the participant questions the credibility of the benefit, finding it insufficient. Regarding this advertisement, P5 stated, “The slogan that’s supposed to make me feel valued in advertisements doesn’t affect me; it doesn’t work for me because I am already valuable. What matters is what it offers as a service, that is, the opportunities.” With respect to advertisement A1, which emphasizes exclusivity, P6 commented, “Privilege—privilege doesn’t give me anything because it’s empty.”

Individual lifestyle

In the A3 advertisement, which specifically targets young consumers, the target audience is characterized as individuals who ‘enjoy capturing every moment and sharing photos on social media.’ In promoting the Lifebox product, which provides additional memory options, the ad incorporates the themes of technology use and resistance as humorous elements in a dialogue between a couple spending time in nature. Although the ad intended to appeal to Generation Z, participants interpreted it differently. In fact, they aligned with the statement about ‘taking photos at the expense of missing the moment,’ viewing it as a critique of Generation Z rather than a message in opposition. Participants expressed that the advertisement’s portrayal of their identity was inaccurate; they disliked the ad and even found it off-putting, though they agreed that the concept of ‘living in the moment’ was significant to them. They were displeased with being depicted as a group that constantly misses the moment and incessantly shares on social media, feeling the representation was reductive. Regarding the anti-technology character, P3 noted, “They made the character resemble an elderly person, exaggerating as if being anti-technology is an outdated idea.” P7, who felt uncomfortable with the emphasis on ‘technology addicts’ in the same ad, remarked, “The philosopher type is mocked, which is a significant insult to that lifestyle and the idea of living in the moment. It felt as though we’re being criticized for defending such values; I felt marginalized.” This participant clearly voiced discomfort with her lifestyle being judged through certain definitions, oppositions, and stereotypes.

Individual interests

In individualistic societies, the individual’s interests often take precedence over those of the community. This study observed that, even when presented with advertisements featuring collective emotional messages, participants remained focused on their personal interests, particularly the concepts ‘price and benefit.’ For instance, P7 noted that the

emotional message of A4, which highlighted 'hometown,' did not affect him, and he considered the emphasis on 'providing services all over the country' unrealistic. Similarly, P3 expressed skepticism about the brand's claims, stating, "They do not bring services to the countryside! Türk Telekom has no signal when we go to our village, for example." P3 emphasized that his primary expectation from a GSM operator was to have reliable signal coverage everywhere." P1 echoed this sentiment, saying, "When making my choice, I first look at the price in terms of price-performance, and then I look at the performance features such as how much signal I have." In response to A1, which emphasized privileges, P8 pointed out, "I would be more impressed if the privilege was related to the price. Zeynep Bastık sang a song without emphasizing the price, it doesn't interest me; the important thing is the price of the product for me." Underscoring how individual interests, particularly regarding cost, took precedence in their reception of the advertisement's message. P8 further reinforced this by stating, "When the price advantage disappears, we look at the features and prioritize price." P2 also echoed a similar perspective, saying, "Performance is more important than price. I buy what works in my school. I don't think about how much the message benefits society because we are not in an ideal world" and "Do I care about contribution to the country? I may or may not. If they all provide the same service, I leave my house and go to the nearest operator; I don't think too much." P4 shared a student-focused view, noting "Price is very important for us students... A friend of mine switched from Vodafone to Türk Telekom and then to Turkcell, which offered a better price." This comment provides valuable insight into the fluctuating brand loyalty of Generation Z, showing how price sensitivity can override previous brand choices.

Similarly, P8's response to A2 highlighted the importance of individual needs: "... I think most of us are competent with *Google*, this service is meaningless since it provides much more storage space. Increases in prices and our budget are important, price is a primary criterion in our brand preference." This further emphasizes that individual interests, particularly price and utility, play a dominant role in shaping their brand preferences, with less regard for collective or societal benefits.

Equality between groups / flexibility in roles

In individualistic societies, the importance of equality over hierarchy is a central value, with individuals often rejecting rigid role distributions. Generation Z, as part of this cultural shift, is particularly sensitive to equal recognition of identities, flexibility in roles, and global issues. This generational sensitivity is reflected in their reception of advertisements

that emphasize social responsibility and equality. For example, all participants in the study appreciated A6, an advertisement that tackled social responsibility issues such as violence against women, equal access to education, the right to technology, and technological advancements. The ad's emotional appeal, combined with transparent and clear numerical information, fostered a sense of trust and alignment with the participants' values. P3 remarked: "I was attracted to it when I saw its benefit to society, its support for women who are subjected to violence, software coding education for children, street animals, all of them touched me." This statement highlights the emotional connection the participant felt, emphasizing that the ad's social impact resonated with their values. Similarly, P7 described the ad as 'romantic' and expressed an emotional connection to the messages conveyed, stating, "...I really felt the emotions they were trying to convey. I found their attitude towards women and animals sincere... ..it was good that they gave information. I think my money was well spent." P7's comments underscore the importance of authenticity and transparency, both of which played a significant role in shaping the participant's positive reception of the ad. These insights suggest that Generation Z not only values emotional appeal but also demands factual clarity and social relevance from the brands they engage with.

Collectivity

The data on the theme of collectivity obtained from the focus group study are given below.

Social connectivity

In collective societies, individuals tend to prioritize the well-being of the society as a whole, making decisions that often reflect communal values. However, the analysis of the study findings indicate that the representation of collective values in advertisements does not foster a strong sense of social responsibility among the participants. The theme of social connectedness appears to be weak, with many participants identifying more with global values such as 'being a citizen of the world' and a focus on universal issues. This suggests that their ties to the specific values of the community they belong to are relatively weak, signaling a shift toward more individualistic and globalized perspectives. Commenting on the socially responsible advertisement A6, P5 remarked: "Normally we always evaluate operators based on price and performance, but in this ad.... I was very impressed by the way it touches people and its inclusiveness." This

statement aligns with the emphasis on inclusivity and social responsibility found in the advertisement, highlighting the significance of universal themes such as accessibility and support for diverse groups.

Emotional connection

In advertisements featuring collective messages, themes such as family, love, longing, and reunion are often employed to evoke emotional responses. While participants reported enjoying these advertisements, they did not identify with the brand, nor did these emotional appeals influence their purchasing decisions. In fact, some participants expressed a sense of insincerity regarding the emphasis on nationalistic or collective themes. For instance, P5 commented on A2: "Even if I like the commercial and watch it, the national messages in the commercials do not affect my brand preference and do not cause me to change the brand I use." Similarly, P4 noted, "I wouldn't get bored even if I watched it several times, the song is a song I already know, I didn't listen to what the main idea of the commercial was, I focused on the song." Regarding the advertisement focused on love, P8 humorously remarked, "Anyway, these campaigns are limited, this love is too little, so I feel like a sucker." Although the 100th anniversary of the Republic and the image of Atatürk in A2 were emotional elements that some participants connected with, it was generally observed that these themes did not evoke a strong emotional response.

Belonging

In collectivist societies, the sense of belonging to one's country or community is predominant, and the emphasis is placed on the collective identity of 'we' rather than the individual identity of 'I'. This collective orientation is intricately linked to feelings of 'patriotism' and 'nationalism.' In response to the use of nationalism as a collective message in advertisements, P7 expressed strong discontent: "I find the emphasis on nationalism in advertising quite disturbing," he said: "I don't identify as a nationalist; I see myself as a global citizen. I feel connected to the world as a whole, not to any one nation, and I don't feel bound by national social ties" and "...They tried to evoke sympathy through the flag, but frankly I'm not impressed... In general, such nationalist themes don't resonate with me." Through these statements, P7 self-identified as a 'global citizen' and explicitly rejected all collective messages, highlighting a clear preference for individualistic or universal themes over nationalistic appeals.

In reference to advertisement A2, P1 remarked: "It evoked a sense of national spirituality and generated enthusiasm; the emphasis on the 100th anniversary of our Republic was significant." However, P1 also noted: "While I felt motivated by the message, the appeal to national sentiment is not a determining factor for me when selecting a brand." Similarly, P2 criticized the message's lack of sincerity, arguing that it was inconsistent with the brand's corporate identity: "I consider myself a nationalist and I carry a picture of Atatürk on my phone case." He said: "Banks like İş Bank are sincere in using national symbols because Atatürk founded the bank. But what connection does Turkcell have with the founding of Turkey? It failed to impress me" thereby demonstrating a critical awareness of the brand's image and its perceived lack of authenticity.

P8, regarding the A4 advertisement, stated: "It says 85 million, it shows two pictures of stone and earth;.... Ads with universal themes, such as nationalism, are made simply because they have to be; there is nothing special about their service. Price/performance is important ...". In a similar vein, P6 expressed indifference: "Even though I like this kind of commercial, I don't want to watch it again... It's not clear when it was made; it could be an ad from 10 years ago, the message is outdated." Likewise, P5 criticized the brand's message as insincere and insufficient, saying, "The brand says it has been taking technology to the countryside for 10 years. If you still haven't solved this issue, there is a problem." P6 also remarked, "...saying '85 million' doesn't mean anything by itself... I grew up in the countryside; showing a shepherd or a man on a boat doesn't mean anything because it doesn't feel natural." P8 added, "I feel like a sucker in advertisements where such big emotions are emphasized because this promotion isn't for me as a citizen of Türkiye, it's something they give so they can take my money." P7 noted, "... They used local motifs instead of the national theme, they used the countryside and emphasized the hometown, but since I grew up in the city, I couldn't identify with it." These statements collectively demonstrate that they were not influenced by messages of 'belonging' in general. Indeed, P7's self-description as a 'person of the world' encapsulates the shared sentiment of all participants.

Solidarity and shared goals

In collective societies, solidarity, common destiny and unity of interest are important. Solidarity in these social structures is related to the sense of 'we'. Based on the research findings, data related to collective values were elicited when the emphasis on 'solidarity' in advertising messages was aligned with the participants interests or current universal

values (such as equality, freedom, justice, etc.) to which they were attuned. Regarding the advertisement with the theme of 'hometown' rather than 'republic,' P8 commented, "Instead of the nation theme, they focused on the countryside and emphasized the hometown. I couldn't identify with it because I grew up in the city, but the other ad had the flag and Atatürk" pointing out the symbols that were more effective for him. P6 stated, "When I think of Türk Telekom, I think of the old, outdated home phones... Since Generation Z doesn't have the economic purchasing power, our parents make these decisions... That's why it doesn't target us." Similarly, P8 remarked, "Scenes depicting the public, such as taxi drivers, minibus drivers, and cultural elements, are more relevant to older generations—at least 10-15 years older—these are symbols of past times and don't hold much significance for us" illustrating that collective symbols hold little meaning for Generation Z.

Social values

In collectivist societies, social values are shared and transmitted by all members of society. However, the participants in this study identified more with messages that emphasized universal values rather than traditional ones. Regarding advertisement A6, P5 remarked: "Seeing which civil society organizations it collaborates with, rather than just generalized messages like 'no to violence' and 'animal rights,' is a sign that it is a real project, which builds trust. This aspect was appreciated" and "...The brand conveyed the message without taking the forefront. All the scenes stayed in my mind, and the emphasis on the relationship between technology and humanity was impactful" highlighting the significance of universal values. Similarly, P1 stated, "...The social responsibility advertisement was effective. I liked the themes of solidarity, unity, equality in education, the relationship between technology and people, and the idea of using technology for the benefit of people, rather than simply for enjoyment." P1's statements are related to the emphasis on technology and social responsibility, which is the main theme of A6, which gained the common appreciation of the participants. This phenomenon explains why A6 emerged as the advertisement with which all participants identified. Participants connected exclusively with this advertisement within the collective category, as its focus on universal issues aligns with Generation Z's entrepreneurial and socially conscious identity.

Discussion and conclusion

Research exploring how individualistic and collectivist cultural codes are perceived remains a relevant topic for social scientists (Nayeem, 2012). Intergenerational studies, in particular, offer new avenues for research in this area. Building on past and current studies, this study provides an opportunity to interpret global culture through the lens of Generation Z. It raises the question of whether collective values still hold meaning in a collectivist society, despite the influence of global culture on this generation. Existing research on the dimensions of individualism and collectivism suggests that individualistic people are success-oriented and prioritize personal gain in their decision-making. As a general characteristic of this generation, while diversity in choices is valued, equality and flexibility are emphasized in relationships (Triandis, 2001). Indeed, the results of this study reveal that all participants focused on individual benefit and enjoyment. In contrast, in collectivist societies, the success of the group and shared goals are of greater importance. Relationships and group norms are shaped by authority, and social categorization tends to be more hierarchical and rigid (Korostelina, 2007, p. 41). According to the findings of this study, all participants showed little sensitivity to collectivist advertising messages with these characteristics, instead concentrating on individual opportunities and concrete promises.

Participants primarily identified with the non-hierarchical, egalitarian, pro-technology, and socially responsible community values presented in advertisement A6. This aligns with the characteristics of Generation Z, which is notably defined by a strong sense of social responsibility (Starczewski, 2023). Generation Z is highly attuned to global issues such as climate change, environmental awareness, and sustainability. In the current study, their sensitivity to social policy-related problems is considered an integral part of their identity (Bulut, 2021; Pavlukovic, 2023). These values are reflected in their consumption behaviors, particularly in their purchasing habits and brand choices. Furthermore, it has been observed that Generation Z consumers are more likely to respond positively to advertisements that emphasize authenticity and transparency (Nalanda & Waghmare, 2024). The findings related to the A6 advertisement in this study align with this view. Additionally, their lack of belief in the sincerity and realism of nationalist discourses in collective-themed advertisements can be linked to generational characteristics. For Generation Z, nationalist discourses in collective ads are less significant than the global codes they use to define their identities. Generation Z, which attaches great importance to personal success, focuses on freedom, limitlessness and personal benefit when making decisions. They are also against class in their social relations and seek equality and flexibility. Young people in Türkiye, who are defined as collectivists,

display similar characteristics with their peers in the world (Ustaahmetoğlu & Toklu, 2023). Therefore, their reactions to advertising messages and the way they perceive the world are compatible with each other. Therefore, it is important to observe the individualism/collectivism dimension of advertising messages as a cultural element in the representation of Generation Z.

The findings of this study indicate that participants' reception of individualistic and collectivist messages in advertisements was consistent with the responses of their peers globally. In addition to individual benefits, the most prominent theme was the focus on price and performance, while the emotional appeal of the ads was less emphasized. The concept of 'unlimited' emerged as the most significant aspect of the opportunities presented in the advertisements. There was a strong demand for concrete information and statistical data regarding these opportunities. Participants openly expressed their discomfort when such information was not provided. For instance, limited travel or concert tickets presented as privileges, restrictions on the number of days or the specific days for free coffee, and limitations on the selection of hotels and accommodations elicited strong reactions. They considered the imposition of restrictions on their freedom of choice and the expression of limitations as unacceptable. It was evident that all participants paid close attention to the campaign conditions presented in the advertisements, were not easily satisfied with the promises made, and largely did not believe them.

When participants were asked about their favorite commercials, three respondents favored A5 (opportunities aligned with their lifestyles), three respondents preferred A1 (music, entertainment, and opportunities), and two respondents selected A6 (social responsibility, technology, and equality themes). The study reached a highly significant conclusion that participants were not influenced by advertisements with collectivist content aimed at appealing to national sentiments. However, the A6 advertisement was perceived differently from other collectivist-coded ads, as it emphasized technological superiority and demonstrated sensitivity to social policies.

This study is grounded in the question: How do Generation Z individuals, raised in a collectivist society like Türkiye, perceive and respond to individualist and collectivist messages in advertisements? The findings reveal that participants, aged 18-22 and representing Generation Z in Türkiye, identified more strongly with individualistic advertising messages. While they enjoyed emotionally charged, collective-themed

advertisements, they distanced themselves from the collectivist messages (e.g., those emphasizing country, unity, togetherness, land, and flag) and perceived them as distant, unable to relate to them. In response to the question of whether there is correlation between the cultural codes of advertisements and the characteristics of Generation Z, the study presents preliminary findings suggesting that such a shift may indeed be possible. Additionally, the results align with those of similar studies in the existing literature (Ustaahmetoğlu, 2023). The representation of this focus group, which clearly demonstrated an individualistic tendency, offers valuable insights for more extensive field research. The impressions derived from the participants' statements suggest that the cultural values of Generation Z- who grew up under the influence of globalization and digitalization- have shifted from collectivism to individualism. While it is not feasible to provide definitive answers to these complex questions within the scope of this study, it offers a significant contribution to the literature, highlighting the potential for such a transformation and emphasizing the need for further, more comprehensive research in this area.

In light of the main research questions, the findings indicate that the distinction between the collective and the individual requires re-evaluation, particularly considering the pervasive use of technology by younger generations. Individualism -one of the cultural codes of globalization- constitutes a core attribute of the modern consumer, who has evolved into a neoliberal subject. This cultural transformation thus assumes a global character. Accordingly, the traits of the generation can be understood as expressions of a global cultural framework, extending beyond the economic infrastructure challenges within the country.

ENDNOTES

¹BRICS, an international organisation, takes its name from the acronyms of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. As of 2024, BRICS has grown to nine members, with the inclusion of Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, making it an important geopolitical bloc.

²Group of 20 is an intergovernmental forum comprising 19 sovereign countries, the European Union, and the African Union.

Ethics Committee Approval: Approval for this study was obtained from the Istanbul University Ethics Committee with the letter dated 10.05.2024 and numbered 2556942.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

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Representations of religion in the entertainment media: A comparison of the TV series *Shtisel* in Israel and *Ömer* in Türkiye

Eğlence medyasında din temsilleri: İsrail'deki Shtisel ve Türkiye'deki Ömer televizyon dizilerinin karşılaştırması

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Abstract

This research focuses on two cases from the Global South -the Israeli series *Shtisel* and its Turkish scripted format adaptation *Ömer*- to revisit the theoretical debates on the relations between entertainment media, politics, and society by employing Curran's radical democratic approach. Both series illustrate a recently popular genre: Pious people's bemusement with modern/secular everyday life. Analyzing TV format adaptations in Türkiye is further significant because the imported format adaptations remain relatively less studied. Four main narratives come into prominence via the narrative analysis: i) the use of technology, ii) the skepticism towards the outside world in *Ömer*, iii) gender narratives, and iv) politicization/depolicitization of representations of religion. *Shtisel* represents religion without reflecting current socio-political conflicts, *Ömer* reflects religion as a site of contestation and polarization of differing identities by reproducing political conflicts from everyday life into fiction. Curran's framework explains *Ömer* sufficiently but is limited in helping understand *Shtisel* unless the Israeli case's transnational political-economic context is considered. Finally, to comprehend multilayered, dynamic, and sui generis cultural dimensions for each case in the Global South -which is not a homogenous whole- further theoretical inquiry on local, cultural and intertextual characteristics of scripted format adaptations in individual cases is needed.

Keywords: Scripted format adaptation, James Curran, Türkiye, Israel, narrative analysis

Öz

Bu araştırma, Küresel Güney'den iki örneğe -İsrail dizisi *Shtisel* ile onun Türkiye'deki format adaptasyonu olan *Ömer*- odaklanarak eğlence medyası, politika ve toplum arasındaki ilişkiler hakkındaki teorik tartışmaları, Curran'ın radikal demokrasi

alternatif yaklaşımı ile ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. İncelenen iki dizi de her iki ülkede son zamanlarda popülerleşen bir türü temsil etmesi açısından önemlidir: Dindar insanların modern/seküler günlük yaşamdaki kafa karışıklığını veya dindar-seküler hayat tarzları karşılaştırmasını temsil eden diziler. Türkiye'deki format uyarlamalarını incelemek ayrıyeten önem teşkil etmektedir, çünkü ithal format uyarlamaları Türk dizileri hakkındaki literatürde görece daha az incelenmiştir. Çalışmadaki anlatı analizi sonucunda dört ana anlatı öne çıkmaktadır: i) teknoloji kullanımı, ii) *Ömer*'de dış dünyaya duyulan şüphe, iii) toplumsal cinsiyet anlatıları ve iv) her iki dizideki din temsillerinde, *Ömer*'de siyasallaşma ve *Shtisel*'de siyasallaşmadan arındırma (depolitizasyon)

anlatıları. Radikal demokrasi çerçevesi *Ömer*'i yeterince açıklamakta iken, İsrail örneğindeki ulusaşırı siyasi-ekonomik bağlam dikkate alınmadıkça *Shtisel*'i anlamada sınırlı kalmaktadır. Son olarak, homojen bir bütün olmayan Küresel Güney'deki çok katmanlı, dinamik ve kendine has boyutları olabilen her bir vakayı anlayabilmek için her ülke örneğindeki format adaptasyonuna ait yerel, kültürel ve metinlerarası özellikler hakkında daha fazla teorik incelemeye ihtiyaç olduğu görülmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Format adaptasyonu, James Curran, Türkiye, İsrail, anlatı analizi

Introduction

Touring the streets of Casablanca and talking with the local people in 2010, the author of this article was surprised that a considerable number of people from different age groups were mentioning 'Muhannad' or 'if she met Muhannad in person,' etc. when they learned that the author was from Türkiye. Eventually, she would realize that Muhannad was the famous actor Kivanç Tatlıtuğ's character's name in the exported Turkish TV series, titled *Nour* in the adapted format, and *Gümüüş* (2005-2007) originally.¹ In the years since, the Turkish drama sector has enhanced drastically and globally, and it has been a main program exporter globally since 2000s (Algan & Kaptan, 2023, p. 325; Gül, 2021, p. 20; Öztürkmen, 2022). Türkiye's rise as a cultural and economic player in the entertainment industry has already garnered considerable academic interest.

The extant scholarly works on Türkiye's global export of TV series have examined various aspects such as international and transnational soft power construction, the challenges and success of Turkish drama industry, transnational media flows, viewership characteristics, and geopolitical elements (Kaptan & Algan, 2020; Berg, 2023; Gül, 2021; Wagner & Kraidy, 2023). This article, however, zooms in on a relatively less studied dimension of Turkish dramas with a comparative analysis: the scripted format adaptations in the mainstream media in Türkiye. Despite the recent rise (Kesirli Unur, 2021; Kesirli Unur, 2020; Kesirli Unur, 2015; Behlil, 2021), studies on TV format adaptations in the Turkish case still remain relatively underrepresented compared to the academic interest in TV format adaptations in global markets (Moran, 2009; Chalaby 2016; Oren & Shahaf, 2012). The article examines the representations of the popular Israeli series *Shtisel* and its Turkish scripted TV format adaptation *Ömer* comparatively through narrative analysis to explore whether mapping and interpreting the political/ideological meanings embedded in TV dramas can be explained with the radical democratic view of entertainment and fiction (Curran, 2005). The author draws upon James Curran's (2005) critique of classical liberals for their oversight of the ways media intersects with broader societal divisions. By positing that fiction is neither mere fantasy nor sheer distraction but rather a reflection of the society it portrays, this article adopts Curran's approach to test because according to Curran's view, the classical liberal and orthodox Marxist perspectives do not effectively address the entertainment media (see: Table 1). Therefore, *Ömer* and *Shtisel* are examined within this framework to assess whether -compared to classical liberal and old-style Marxist views- Curran's radical democratic perspective

provides a better explanation for understanding TV dramas' representations of social realities and debates in the Global South.

Shtisel (2013) initially appeared as a TV drama on Channel 2 in Israel, and in its third season in 2018, its streaming rights were sold to *Netflix*. It narrates an ultra-Orthodox Haredim community, an old yeshiva teacher and widower Rabbi Shulem Shtisel, and his confused artistic son Akiva who live in Mea Shearim². The show's success is attributed to its representation of strong women (Weinbaum, 2020, p. 1). The show centers on Shtisel family members' bemusement between ascetic religious way of life and modern lifestyles. It is not limited to religion-oriented topics, but it narrates themes from everyday life such as gender roles, education, marriage, child rearing, romantic relations, rituals, and so on. Overall, the family and their social relations construct the base narrative.

The background context of Israeli entertainment media provides important details on why *Shtisel* is an important case to study. This drama is not the first of its kind. *A Touch Away* (2007), *Srugim* (2008), and *Jerusalem Mix* (2004) can also be listed as similarly thematized and popular shows in Israel that can be included in this 'religious genre.' Starting in 1999, the religious genre series started to pop up on Israeli television (Peleg, 2015b). Although, like in Türkiye, the 1990s were the years of a sudden transition to private broadcasting in Israel, this transition and market forces alone cannot explain the appearance of series with the focal points of secular-religious division. During the coding phase of this article, an important question came to the fore: why does *Shtisel* not reflect current political events at all? As discussed below, the religion-oriented TV series in Israel cover different Jewish communities such as Haredim, Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, Sephardim, etc. without underlining the differences among them, but by representing them as 'harmonious colors of the same cultural and political Israeli nation.' The secular-religious divergence is presented as a source of consonance, not conflict, in these series.

Understanding the predecessor dramas and political-economic context in Israel is significant to interpreting *Shtisel's* master narrative. Previous studies (Talmon, 2013; Peleg, 2015; Peleg, 2015b; Dardashti, 2015) have analyzed how the American-based AVI CHAI Foundation (AC) has financed these dramas as a socio-political project³ to create a collective Israeli identity and an awareness and discourse about this identity. *Shtisel* is also a part of this project and is supported by this foundation (Peleg, 2015, p. 117; Dardashti, 2015, p. 77-78). The relationship between this foundation and the

dramas is not limited to financial support but involves the scriptwriting processes of these shows (Dardashti, 2015, p. 87; Talmon, 2013, p. 63).

Similarly, in the Turkish context in the last decade, a religious genre⁴ has arrived. Compatible with the incumbent party rhetoric and policies of the 2010s and 2020s, series centering on conservative family-oriented characters proliferated (Uğur Tanrıöver, 2022). Similarly, in the post-2010s, a new historical narrative -neo-Ottomanism- appeared in multiple series (Çevik, 2019 as cited in Uğur Tanrıöver, 2022, p. 22). Producers and the Turkish audience have shown an increased interest in this religious genre such as *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* (One Love, 2022), and *Kızıl Goncalar* (Red Buds, 2023). *Ömer* also belongs to this genre, but its complex narrative as a format adaptation from a drama on ultra-Orthodox Jews makes it further interesting to examine. Not only narrative-wise but format adaptation dramas bring another layer in terms of complex web of the transnational entertainment industry. On the other hand, examining these series simply via the discourse of secular-religious dichotomy would be misleading. Rather, 'how everyday life is represented, and which values and norms come to the fore' can provide researchers with a much more accurate socio-political, cultural, and theoretical reading.

In an interview with him (Vivarelli, 2023), the owner of the OGM company -the producer of *Ömer*- Onur Güvenatam provides some clues about how and why *Ömer* drags fault lines and emotions of Turkish society into the narratives of the drama:

In my opinion, as a Turkish content creator, if you look at the ratings, we are used to conservative shows. We are always trying to create within that conservative mindset, and this also adds to the show's potential. When you are making shows for the streamers, yes, you do feel like you can be more edgy, more controversial. And when it was forbidden, we thought that this was very appealing, but when the streamers said, "OK, do whatever you want," we found out that, no, our talent is creating conservative stuff. We are much better at creating those types of stories.

The following parts will respectively cover Curran's radical democratic approach as the theoretical framework, the methodological details of the study, the findings of narrative analysis, and the concluding remarks of the research. As stated at the beginning, the importance of this research is multifaceted. First, it examines scripted TV format adaptations an understudied dimension of Turkish dramas; second, it tests the radical democratic theoretical framework on two cases from the Global South; third, it revisits

discussions on the function of entertainment media in politics; fourth, it tests whether or not Curran's radical democratic approach can offer an alternative but complementary perspective to the two already existing significant theoretical views in interpreting scripted format adaptations: "intertextuality" (Kesirli Unur, 2020; Kesirli Unur, 2015) and "intermediality" (Öztürkmen, 2022, pp. 133-163), and fifth, by comparing the narrative of the original series with that of the scripted format adaptation, it attempts to understand what kind of societal differences/similarities they represent in their narratives. The final importance of this study underlies in its examination of traditional TV series, not the digital platforms (*Shtisel* was sold to *Netflix* later) as a crucial point for the Turkish case, in which traditional TV viewing is still a strong cultural element (Vitrinel, Kaptan & Algan, 2022, p. 6).

Does fiction reflect what you are? Radical democratic approach to entertainment

In elucidating the interaction between the public sphere and media, the normative or idealized roles assigned to media are primarily influenced by liberal perspectives rooted in the well-known 'fourth estate' theory. A second principal theoretical approach, originating from the Marxist tradition, also positions media normatively but interprets its function through the lens of dominant political power relations. Despite these two prevailing approaches, the public sphere is conceptualized differently. Consequently, the ideal or normative role of media within various political regimes is not uniformly interpreted across different theoretical traditions. These roles, whether derived from liberal or Marxist traditions, are predominantly attributed to a focus on news media, leaving entertainment media largely sidelined.

With Curran's perspective, however, this article brings similar discussions to entertainment. Due to the normative or ideal roles attributed to media by the liberal perspective, entertainment has been evaluated generally as "a separate category unrelated to the political role of the media" (Curran, 2005, p. 33) or any political content or information. To the traditional liberal view, entertainment is neither a part of rational-critical debate nor a part of the flow of information between government and the governed. Instead, the classical liberal view sees entertainment in three ways: as a diversion from media's democratic functioning, as ignoring the existence of entertainment in the political sphere and denial of its political role, and finally, as maximization of the consumer gratification (Curran, 2005, pp. 32-33; Curran, 2010: pp. 69-70).

Quite contrary to the liberal stand, the radical approach does not situate entertainment media just within the confines of a “state-oriented definition of politics,” but includes various processes of everyday life including “the nature of social relations between men and women, parents and children, young and old, the ethnic majority and minorities.” Entertainment might also function in both ways: either by fostering “empathetic insights between different sections of society and strengthens bonds of social association” or conversely, by stimulating “misunderstanding and antagonism through the repetition of stereotypes that provide a focus for displaced fears” in the given society (Curran, 2005, p. 33). Comparing the narratives of two versions of the series (*Shtisel*, and *Ömer*) is important; even though the main plots of both scenarios appear similar, the society-oriented everyday life details from both versions notably differ.

The points above bring us to Curran’s (2005, p. 28) argument that via the entertainment media, “society communes with itself” according to the radical democratic framework. The traditional liberal view equates the public sphere with the political sphere, and thus, defining the roles of media vis-à-vis government. The radical democratic approach rejects the traditional separation between private and public spheres. It argues that the mediating role of the media extends to all areas where power is exercised over others, encompassing both the workplace and home. The influence wielded by the media is not only defined by its impact on government actions but also by its ability to affect “adjustments in social norms and interpersonal relationships” (Curran, 2005, p. 32). Then not only government-related news but also media fiction and entertainment can also provide ways of “mapping and interpreting the society” (Curran, 2005, p. 33).

The radical democratic approach, as Curran puts it, is thus distinct from the Marxist viewpoints on entertainment. While the old-style Marxist theory of media considers the media as the disguised mode of “bourgeois domination” and the public sphere as “a chimera” (Curran, 2005, p. 36), radical democrats render a relatively autonomous place for journalists vis-à-vis the government.

Table 1. Alternative theoretical perspectives on media

	Liberal	Marxist critique	Communist	Radical democratic
Public sphere	Public space	Class domination	-	Public arena of contest
Political role of media	Check on government	Agency of class control	Further societal objectives	Representation/counterpoise
Media system	Free market	Capitalist	Public ownership	Controlled market
Journalistic norm	Disinterested	Subaltern	Didactic	Adversarial
Entertainment	Distraction/gratification	Opiate	Enlightenment	Society communing with itself

Source: (Curran, 2005, p. 28)

As Table 1 illustrates, except for the radical democratic one, there are three responses to the democratic meaning of media entertainment that Curran (2011, p. 63) finds inadequate. The first one -as claimed by the classical liberals- sees entertainment as a diversion from the 'serious' democratic role of the media. To Curran, this assessment ignores the political meaning of entertainment. The second -distinguishing entertainment as a separate category from public affairs coverage- is also criticized as methodologically problematic in understanding the contemporary media environment since it reflects the late 19th c. and early 20th c. press-oriented explanations of the American academic community. The third response -"to point to a cross-over between public affairs coverage and entertainment"- is also limited by focusing solely on the segment of media content that explicitly combines entertainment and politics.

Overall, to Curran (2010, p. 70), viewing entertainment as detached from politics or the democratic role of the media is no longer viable. It is rather involved with democratic life in four key ways: values, identities, cognitions, and norms. First, entertainment creates a space for exploring and debating social values and norms that are central to current political debates. Second, it helps in defining and reshaping social identity, closely linked to self-interest. Third, it offers alternative frameworks of understanding that shape public debate. Finally, it provides a means to assess, strengthen, weaken, and revise public norms, which are crucial to self-governance (Curran, 2011, p. 63, 75; Curran, 2010).

Aim and methodology

By focusing on two cases of TV series from the Global South, the Israeli series *Shtisel* and its Turkish scripted format adaptation *Ömer*, this research aims to understand and revisit the theoretical debates on the relations between entertainment media, politics, and society. Instead of the classical liberal perspective's dismissal of entertainment

media, this article rather uses James Curran’s radical democratic approach to test whether Curran’s approach can sufficiently explain these two cases from the Global South, and if not, explore the reasons for this limitation. In Curran’s approach, viewing entertainment as detached from politics or the democratic role of the media is no longer viable. It is rather involved with democratic life in four main ways: values, identities, cognitions, and norms. The comparative narrative analysis of the two series attempts to examine these interactions between entertainment, politics, and society as well as the narrated contents of two series. This comparison allows to observe the differing representations of everyday life when TV series are studied as “narrative ecosystems” (Rocchi & Pescatore, 2022).

Aim

By selecting two cases from the Global South, this research adopts two main aims: first, contributing to the comparative literature on Turkish *dizis* and their less studied dimension, scripted format adaptations, by focusing on narrative similarities as well as differences; and second, questioning whether a western theoretical paradigm of Curran’s radical democratic approach is an explanative framework vis-à-vis the limited perspectives of classical liberal and orthodox Marxist views of entertainment media. This inquiry is important to explore the embedded social, political and ideological meanings in fiction, and to understand the local differences as well as societal divisions in their narratives. In the following section, the reasons for methodological selections, and the techniques used in the research will be clarified.

Methodology

In this research, a qualitative and inductive approach to narrative analysis is adopted to have an exploratory view and to see if there are any patterns in the data. The narrative analysis is applied via a thematic content analysis technique in which the author used a posteriori codes after a pilot watching. During the pilot watching, prominent ideas, recurring ideas/words/attitudes as well as repeating/differing/common themes in both dramas were noted. As a result, the codes (Table 2) were specified. The core aspect of both series is the religious people’s bemusement and complex relations with modern life. Regarding the research question and this core aspect, sub-themes that might relate to the religion-modernity-everyday life triangle were assigned. Once the codes were determined, the corresponding dialogue or phrase from the plot was noted. Besides

the codes, the author also coded what sort of attitudes and scenes the dialogue or the actor is laden with.

All episodes of both series were examined in the research that makes approximately 1650 minutes of videos of *Shtisel* (three seasons/ 33 episodes/ 50 minutes average per episode) and 8100 minutes of videos of *Ömer* (two seasons/54 episodes/150 minutes average per episode). Approximately 9750-minute-long videos were examined in total. Turkish dramas are famous for their extremely lengthy episodes, which appears to be a limitation in the research since a 3-hour-long episode would naturally create a burden of coded text in comparison to a 50-minute episode. To overcome any potential problem of excessive coding for *Ömer*, the author chose to consider examining all seasons of both series instead of episode-sampling from each. Therefore, the author could trace the differing sequences and video lengths of narrated events between the original drama and its scripted format adaptation and pursue the differences in the narratives for the same plot that was broadcast in two non-sequential episodes of each drama. And while *Shtisel* lasted three seasons, *Ömer* continued for two seasons with a complex narrative flow from three seasons of *Shtisel*. That is why the flow of events were not in a similar sequence in both.

Due to the multiple layers of narratives, this research had two key methodological questions to understand: How was the story told in *Ömer* and *Shtisel* separately? And “Why was the story told that way?” (Kohler Riessman, 1993, p. 2). This article delves into the first question by conducting narrative analysis, and the second one via the secondary literature. The difficulty in conducting narrative analysis is not only because of the complex layers of narratives but also “systematically interpreting [the] interpretations” (Kohler Riessman, 1993, p. 5).

Narrative analysis is a suitable approach for this research. Since an adaptation drama and the original one are examined, it creates multi-layered narratives in which there is the first narrative in the original drama, *Shtisel* (which represents the Israeli context), and the second narrative is formed via the scripted format adaptation *Ömer* based on *Shtisel*, yet the adaptation represents a different context in terms of politics, culture, and religion. Despite *Ömer* being an adaptation, the sequence and content of plots are not the same with *Shtisel*, which adds another layer to the general narrative in tracing the plots, narrative flows, and discourses.

This research uses narratives not only for pinpointing discursive details but also to trace if there are representations of similarities in the dramas with the real politico-cultural life of the represented societies. If yes, 'whether they are represented similarly in the fictional narratives' happened to be an important inquiry for this research. At this point, the author also borrows two dimensions from the intermedia agenda-setting theory: whether there are transfer of issues and/or attitudes from the original drama into the adaptation. If the salient issues and attitudes are not the same, what can be the explanative factors? Even though these two (issue-transfer and attitude-transfer) were not coded as two separate themes, these two remained as a background criterion while coding the other themes and were noted properly under the relevant code.

A narrative theorist, Seymour Chatman, argued that "characters in TV and the plot are equally important, and thus, interpreting the character is valid and important as the interpretation of the theme, plot, or some other narrative elements in TV programs" (Porter, et. al., 2002, p. 24). During coding in this research, the author particularly considered character development. For example, while examining Ömer (the protagonist in *Ömer*)⁵, he was continuously compared with the character, Akiva (protagonist in *Shtisel*) in terms of discourses, characteristic features, and the way the character was developed through episodes.

The codes in the narrative analysis are appointed to understand the general narrative of religious people's confusion and conflicts in modern everyday life. Table 2 lists the main and sub-codes and their short conceptualizations.

Table 2. The main and sub-codes of the analysis

Codes	Description	Sub-codes (if any)	Explanation (if necessary)
The use of technology and any sort of medium	Using or not using technology or any technology-relevant medium. (Not only using but talking about usage of technology is also included in this code.)		Any sort of technology usage-related plots, scenes, dialogues, behaviors are coded. Exemplary keywords: technology, vehicle, computer, car, driving, TV, radio, newspapers, phone, the Internet.

<p>Gender-related issues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How is motherhood defined? ● How is femininity defined? ● How is masculinity defined? ● What kind of gender roles are attributed to women and men? ● Are there any educational differences/similarities for girls and boys? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Are women and men representations similar for the corresponding characters in two dramas? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● female-male interaction ● masculinity ● femininity ● motherhood ● marriage ● gender-based education (for boys and for girls) 	
<p>Social and family relations</p>	<p>social relations with friends, family, neighbors, and relatives</p>		
<p>Representation of religion and religion-related themes</p>	<p>Any discussion related to religion is coded accordingly with sub-codes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● religion-politics interactions ● religion-history debates ● religious behaviors, practices, and clothing ● religion in everyday life 	
<p>Everyday life practices</p>	<p>any sort of everyday life practices that appear to be relevant with modern lifestyle</p>		<p>Inconsistencies, hesitations, dichotomies and modernity-related problems (between religious practices/thinking with modern life)</p>
<p>Transfer of issues or attributes from <i>Shtisel</i> to <i>Ömer</i></p>	<p>Transfer of issues or attributes: a) from <i>Shtisel</i> to <i>Ömer</i>; b) from real-life (reality) to episodes (fiction)</p>		
<p>Politics-fiction interaction</p>	<p>Are the real-life socio-political issues represented in the fiction? If yes, how?</p> <p>Which political events do/not the series refer to?</p> <p>To what extent, these representations are compatible with the current political ideological atmosphere?</p>		
<p>Descriptions of the characters</p>	<p>Describe the character's features and compare/contrast with the corresponding character in the original/adaptation.</p>		

Findings

Four main narratives -the use of technology; intrigue, skepticism and distrust; emancipation of women vs. pseudo-feminist narrative; and politicized and depoliticized narratives in the representations of everyday life and religion- come to the fore as a result of the data analysis in the two series in differing ways. Each of the subtitles below represents these salient narratives.

The use of technology

In *Shtisel*, avoiding the use of technology in Haredim appears to be interpreted as withdrawal from worldly pleasures. Not only the use of technology but also other listening to music, painting, singing, and such activities are interpreted as worldly activities that might keep the person away from the yeshiva doctrine. All the examples about worldly pleasures and their interpretations by different characters illustrate the drama's attitude towards the religion-modernity dichotomy: modernity is not completely incompatible with a religious lifestyle.

Those who deal with the issues found improper according to the ultra-Orthodox Jewish tradition (such as driving, having a car, watching TV, etc.) are called "rebel" in *Shtisel* (S2, E5)⁶. The issue of driving, as a case in point, is not welcomed in the Haredi community either for men or women. However, despite the use of 'rebel' by Rabbi Shulem, for instance, the dominant attitude in *Shtisel* is finding a mid-way between traditional and modern life. For example, even if Lippe (the son-in-law of Rabbi Shulem, husband of Giti) was called a rebel because of his driving and having a car, Giti (the daughter of Shulem) could marry him; Tovi (the daughter-in-law of Shulem, wife of Zvi Arye) could drive despite some opposition from her husband at first. Akiva listened to English songs on the radio while painting (S1, E7). Similarly, Rabbi Shulem listened to a comedy group called 'Gashash Trio' CD at Torah School and enjoyed it (S2, E10). Another example is that Lippe continued to use his smartphone and the Internet for fun, business, and communication despite his wife Giti's critiques (S1, E12).

Ömer is similar in terms of withdrawal from technology. For example, the pious (Muslim) Ademoğlu family members do not use smartphones. When it is found out that the younger members -such as Tahir's teenage son and daughter- use smartphones without their father's permission, he destroys their phones. As another case of technology use, like *Shtisel*, the religious characters do not own a car in *Ömer*. However, different from *Shtisel*, it appears to be a matter of economic class more than a religious reason.

Intrigue, skepticism, and distrust in *Ömer*

What are the odds of being evicted from your home, your granddaughter falling into the hands of a prostitution ring, your other grandchild being kidnapped, your son being ensnared by a political Islamist cult crime network, your daughter-in-law becoming pregnant, and your son being beaten -all in the same day? (*S2, E37 & E38*) *Ömer's* proves it is possible. Though fiction, it cannot be disregarded as a total fantasy. Fiction still reflects the values, beliefs, sensitivities, and ideology of the society. It can also represent the already existing debates from the public sphere.

In the abovementioned episode, Eda (the teenage granddaughter) is kidnapped by a prostitution gang, but no one thinks of filing a police complaint; the family tries to save her themselves, fighting with armed men in the process. Going to the police becomes the last resort. This aligns with themes of a lack of trust in law and the tendency to bring justice through personal accounts. Moreover, when they go to the police station to file a complaint, political Islamist gang members are immediately informed about everything that happens in the prosecutor's office or the police station. This reflects the real-life experiences of Turkish society, mirroring the period when the political Islamist crime network, Gülenists, captured the state institutions and were able to gather information secretly and illegally. Within this context, we see a represented parallel between everyday politics and fiction. This parallel illustrates how TV dramas "continuously articulate the value system of the society" because with their stories, some underlying norms and values are dramatized, and through dramas, we discover these norms and values. In this sense, "characters represent cultural values" of the society they symbolize, and they "personify the contradictions" (Oud, Weijers & Wester, 1997, p. 6-7).

The narratives of the two dramas diverge drastically in some respects. While *Shtisel* reflects a drama-free, calm, and naturally flowing everyday life; *Ömer* has anything but tranquility as it is one intrigue after another in their daily lives. Being distrustful towards the outer world, continuous doubtfulness, distrust towards the rule of law and the justice system, trying to take the law into one's own hands, being anxious, the feeling of the need to protect oneself, and the dangerous world syndrome are some of the dominant traits characters in *Ömer* reflect.

Emancipation of women or pseudo-feminist narrative?

Another salient narrative that appears in both series is the issue of gender. A 'liberal narrative' for women and a discourse of 'emancipation of women' have characterized global media productions in the last decade. This narrative shows itself in women represented to be taking an active part in working life, having more economic and individual rights and liberties. However, by merely rhetorically mentioning the gender (in)equality between lines in a didactic tone without internalizing this rhetoric in the attitudes of the characters, *Ömer* uses this frame of 'emancipation and empowerment of women' to reproduce the existing traditional gender roles in Turkish society while *Shtisel* represents a relatively more convincing way in which the gender equality is not covered superficially but appears to be internalized via both the discourses and behaviors of the characters.

Ömer's woman narrative can, therefore, be described as a pseudo-feminist narrative, one that popularly uses feminist concerns without reflecting them in the attitudes and behaviors of the actors, the narrative arc, or the plot of the drama. Eventually, it turns out to be a narrative where women's emancipation remains just a rhetorical element while the behaviors and attitudes in the drama remain traditional and reproduce existing traditional norms, values, and identities.

Since both dramas are about orthodox religious people's everyday lives, the first gender-related issue is about the individual rights and liberties of women. One of these freedoms comes with 'driving' since it provides individual mobility, speed, and further space for women. In other words, driving can be interpreted as a symbol of autonomy with accelerated mobility. In *Shtisel*, the topic is treated in the case of Tovi, the wife of Zvi Arye (a devoted yeshiva student) when she starts driving (S3, E6). Considering the position of women in public life in the ultra-Orthodox Haredi community, driving turns out to be an illustrator of 'excess freedom' for women who are thought to be ideal mothers and wives. When Tovi ignores her husband's 'warnings' about the inconvenience of driving for their community and gets her driver's license and then a car without asking Zvi Arye, his first reaction is negative. But when Tovi persuades her husband to join for a tour in the new car, pointing out that the color is Zvi Arye's favorite, and it will provide a comfortable commute for him to yeshiva school, Zvi Arye starts to relish his journey with his wife flattering him 'like a King.'

This scene illustrates two things about gender role representation. Without knowing his wife's driving issue, Zvi Arye is having a conversation about women's position in public life with his colleague at the Kollel. When he said to Zvi Arye that his wife wants to go to university and become a lawyer, Zvi Arye responds with surprise, "a university [for a woman]?" and the colleague makes it more 'proper' for Haredim by saying that it is "an Orthodox university for women" and continues, "Honestly, I tried to dissuade her, but she wouldn't listen. Women these days are like that. This is an issue, a serious problem." As a 'manly' reaction, Zvi says that "What does it mean she wouldn't listen?" and then he quotes from the book, referring to women: "Your man shall rule over you" (S3, E6). Although the dialogue illustrates how ultra-Orthodox men want to keep their power over women, Tovi's scenes revealing her driver's license and car complicate that. She challenges her husband on traditional roles, and it turns out that as long as Tovi does not mar Zvi Arye's manly image in the community, he will consent to Tovi's driving. In the following scenes, Tovi acts pragmatically, flattering her husband when the community men are around, and pretending that she recognizes her husband's manly authority and listens to whatever he says.

The same plot on driving is covered in *Ömer* quite differently. When Şükran first learns how to drive secretly, away from her husband, Tahir is depicted as a strict opponent of using technology and women's public appearance and liberties. By the time Şükran gets her driving license and decides to drive, the family has already passed through many incidents and Tahir turns out to be a more supportive, understanding male character. Thus, Tahir starts to support Şükran in driving. However, in *Shtisel*, the audience sees the independent agency of Tovi -both financially and rhetorically- as she buys her car and decides independently since she is the one who earns money in the family⁷ and thus retains her autonomy while resisting her husband. In *Ömer* however, the autonomy was 'given' from Tahir to Şükran, and this driving scene remains isolated. Later, we never see Şükran driving or owning a car. Even when female characters (including Şükran) come to own a restaurant later on, they cannot earn enough money without the help and 'entrepreneurial wisdom' of Tahir (S2, E47 and E48). All in all, the depictions of women characters and the autonomy and agency attributed to them differ in the two dramas drastically.

The discursive differences in *Ömer* and *Shtisel* narratives on driving can alternatively be interpreted with "intertextuality" in the narrative of the scripted format adaptation (Kesirli Unur, 2020). Intertextuality associates "TV fiction with other texts as well as the

multiple dimensions of the social and the historical for making meaning in the local contexts” (Kesirli Unur, 2020, pp. 4-5) and when the series were adapted, the original “narrative had to go through a secondary localization process,” (Kesirli Unur, 2020, p. 7) to make the adapted script compatible with the cultural codes of the society where the adaptation would be aired. Through the “secondary localization” process of *Ömer*’s script adaptation, driving a car appears as a significant symbol of modernization - a very similar discursive component of that we see in “car narratives” in Turkish novel writing as Parla (2003) ascertained. Tovi’s “possession” and Şükran’s “dispossession” of a car can also be interpreted not a simple indicator of class differences, but as a matter of “Westernization and formation of national identity” (here, in Şükran’s case, ‘non-Westernization’ and ‘formation of conservative identity’) at an intertextual level as Kesirli Unur (2015, p. 146) shrewdly analyzed for the case of the format adaptation *Kuzey Güney*. Şükran’s case sounds complex here because of the inconsistency between discursive and behavioral narratives in *Ömer*. As mentioned previously, on one hand, Şükran’s learning of driving can construct an example for the pseudo-feminist narrative in *Ömer* in which driving is associated with modernization/Westernization; on another, unlike Tovi, this association is not internalized in Şükran’s agency.

In *Shtisel*, there are more to-the-point, policy-oriented, or modernity-related topics of gender such as surrogacy, abortion, and divorce; in *Ömer*, these topics remain superficial. When Ruchami’s pregnancy causes serious health problems, the couple goes to the head of the yeshiva and asks his opinion on surrogacy, and the head yeshiva states that “surrogacy is prohibited in Torah, but you are in a zone that Torah does not cover. That is why whatever you decide would be suitable with Torah” (S3, E2).

On the other hand, *Ömer* reflects what already traditionally exists in society. For example, in Türkiye in current public life, surrogacy is not legally possible, and similarly, it is not a subject at all in the drama, either. Abortion is only covered as a compulsory case when Gamze encounters health problems, but not as a matter of individual choice. *Ömer*’s narrative does not refrain from bringing conflictual discussions into the script, but it concludes in a conservative fashion, which is compatible with the present hegemonic view in Turkish society when it comes to some socio-political issues such as abortion and women’s agency.

The two dramas also differ in their depictions of masculinity. In *Ömer*, the men of the neighborhood gather, go to fight, intervene in situation, and find their solutions to problems; but in *Shtisel*, men and women use their agency to solve their problems. Nonetheless, due to the variety of male characters, there is no single depiction of masculinity in the two dramas. *Shtisel* portrays Shulem as a pragmatist, traditionally masculine, and old Jew; Akiva as a moderate, confused, easy-going, and more understanding male; Zvi Arye as a pious, traditionally masculine character but this masculinity remains a show-case feature when he was with his wife.

As a rhetoric of women's empowerment and emancipation, Şükran's support of her daughter Eda after being victimized by the prostitution gang sounds initially liberating. She comforts her by saying "You have done nothing to be ashamed of." However, Tahir enters the scene trying to lock down Şükran (his wife who wants a divorce) and Vicdan (Tahir's first love and mother of his 'illegitimate' daughter, Nilüfer), forbidding their daughters from going to school and smashing their phones. Throughout these scenes, we witness male violence to the fullest. Despite a short discourse on 'women-supporting-women,' it is shadowed by male violence, women are victimized, and their agency is taken from them.

Another point about masculinity in *Ömer* is that no matter what the male characters do (such as cheating or deceiving their wife, having an illegitimate child from a past affair, abandoning their wife and children for another woman, secluding their wife forcefully, seizing their wife and children's mobile phones and breaking them, mistreatment their family, etc.), they are eventually accepted happily as beloved husbands and fathers. The final episode (S2, E54) illustrates all these male-friendly depictions in the marriage scene. The supposed women's emancipation discourse is demolished in this episode in which all main women characters are represented as 'longing for wearing a white wedding dress as their childhood dream,' and ready to accept their grooms as they are. The women's agency suddenly disappears, and the women's freedom rhetoric is forgotten. All women characters forgive their husbands and remarry them. The 'outlier' cases - such as Vicdan (the former 'jezebel' and new 'magdalene'), the womanizer Hakan, the 'rebellious' Gamze- are all 'properly tamed, redesigned' and only then do they acquire a place in this conservative community. Women's emancipation remains a pseudo-narrative that cannot internalize the values of emancipation in the attitudes and behaviors of the characters. They end where they began: in the accepted norms and values of a conservative lifestyle.

Representation of religion and everyday life: Politicized and depoliticized narratives

In this part, the results of two themes are analyzed: the representation of religion, and the narratives on politics-religion interaction. The main argument is that *Shtisel* depoliticizes religion and does not bring political discussions from everyday life to fiction, or when rarely it does, it portrays it in the least conflicting way possible; and *Ömer* re-politicizes the already existing conflicting identities and values of the society, and brings real-life conflicts, events, and norms into fictional narrative more provocatively and intriguingly.

When *Shtisel* is examined with the political and economic context in which it is broadcasted, it becomes easier to interpret the religion-politics narrative and the transfer of issues and attitudes from public debates into fiction. As mentioned in the introduction, considering a religious genre series in Israeli television, and the funding by AC is common in these types of series in the Israeli context. As Peleg (2015b) pointed out “focusing primarily on television programming, the foundation has sought to raise the religious consciousness of Israeli Jews and bridge the gap between secular and religious Israelis” (p.16). This explains well why politics were not a matter to be touched upon lucidly in *Shtisel* whereas in *Ömer*, we could find many issues transferred from everyday politics into the episodes.

Shtisel ‘depoliticizes religion’ in many respects by not addressing real-life conflicts or issues. However, *Ömer* ‘re-politicizes the politics’ by overstressing and reformulating existing fault lines in Turkish society. In depoliticizing religion, *Shtisel* makes the religious characters “ordinary” (Peleg, 2015b, p. 18) and disconnects them from the public sphere. *Ömer* recreates current public discussions in fiction by further dramatizing them⁸. Thus, *Ömer* is more emblematic of the way Curran’s approach defines public sphere-entertainment relations.

What could be the reason for the above-mentioned difference in de/politicization in these two dramas? OGM owner Güvenatam’s statement should be recalled: “we do well what we know the best: the conservative people” (Vivarelli, 2023). In *Shtisel*, however, the picture is more complex, and we need to understand its economic and political background and the involvement of political actors. As denoted above, the post-2000s TV series in Israel are “symbolic sites for the negotiation of Jewish identity” and they provide a communication channel for religious communities in Israel, hence, they turn

out to be “creating more visibility of these versions of Israeliness on the small screen, and deconstructing stereotypes thereof, allowing for more complex images of” these religious communities and individual Israeli Jews (Talmon, 2013, p. 55). But what is the reason for this kind of homogeneous presentation in reflecting Jewish religious communities in different TV series? Talmon (2013, p. 55) explains it:

The dramatic elaboration of intercultural encounters and conflicts in these TV dramas are contextualized by the Tzav Piyus project of reconciliation, which was initiated as a consequence of Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination and the painful sociocultural fissures associated with it, as well as the larger enterprise of the AVI CHAI foundation—the promotion both in Israel and in North America of an awareness and discourse about Jewish identity as a complex and diversified experience.

How, then, in *Shtisel*, this reconciliation of different identities is achieved? Bobrowicz and Gustafsson Lundberg (2021) fairly argue that in this drama, the Haredim characters “are depicted as people who deal with the same problems as everyone else” (say it religious, ultra-Orthodox, or secular), “which makes a relation between secular and religious less dichotomic” (p.178). In other words, the issues -such as “doubts and severe struggles for independence” (Bobrowicz and Gustafsson Lundberg, 2021, p. 178) in *Shtisel* are depicted like ordinary problems for any person, independent of their religious community.

As some other examples of avoidance/absence of bringing public debates into *Shtisel*'s script, it can be summarized as the issue of military service⁹, Ashkenazim-Haredim or Sephardim-Haredim differences (S3, E1)¹⁰, Palestine or Palestinians, and so on. The absence of military service from the covered topics is especially interesting because it is one of the most hotly debated issues among Haredi, the state, and the Israeli society. Because Haredi males get yeshiva education in their lifetime as a command of their religious belief, they are exempted from the obligatory military service¹¹. The debate on the topic is not a matter of being exempted from the service, but a total non-involvement of Haredim with any of the political and military issues. Two main attitudes about political issues from real life appear in *Shtisel*'s representations: 1) ‘nostalgic grieve/sigh,’ and 2) ‘anti-Zionist emphasis’ made for the state institutions and celebrations.

Rebbetzin Erbllich's (lifelong friend of Shulem's mother Malka) suicide scene is striking as 'nostalgia for the selected past,' Erbllich decides to commit suicide when she learns that she has a terminal disease. Malka 'accompanies' her friend by being with her in the nursery room. Erbllich takes the pills and asks Malka to turn on the TV for the news. While Erbllich is dying, the audience can hear some bits and pieces from the news: "Germany after 70 years... Remembering the survivors of the Holocaust... German youth want to visit the holocaust survivors in Israel." With the sound of the TV in the background, from the two holocaust survivors, Erbllich dies, and Malka "accompanies" her in spirit. (S2, E4). This scene creates nostalgia for the selected moment. Despite addressing this moment from history in the drama, the audience never sees a similar coverage of the 'other moments in' the past when it comes to the issue of Palestine, and the history of Israeli-Palestinian relations, for instance. This is another indicator that the drama does not cover or represent contemporary debates or conflicts in Israeli society. The AC funding and its agenda-setting via entertainment could be one of the reasons of this outcome¹².

Discussion and conclusion

The data analysis illustrates that *Shtisel* prescribes a sympathetic, apolitical view of the Haredi community. The real-life political debates are not covered, and the Haredi community is depicted as a peaceful community of ordinary people. It does not represent a secular-religious dichotomy, but the problems characters face are mostly routine everyday life problems that secular people can encounter as well. Therefore, the drama 'humanizes' the Haredi community, and does not highlight its radical religious features such as early marriage, not educating girls, ascetic life, throwing stones to protest obligatory military service, etc. Similarly, current political conflicts such as Israeli aggression toward Palestine, and its historical details never find a representation in the narrative.

It is a different story in *Ömer*. Although *Ömer* does not represent an ultra-Orthodox Muslim community, contrary to *Shtisel*, the representations of religious and identity-based differences become more apparent, and these differences appear to reflect the main causes of conflict in Turkish society. The pious Ademoğlu family does not live in an isolated space, unlike the Haredi community. Nonetheless, there are some socio-political real-life problems that the fiction does not deal with but superficially mentions. Abortion, early marriage, and women's empowerment are some of them.

This article traces two differing representations of 'religion as a matter of everyday life' in these two dramas: Despite both dramas' reflections and narratives on the pious people's bemusement with modernization, while *Shtisel* represents religion as a natural element embedded in everyday life practices, *Ömer* reflects religion as a site of contestation, polarization, and skepticism of differing identities.

All in all, Curran's (2005) theory on radical democracy appears to be explanative for *Ömer's* narratives but is limited to explaining *Shtisel*. The reason for this limitation is that without taking the political, economic and industrial characteristics of media productions, a purely radical democratic framework *per se* would be restricted to understanding the relations between the public sphere and entertainment as the AC case illustrates. *Ömer* has illustrated how Turkish society communes with its existing norms, values, and identities, and their reproductions via entertainment. Without consideration of the political economy of media production, Curran's radical democratic explanation *per se* would not sufficiently explain the functions attributed to entertainment and fiction. As the AC example in the Israeli case illustrated, the funding of the TV programs is not only a matter of finance, but it comes with its socio-political agenda including the values and debates that happen to exist in the public sphere.

Overall, in testing Curran's radical democratic perspective through two cases from the Global South, some concluding remarks are necessary. The data confirm that, when analyzing entertainment productions, the radical democratic claim that 'society is communing with itself through entertainment media' provides a rather explanative theoretical framework, especially in contrast to classical liberal or Marxist approaches. However, Curran's radical democratic framework, in its current form, appears somewhat limited in its ability to fully interpret scripted format adaptations, where production and consumption processes are notably more complex. As the literature indicates, these adaptations involve multifaceted elements such as intermediality, intertextuality, localization, and cultural codes. The data show that, while acknowledging the political role and significance of entertainment is crucial, these complex aspects of format adaptations suggest that the political meanings and roles attributed to entertainment and fiction are accurate but ultimately offer a limited explanation unless Curran's theory communicates the culture-oriented theoretical explanations to media productions.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The series and *Muhannad* were not only popular in Morocco but the Middle East, which would later be examined as the “neo-Ottoman cool” (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Kraidy, 2019, p.155).
- 2 The “haredim” (plural of haredi) refers to one of the Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities which was headed by their rabbis, strictly follow Jewish religious law in their rituals and everyday life practices, separate themselves from Gentile (non-Jewish) society, have high birth rates, and their own synagogues and schools, which are called “yeshiva” schools for Talmudic learning (Britannica, n.d.).
- 3 It is also called The Film and Television Project (Dardashti, 2015, p. 87).
- 4 Öztürkmen (2018) and Uğur Tanrıöver (2022) examine the Turkish dizi genre.
- 5 Not to confuse the drama name with the protagonist, the drama will be addressed in *italics*.
- 6 S signifies ‘season’ and E is ‘episode.’
- 7 The yeshiva seminary students do not work but study Torah in their lifetime. This is the dominant approach among Haredim. Since these seminary male students cannot earn money, either their wives earn money, or they get community or state subsidies. This is one of the debated topics in Israeli society. Male Haredim are also exempted from compulsory military service in Israel.
- 8 *Ömer* sometimes refrains from politicization. For example, in Israeli version of the show, Ruchami marries at age 15. For the corresponding Turkish character Emine, however, *Ömer* does not depict early-age marriage which is a hotly debated topic and a fault line in the Turkish public sphere.
- 9 The director explains why they do not bring forward the issue of military service: “The perception of Haredim is those people who throw stones and that don’t want to go to the army. Yes, that’s true, but they are also people, and I want audiences meet them as people” (Dardashti, 2015, p. 90). In other words, with *Shtisel*, the

producers want to transform the existing image of ultra-Orthodox Jews into a moderate one. As a form of “neo-Zionism,” the AC-funded productions leave “less room for multifaceted representation of Palestinian Israelis [for example] and other non-Jewish Israeli citizens on the screen” (Dardashti, 2015, p. 96).

- 10 Giti disagrees with her husband and opposes her son Yose’le’s wish to marry a Sephardic girl, yet the audience is not told why and what differences exist between these two religious communities.
- 11 This could change though as the Supreme Court in Israel ordered in June 2024 ultra-Orthodox Jewish men to be drafted into military service (Rubin, Parker & Soroka, 2024).
- 12 Recently, AC has changed which themes will be covered in TV shows it funds. In the context of the Israeli war against Gaza, they have decided to produce media content that projects a conflict between Hamas and Palestinians. Ilan Sigal, CEO of Yes Studios, says, “We’re doing what’s necessary, especially now, in the time of war.” The drama, *East Side* (2023) appears as the product of this decision (Steinberg, June 6, 2024). The producer company of *East Side* is the same as *Shtisel*’s: Abot Hameiri Barkai & Freemantle.

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'Bad word' for good engagement: The commodification of 'the Suroboyoan language' in Indonesian local television newsroom

'Argo yayın' yüksek katılım: Endonezya yerel haber merkezinde 'Suroboyoan dili'nin metalaştırılması

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Abstract

This study explores how Indonesian TV station *Jawa Timur TV's (JTV)* commodified the Suroboyoan language in its *Pojok Kampung* news program as a part of its media convergence strategies and its influence on cultural representation. Known as a dialect in East Java Province, Indonesia, the Suroboyoan tongue has transitioned from oral-informal communication to be a staple-formal language in media, notably through news programs. By taking in-depth interviews and framing analysis, this research investigates how *JTV* constructs, frames, and represents Suroboyoan cultural identity through the lens of three prominent case studies: the production of Suroboyoan news content on television, online portals, and social media platforms. The study also explores how media convergence strategies influence the cultural representation to align with editorial agendas. *JTV* leverages the Suroboyoan language to create a unique brand identity, attracting the broader public to gain more revenue. The news content, *Pojok Kampung* program, is the prime-time program which has become an integral part of media convergence strategy. *Pojok Kampung's* content also redistributes in different formats and publishes in the online news portals, Instagram, and *TikTok*. This strategy aims to boost audience engagement and convert it into revenue, in advertising, clicks of visitors, also the number of digital engagements, with every platform requiring unique content strategies to maximize it. *JTV's* approach on *Pojok Kampung* content to integrating the Suroboyoan language into news products reflect a strategic commodification of local culture, which also indicates that it contributed to reinforcing language stereotypes. The news production in *Pojok Kampung* portrayed the Suroboyoan language as vulgar and associated with an over-class dialect.

Keywords: Commodification, the Suroboyoan language, local media, newsroom, Indonesia

Öz

Bu çalışma, Endonezya televizyon kanalı *Jawa Timur TV*'nin (*JTV*) *Pojok Kampung* haber programında Suroboyoan dilini medya yakınsama stratejilerinin bir parçası olarak nasıl metalaştırdığını ve bunun kültürel temsil üzerindeki etkisi üzerinde durmaktadır. Endonezya'nın Doğu Java Eyaleti'nde bir lehçe olarak kullanılan Suroboyoan dili, sözlü-gayri resmi iletişimden medyada, özellikle de haber programlarında bir temel-resmi dil haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, *JTV*'nin Suroboyoan kültürel kimliğini nasıl inşa ettiğini, çerçevelediğini ve temsil ettiğini derinlemesine görüşmeler ve çerçeveleme analizi yoluyla şu üç önemli vaka çalışması merceğinden incelemektedir: Televizyonda, çevrimiçi portallarda ve sosyal medya platformlarında Suroboyoan dilinde haber içeriği üretimi. Çalışma, aynı zamanda medya yakınsama stratejilerinin kültürel temsili editoryal gündemlerle paralel hale getirmek üzere nasıl şekillendirdiğini de incelemektedir. *JTV*, Suroboyoan dilinden yararlanarak özgün bir marka kimliği yaratmakta

ve daha fazla gelir elde etmek adına daha geniş kitlelerin ilgisini çekmektedir. Bir haber içeriği olan *Pojok Kampung* programı, medya yakınsama stratejisinin vazgeçilmez bir parçası haline gelmiş bir prime-time programdır. *Pojok Kampung*'un içerikleri aynı zamanda farklı formatlarda yeniden dağıtılmakta ve çevrimiçi haber portallarında, *Instagram*'da ve *TikTok*'ta da yayınlanmaktadır. Bu strateji, izleyici katılımını artırmayı ve bunu reklam, ziyaretçi tıklamaları ve dijital etkileşim sayısında gelire dönüştürmeyi amaçlamakta ve farklı platformlarda bunu en üst düzeye çıkarmak için özgün içerik stratejileri gerektirmektedir. *JTV*'nin *Pojok Kampung* içeriğinde Suroboyoan dilini haber ürünlerine entegre etme yaklaşımı, yerel kültürün stratejik olarak metalaştırılmasını yansıtırken, dil stereotiplerinin pekiştirilmesine de katkıda bulunduğunu göstermektedir. *Pojok Kampung*'daki haber prodüksiyonu, Suroboyoan dilini kaba ve sınıflar üstü bir lehçeyle ilişkili olarak tasvir etmiştir. **Anahtar kelimeler:** Metalaştırma, Suroboyoan dili, yerel medya, haber merkezi, Endonezya

Introduction

JTV stands as one of the biggest local media in Indonesia, marking an important breakthrough in terms of local news television. The media station established multi-platform media ecosystem that represents East Java province, including the *JTV* broadcasting channel, *portalJTV.com* which responsible for news reports, also @*portalJTVcom* (*Instagram*) and official*JTVrek* (*TikTok*) that represents the news-entertainment content. This multi-channel network, which has been managed by *JTV*, has been utilized by the newsroom to build their brand and develop a relationship with a broader audience. *JTV*'s convergence strategy appears to have created a cultural mindset that has built a loyal audienceship.

Media convergence refers to the integration of different forms of media, and it appeared in several local broadcasting stations across the country (Donoghue, 2022; Do & Jung, 2020). In the case of *JTV*, the convergence strategy is a part of their recent plans to reach new audiences, and also to adjust to the preferences and needs of their consumers, which are driven by increasing use of the internet in the country. The pre-research observation showed that *JTV* newsroom noted the development of digital content consumption by their audiences has pushed their production processes to become more diverse, not only for conventional content needs but also for digital content, especially the video platform. It also appeared on other local broadcasting stations in Indonesia, based on the research conducted by Romadlono & Indainanto (2020). The effort to create a convergent channel is considered to increase effectiveness during the information disruption era. Previous research has found that audiences consumed television content through internet-connected devices, proving that technological advancements disrupt traditional media consumption patterns (Chukwu, 2023).

The Nielsen Indonesia report (2023) showed that the television audiences in Indonesia are currently shrinking drastically compared to before the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). On the other hand, 'Streaming Content Ratings' presented in the survey show that internet users have increased. It was recorded that the percentage of TV users in the country reached 81.1% in the third quarter of 2022, it decreased compared to the third quarter of 2019, which was 93.7%. Meanwhile, internet users in Indonesia reached 76.7% in the third quarter of 2022. This achievement increased from 55.1% in the third quarter of 2019 (Annur, 2022). Furthermore, the average Indonesian uses the

internet for 7 hours and 42 minutes daily (Rizaty, 2023). It means that Indonesian people are starting to leave traditional television consumption and switching to digital media instead.

However, as this research shows, the 'survival strategies' of *JTV* to face the digital challenges contributes to the commodification of local culture. Research found that it was common for local media to capture the potential of the local content and commercialize it (Hare & Baker, 2017; Jin & Yoon, 2016). The practice of commodification of local and cultural content has appeared in several local television stations globally. In South Korea, the commercialization of Korean Hip-hop culture went viral on the local television program, *Who Is Next?* The commodification also appeared on the Spanish television program, which was successful in globalizing their traditional games via variety shows program (Dobek-Ostrowska et al., 2010). Research conducted by Bai (2012) also showed the commercialization of accents in Chinese local television in their news programs.

In Indonesia, the commodification of local and cultural contexts also appeared on television programs. Local television brings cultural arts performance to be one of their main programs, such as *Ludruk* (Surya, 2006), *Lenong* (Mansur et al., 2022), or *Pangkur Jenggleg* (Santoso, 2016). Beside the entertainment programs, the television news programs also commercialize local culture, such as the local language of East Javanese and Madurese (Ardyani, 2020; Tohirin & Dewi, 2019), and Sundanese (Permana & Rohmah, 2022). These news programs are delivered in local languages and aired on prime-time. In addition, research also showed that the commercialization of local culture contributes to stereotypes about the culture. Research showed that local television programs in Indonesia also contribute to the representation of the cultural stereotype. It appears in various television genres such as, "soap operas" (Hidayatullah, 2019), "cartoons" (Aristhya, 2023), "variety shows" (Yuwana, Santosa & Sumarlam, 2019), and news programs (Meifilina, 2016).

This research focuses on the development of *Pojok Kampung*, the most popular program on *JTV* (Khotijah, Rahmanto & Satyawan, 2023; Hidayat, 2021). *Pojok Kampung* is a local daily news program on *JTV* delivered in the Suroboyoan language, a local tongue in East Java province, Indonesia. This research has found there to be a power imbalance in how the media represents the Suroboyoan languages via a case study of *Pojok Kampung*. This study also addresses the gap in research concerning cultural

commodification, and local media, which has institutionally struggled to draw necessary content, capital, and audience (Dimmick & Rothenbuhler, 1984).

Several previous studies showed how the Suroboyoan dialect has been represented with many stereotypes and portrayed dirt, low-class, impolite, and “should be avoided” (Sartini, 2018; Yolanda, 2018). But very few studies have critically analyzed the digital content production of local media outlets (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; McAllister, 2011). As local media utilize digital platforms to develop their content, capital, and audience resource, it is interesting to carry out research that addresses ‘what is going on behind the production desk.’ To fill the research gap, this study systematically examines the production of *Pojok Kampung* as a part of *JTV*’s convergence strategy. Drawing from a critical media studies perspective, this paper argues that commodifying the Suroboyoan dialect aligns with *JTV*’s revenue-driven editorial strategies, impacting the representation and perception of regional identity.

News in local television

There is always an expectation by the public that information about public issues in certain regions will be easy to access through local media channels. Research showed that there is a significant consequence in locality related to the availability of information about public issues (Usher, 2023). McLeod et al (1996) also assumed that the power of local media is huge amongst local communities because they are a “better predictor of community interest, knowledge, and participation in public issues” (p. 202). On the other hand, national or international media does not cover local issues, as the big news agencies receive less complete coverage of local phenomena as it is not their main interest in news coverage (Mathisen, 2023).

The competition between local media industries becomes more complex, not just considering the dominance of financial capital. Human resources for production, the cultural acceptance among the audience, and their perspective as information suppliers for various local issues came as determinant factors that affect the media capabilities (Rusli, Chandrabuwono & Akbari, 2021; Nainggolan, 2017). It also shows that financial capital, the ability to produce quality content, and the social dynamics of the audience are intercorrelated. Financial capital is essential for media organizations to maintain infrastructure, hire skilled talent, and produce high-quality content. In Asia, where media markets are becoming increasingly competitive, outlets with strong financial

backing are better positioned to invest in advanced production technologies and skilled labor (Flew, 2010). For instance, the rise of Chinese and South Korean media industries shows that investment in production facilities and talent migration has led to the production of content with global appeal. Media hubs such as Hong Kong and Seoul have developed strong financial ecosystems that support a wide range of production activities, further enhancing their competitiveness in global media markets (Keane et al., 2007).

Quality content production, however, is not just about financial investment. It also requires an understanding of regional tastes and preferences. In East Asia, local media companies are thriving by creating content that reflects the unique cultural imagination of the region, rather than simply imitating Western formats. For example, formats such as *SuperGirl* in China and *Produce 101* in South Korea have gained immense popularity by blending global reality TV structures with local cultural nuances, allowing for high engagement from regional audiences (Yoshimitsu, 2020; Zhao, 2024). The social behavior of audiences is a key factor that local media must navigate. Audience preferences in East Asia are shaped by cultural values, social dynamics, and economic conditions. Viewers tend to gravitate toward content that resonates with their everyday experiences, and the success of certain genres like talent shows and family dramas in Asia highlights how understanding audience behavior is integral to content production (Hills et al., 2019). The rising demand for content that promotes social values, such as family solidarity or educational programming, reflects the role of social behavior in shaping media content preferences. This demonstrates that content creation must go beyond financial capital to include deep knowledge of regional social dynamics and cultural values, which are key drivers of content consumption in Asian markets.

Large research projects in the United Kingdom (Johansson & Nygren, 2019), China, and the United States (Sparks et al., 2016) portrayed that local media generally utilize multiple social media platforms for multiple opportunities. The necessity of local media to strengthen the resources in capital, content, and audiences could be maximized by using this strategy. Social media have become large platforms that have a high value because it provides easy access to different social networks (Moskowitz, 2021; Newton, 2021). Multiple social media platforms for local television stations provide opportunities for the station to develop their content, reach more audience, and also bring another capital such as subscribers in digital video platforms or online streaming platforms.

The local information and culture is the biggest capital in Asian local broadcasting stations (Agrawal & Kumari, 2021; Zhao, 2021). Mostly, the news and local culture program become the primary program of local media in East Asia and Southeast Asia. Specifically, the news programs were packaged with an essential localization strategy of providing the news segment in vernacular languages. In these regions, journalism is not only about delivering information but also about fostering a sense of local identity and community engagement. Vernacular journalism, which uses local languages and dialects, enables news outlets to connect deeply with their audience, ensuring that content resonates culturally and contextually. This approach is especially prevalent in countries like Indonesia, India, and Thailand, where regional languages are crucial for engaging diverse local populations (Otmazgin, 2013). It also captured that the future of local media depends a lot on program localization that commodified cultural aspects, such as languages, as the production of news itself is subject to calculus that treats information as commodity. Reflecting on what happened in local news agencies in India (Mehta & Kaye, 2021) or China (Liu & Zhou, 2022), the localization vision of local media agencies has an effect on the nature of news and public affairs programming in local places.

The commodification of language as a cultural capital can be found in various research on the Asian media industry. Asian cultures, which are deeply intertwined with their languages, commonly view language as a tool for fostering identity and promoting socio-political narratives (Chen & Starosta, 2003). For instance, Suzuki (2015) showcased how major Japanese media outlets commodified non-Japanese speech into news programs to evoke a sense of nationalism in their broadcast. Similarly, Gao (2017) investigated how Chinese media utilized English news sources to support China's neoliberal goals and assert its identity in the global order. In Singapore, Kok & Loh (2024) emphasized the changing perceptions of Singlish in the national media - once seen as negative but later appreciated for its influence on identity, demonstrating shifting attitudes towards Singlish and Standard Singapore English in different social settings. These instances demonstrate how vernacular journalism and cultural commodification tactics are utilized by media to navigate identity, strengthen community bonds, and enhance audience involvement throughout Asia.

An overview of vernacular journalism in Indonesia

The local media in Indonesia mostly present themselves as news media outlets (Yudha & Hendriyani, 2024). The format of local news outlets has been established to exhibit

stronger support for the local community via their advocacy role and the watchdog role compared with national media agencies. Research found that local media in Indonesia performed the professional ideals and maintained normative and affective ties to the local community (Sjuchro, Khadijah & Sjafirah, 2023; Soekawati, 2021; Hastjarjo, 2017).

Specifically, local television stations are still the trusted reference for people seeking information (Nielsen, 2023). Beside the information and advocacy role in the local media outlet, their newsroom also offers vernacular journalism, a type of local journalism that uses the language, culture, and perspective of a specific community to report on local news and issues (Wahl-Jorgensen & Boelle, 2023). The local context in news programs provides 'symbolic power' to construct the idea of the local community, then enrich the delivery of information as something valuable for the community. In Indonesia, vernacular journalism has been adopted by news media in various forms that pushed for the representation and voice of local people. This approach can influence news gatekeeping processes and the news values in local perspectives. The usage of local language also fosters a stronger connection with local audiences (Bogaerts, 2017).

In a nation with at least 718 different local languages (Rohana, Mukhlis, & Jamaluddin, 2024), much of the population speaks not just Bahasa Indonesia as the official languages. This condition also encourages the vernacular programs in television newsrooms to grow exponentially since the legalization of local broadcasting law in 2022. In 2019, The Association of Local Television in Indonesia (ATVLI, 2019) listed 400 local television channels which also had approximately 400 local language news programs. But, previous research found that these local television stations are different from traditional communication broadcast outlets because they captured more commercial incentives or profit-making enterprises which was the driving force behind the establishment of these local stations (Wibawa, Afifi, & Prabowo, 2014).

With the advent of digital platforms, local television in Indonesia was forced to enhance their news delivery for quicker access by the public. The digitalization of local television outlets has been supported by the rise of localized content, especially related to the usage of local language. The local media newsrooms prioritize accommodating the local language programs as a part of their media convergence strategy. Several media outlets such as *PAL TV* used their primetime local news program, "*Grebek Palembang*," to support their media convergence (Solekhah, Duku & Yahya, 2023). *Riau*

TV and *Sakti TV Madiun* also developed local news programs which were delivered by Malay and Javanese language as their digital news program (Syafri & Pannindriya, 2019; Hariyani & Nurchayati, 2017). This research specifically explored the *Pojok Kampung* Program, a prime-time news program in *JTV* which is delivered in the Suroboyoan language. Considering the *JTV* market in East Java Province, Indonesia, the program has potential access to 40 millions audience in terrestrial broadcasting and larger audiences in digital platforms (Emidari & Harliantara, 2023).

Contested media representation of the Suroboyoan culture

As one of the dialects of Javanese language, the Suroboyoan reflects a unique perspective on society. Suroboyoan dialect embodies the openness, friendliness, and directness of Surabayan culture in communication. However, it is also associated with negative connotations like dirtiness, low class, and impoliteness. Due to these stereotypes, the dialect often receives unfavorable views from Indonesian, particularly those unfamiliar with Suroboyoan culture (Anwar, 2021).

The Suroboyoan dialect is widely used, especially in Surabaya greater area. This condition has been captured by various media as the social capital to be maximized by the media industry. As the Suroboyoan language has negative stigma in society, multiplatform media adopted this 'impoliteness' in several representations. Historically, the representation of the Suroboyoan culture in mass media first appeared in 1930, by *Panjebar Semangat* magazine, then followed by *Jaya Baya* magazine in 1945 (Puteri, 2018). Beside the television program adoption, this local tongue was also used in radio programs (Nabubois & Wijaya, 2014), movies (Saputra & Hariyanto, 2024), song lyrics (Kamaluddin, 2017), newspaper articles, and also social media content (Audina, Indrasari & Pamuji, 2023).

Originally an oral dialect, the Suroboyoan language has evolved to various media platforms. Its adoption in mediatized platforms, such as magazines, newspapers, and broadcast platforms, has expanded its usage beyond in-group context. This shift has transformed the dialect from informal, in-group communication to a recognized media language. However, previous research analyzing media representations of Suroboyoan language have shown that its form generally remains quite similar to its spoken counterpart (Joyowidharbo, Fitriania & Puspitorini, 2019).

Today, the representation of the Suroboyoan language in media has closely been associated with the local television station, *JTV*. As the capital of East Java Province, the city of Surabaya has become the most important coverage for *JTV*. This situation also brought *JTV* to introduce several main programs on television, such as "*Cangkru'an*," a talk show that used a street talk scene as the setting. Another main program is "*Pojok Kampung*," a daily news bulletin broadcast during prime time. All the news in this program is delivered in the Suroboyoan local language. This program is well-known as a hallmark of the *JTV* television channel.

Aim and methodology

This study employs a case study approach to examine the phenomenon of local language being used in the media industry. To explore this phenomenon, this research involved in-depth data collection from multiple sources of information. The first step of this study was to identify the context of language commodification. This paper focuses on the news program, *Pojok Kampung* as an appropriate context which frames a number of news productions that utilize the Suroboyoan language. The larger spectrum in the *Pojok Kampung* program analyzed in this study include the television program, the online portal, and original social media posts. To address the research question, the multi-perspective approach was used to capture the evidence about production, representation, and public effect context which assumed that it is closely related with local language commodification in media convergence strategy. This study examines three media layers: newsroom, multi-platform content, and audience.

Aim

Being in a culturally, socially, and locationally disadvantaged space, the Suroboyoan culture is vulnerable to any commodification by the mainstream cultural hegemony of the local community and identity in the East Java province. It is also connected with the social capital of the Suroboyoan community—the value of social connections that can be mobilized to build trust and foster mutual support (Campante, Durante & Tesei, 2022). Local languages are embedded as social capital, encompassing a network of trust and shared norms. *JTV* newsroom as the biggest local media in East Java play a critical role in strengthening, sustaining, and reproducing the culture, identities, and linguistics of the surrounding communities. *JTV* used this social capital to produce, circulate, and publish the content in the Suroboyoan languages. Based on all these, this study proposes

to add a more nuanced understanding on how the local newsroom engages with the ideas of the Suroboyoan culture which represent community, culture, and identity.

This research analyses three case studies that were salient in the editorial agenda: the production of the Suroboyoan news on television, online portal, and social media content. Based on these three cases, it compares how the development of the Suroboyoan culture and identity was framed in news production on different platforms, and explained the interpretation and representation of social issues. Answers to the following questions were sought in this study:

RQ1. How does the *JTV* newsroom construct, frame, and represent the Suroboyoan language and culture in the news program *Pojok Kampung*?

RQ2. How do the convergence strategies in *JTV* affect the *Pojok Kampung's* editorial agenda?

Methodology

This study adopts a multi-method approach, combining framing analysis with in-depth interviews to explore both the representation of the Suroboyoan Language and the internal production processes within *JTV*. Brannen (in Bryman, 2014) defines multi-method research as a combination of two or more data sources to gain respective strength when investigating a research question. This research used two distinct studies to examine and address the way that a TV newsroom represents local culture via the case of *Pojok Kampung* content. Framing analysis allows for an examination of the processes of representation in the newsroom, highlighting recurring themes and rhetorical strategies that can play a role in commodifying cultural elements (Brummet, 2008).

In-depth interviews can complement our understanding of news production context by providing contextual insights from newsroom staff, and shedding light on the motivations and strategic considerations that underpin editorial choices. This research design addresses the Suroboyoan-news by taking into consideration the context of production in the newsroom, and the representation of languages in the news agenda, while demonstrating the meaning of the Suroboyoan identity in media representation. This approach is particularly suited for capturing the nuanced relationship between cultural representation and economic objectives in local media.

This study employs framing analysis to compare the Suroboyoan language in news, aiming to capture the frames and arguments in the news production process. Grounded in the circuit of culture theory, the research examines how framing effect and frame-building process will picturize the process of representation (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). Every form of news that appeared in *Pojok Kampung* television program, online site, and social media content will be analyzed from a rhetorical perspective, analyzing word choices, description, and characteristic of messages. In the analysis of *Pojok Kampung*, the commodification of the Suroboyoan language serves as a clear example of how local news media outlets capitalize on cultural elements. Rhetorical perspective refers to the way arguments and persuasive techniques are used to shape the audience's perception (Herrick, 2020). Word choices involve the specific language and terminology selected to convey messages, which reflect underlying biases, tone, and intention. Description refers to how events, people, or issues are presented in the content, whether through detailed, neutral, or emotive depictions, influencing how the audience interprets the subject matter. Also, the characteristics of messages, such as the structure, tone, and style of communication, determine whether the message is formal, informal, direct, or indirect, and how it engages or influences the audience.

This study systematically analyzed 84 news from the '*Pojok Kampung*' program, including television news segments, online articles, and social media posts. These entries were published between June 1, 2023 and December 1, 2023. The dataset was manually recorded in a spreadsheet, capturing key details such as news labels, relevant keywords, categorization of topics (social affairs, politics, crime, culture and lifestyle), and its corresponding URL. The coding process started with an identification phase for recurring themes and patterns within the content, followed by systematic coding guided by three key nodes: Issues Representation, Linguistic Style, and Audience Engagement. Each content was analyzed segment by segment, ensuring that each excerpt was accurately categorized under the appropriate node. To ensure reliability, a coding process was assessed independently by three researchers based on the intercoder agreement that refined the coding scheme and resolved discrepancies. This systematic and reliable approach allowed the research to uncover frame frequencies and co-occurrences, providing insights into how the Suroboyoan language was represented and commodified across platforms. Patterns of framing, particularly how rhetorical choices influenced audience engagement, were identified to highlight consistencies and variations across the television, online, and social media contexts.

Building on the commodification of culture, this research clarified the findings in framing analysis through non-participative observation and in-depth interviews with the newsmakers. This study focused on understanding the context of news production, the media capital and social resources, the newsroom strategy, as well as the organizational factors such as production norms, values, or ideology (Makwambeni & Msimanga, 2023). The non-participative approach was chosen to maintain objectivity and avoid influencing the news production process. Observations were conducted in three key areas: the newsroom, which portrayed the daily operations and decision-making of the television production team; the team behind the news portal *portalJTV.com*; and the social media team responsible for managing content across various platforms. These observations provided insights into workflows, content creation strategies, and audience engagement practices. In addition to observation, we conducted in-depth interviews with six personnel: Social Media Specialist 1, Social Media Content Editor 1, Content Editor 1, Content Editor 2, Journalist 1 and Chief of Social Media Division 1. These individuals represented diverse roles, ensuring comprehensive perspectives on how the Suroboyoan language is framed and the economic motives shaping content creation. These interviews provided deeper context into the production process, team dynamics, and the integration of content across multiple media formats. The interviews were conducted with newsmakers to gain insights into newsroom culture, the news framing process, as well as the motivations and challenges involved in news production. This study received ethics committee approval from Institute of Research and Community Services UNIDA on 22 June 2023, under reference number 664/KE.01/SK/06/2023xx. This research also analyzes the production of content, using 84 news content in 6 months as a sample from June 1, 2022 to December 1, 2023. All of these contents were distributed in the news television program, *portalJTV.com*, and the post of *@portalJTV* in *Instagram* and analyzed in framing analysis. The selection of these entries was based on their virality across multiple platforms, with a focus on content that achieved the highest levels of engagement. Specifically, we examined the most viewed videos on Portal JTV's video platform, the most liked posts on their *Instagram* account, and the most read articles on their news portal. This approach allowed us to identify and analyze the most impactful content, providing insights into the strategies that contribute to virality and audience engagement across different digital platforms. By focusing on high-performing content, the study highlights how local media outlets optimize their production to cater to and capitalize on audience preferences in a competitive media landscape. A detailed coding scheme was developed to categorize the various

elements of news framing, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how Suroboyoan identity is constructed and represented in *JTV's* news content.

Findings

This study aims to apply the circuit of commodification framework, which demonstrates the relationships between production, consumption, and regulation in media industries (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). This research explores how *Pojok Kampung* as local news is commodified and circulated within the media landscape. This analysis highlights the interplay between economic, cultural, and media platforms factors that shape the production and consumption of Suroboyoan identity in news content.

Frame building of the Suroboyoan language

The framing analysis featured dataset consists of the 84 news products from *Pojok Kampung*, distributed across multiple platforms: television news segments, news articles on *portalJTV.com*, *Instagram* posts on *@portalJTV* and *TikTok* videos that are published by *@officialJTVrek*. The dataset was recorded from June 1, 2023 to December 1, 2023, during when *Pojok Kampung* started featuring the multiplatform content on television programs, online news sites, and social media. The dataset was recorded manually and inputted into the spreadsheet. All of the news entries were inspected and placed in a news category that reflected the content, differentiated by news label, keywords, and categorization of news topics. The coded sheet contained every URL of news content from every platform, then was imported to NVivo for the content to be coded.

The volume of representation for each node in the coding sheets showed the dominant frames in the *Pojok Kampung* content. The text within the nodes were analyzed with framing analysis to identify specific discursive construction of the Suroboyoan culture via the use of language. The dominant idea positioned in the primary position: in headlines, top, leads, and the opening paragraph of captions. In other words, it portrayed how much the newsroom highlighted particular themes in the *Pojok Kampung* content and where the news-ideas were most frequently positioned.

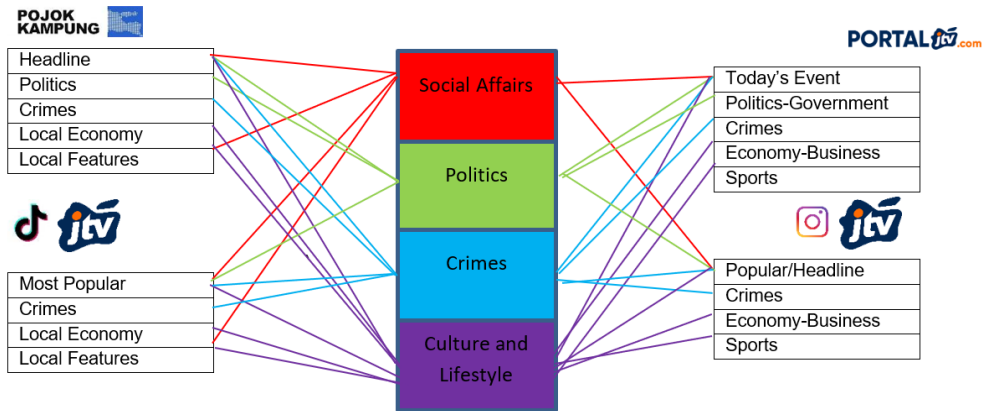


Figure 1. Chart of each news category in *Pojok Kampung* news production
Source: Research Findings

Each of *Pojok Kampung*'s content in television, online news portal, *Instagram*, and *TikTok* was examined to identify the most salient themes and categories related to the use of the Suroboyoan language. The results of this analysis are presented descriptively, combining textual analysis with interpretive explanations.

<i>Pojok Kampung</i> TVs	PortalJTV.com	<i>Instagram</i>	<i>TikTok</i>	Nodes
				The use of 'pentil muter' in the news on tornado disasters.

Figure 2. Manual coding of language used in *Pojok Kampung*'s platform
Source: Research Findings

The case of 'Pentil Muter' could be an example on how *Pojok Kampung* newsroom commodified the Suroboyoan language in their news content. 'Pentil muter' had been chosen as the headword of the post of *Pojok Kampung* because it was recognized as the most popular word. Pentil muter is commonly used in the program when they report about tornado disasters. This word is commonly used in the middle of Surabaya community and neighborhood city, but also has become one of the most unique words introduced by *JTV's Pojok Kampung* news program. The news article adopted a term which roughly translates to 'spinning nipple' in English, and it is considered a low-class, informal word in the Javanese language hierarchy.

Different content strategy was implemented on every *Pojok Kampung* content. For example, the *Instagram* post features an eye-catching graphic highlighting key Suroboyoan terms, such as 'Pentil Muter.' These posts provide concise summaries of news stories, including 'What, When, Where, Who, Why and How' (5W+1H) elements of news related to the specific item. The 5W+1H elements are short highlights of the news reports from *Pojok Kampung* or *portalJTV.com*. The Editor of *Kamus Pojok Kampung* also stated "Our use of certain Suroboyoan terms is carefully chosen to appeal to the audience's cultural pride, but also to create a memorable, engaging product."

Pojok Kampung's social media presence also employs additional strategies to capture audience engagement. On their *TikTok* and *Instagram* platforms, caption incorporates a call to action strategies which encourage viewers to save the content, This strategy becomes a tactic that positions *Pojok Kampung* content as valuable and worth keeping. Additionally, the social media team has created a hashtag, #PojokKampungJTV. Another noteworthy strategy involves leveraging platform features. For instance, on both *TikTok* and *Instagram* platforms, social media posts are featured by music, with the administrators strategically selecting viral songs on that day. Based on the interviews with the social media administrator, this strategy aimed to "increase the post's visibility in users' Explore and FYP tabs."

However, a stereotype is attached to 'pentil muter' as a word in the etymology part. The word 'pentil' is a Javanese word for 'nipple,' and it suggests a dirty and impolite language. Pentil muter has a stereotype as a low-class language to explain the tornado disaster. In Javanese language strata, 'pentil muter' is known as one of the 'ngoko,' or casual language. This level of the language is related to street chat. But, it seems that 'pentil muter' had been chosen because the stereotype is a gimmick for the social media content to boost the exposure and engagement in social media algorithm.

Beside 'pentil muter,' this research listed several nodes and criteria for placing text in a category of information that emerged in *Pojok Kampung* content were:

Social affairs

When we talk about social affairs on news, it commonly refers to a social event that is conducted by social group members. But in *Pojok Kampung*, this section is mostly filled by the news about sexual-relationships. This media coverage of adultery and gossip makes the *Pojok Kampung* appear to be similar to a yellow journalism media outlet.

As Indonesian journalism activities were guided by the Journalistic Code of Ethic (Press Council, 2008), the practice of adultery issue coverage in Indonesia still conducts in a sensational and dramatic manner (Syam et. Al., 2020). Research also found that Indonesian media's newsroom valued the news coverage of sexual issues in the terms of the economic benefits they bring (Astria, Nuzuli & Handayani. 2021).

Several the Suroboyoan words which were often published in this section are:

- Hohohihe - The word 'hohohihe' is used to describe intimate behaviour between a man and a woman. But the word is used to describe sexual relations without marriage or can refer to adultery. The use of the word 'hohohihe' attempts to turn a sense of taboo into a sense of humor.
- Gendakan – The term 'gendak' refers to a romantic partner, typically in an informal, non-marital relationship. The word is primarily used to describe a sexual relationship outside of marriage.
- Ngipik-ipik - The word 'ngipik-ipik' is used to describe the act of having sex between a man and a woman by force (rape).
- Mbok dewor – 'Mbok Dewor' is used to describe middle-aged women as actors in the news. However, *Pojok Kampung* often associates Mbok Dewor with the representation of widows.
- Lanang Erung Ndrangus – 'Lanang Erung Ndrangus' refers to a man who disrespects women. Therefore, 'Erung Ndrangus' is an idiom that is used to refer to men who behave irresponsibly in their relationships and display problematic sexual behaviour.
- Mbalon - The word 'mbalon' means prostitute. *Pojok Kampung* uses the word 'mbalon' to modify words that have a similar meaning to prostitution.

Politics

In local news reporting, spatial proximity rises as a significant news value. Local journalism provides a specific angle or hook of information to offer to the public, especially related to political issues. The local government decision then becomes an important topic and brings greater attention to local news in Indonesia (Halim & Jauhari, 2019).

Pojok Kampung covers the political dynamic in the local context, by delivering it using the East Javanese perspective. The only one the Suroboyoan tongue that used in this rubric is 'Guminte'

- Guminte – 'guminte' is a Suroboyoan word for 'government'. The usage of guminte in oral language is for informal/street conversation, not for the formal forum.

Crimes

Crime news is seen as newsworthy in various news media as the coverage offers news value, such as the crime risk, the name of the offender or victim, or the level of violence (Nasi et.al., 2021; Park, Fisher & Lee, 2022). As argued by Reiner, Livingston, and Allen (2003), media outlets sometimes use a sensationalized approach, emphasizing drama instead of prevention or education. This 'law of opposites' tactic, as stated by the news editor's statement that "crime news is the powerful way to make the audience attached." It prioritizes grabbing attention but potentially leading to the commodification of crime news.

In *Pojok Kampung*, the use of the Suroboyoan language in crime news is vital. This research found that the newsroom uses more hard diction words to strengthen the information, or in other words, the newsroom deliberately replaces words with words that are more impolite or rude. This could be because what is being talked about deserves a harsh word, or because what is being talked about is a bad thing.

Other Suroboyoan words which often published in the crime news are:

- Matek - 'Matek' means no longer alive. The word 'matek' is used in the quote because it expresses displeasure and emphasises actions that result in someone death, especially suicide or the death victim of brawl.
- Kendat - 'Kendat' in Javanese ngoko language means suicide. The word 'kendat' is the harshest word in Javanese language to describe suicide. This word is used in general because suicide is not allowed in the perspective of religious norms, social norms, and moral norms.
- Sunduk Pentol - 'Sunduk pentol' means same-sex rape. It emerged as the Suroboyoan slang describing deviant sexual behaviour. 'Sunduk pentol' is also abusive/harsh language as it relates to paedophilic behaviour.
- Bejat - 'Bejat' means unforgivable behaviour. The Suroboyoan language captures 'bejat' as the highest level of sin or bad behaviour. 'Bejat' is also perceived as language that makes the public condemn the behaviour of the actors in the news, such as murderers, corruptors, rapists, etc.

Culture and lifestyle

Human interest stories have significant impact in the media industry, inline with the development of popular journalism. Beside the urgency to manage public discourse related to 'serious issues,' lifestyle news engages with audience with more relatable content. It explores traveling destinations, culinary, music, or cultural arts in East Java province. As one journalist noted, 'Suroboyoan dialects are frequently used in lifestyle news to create a more personal and engaging connection with the audience.' Several researchers also noted this lifestyle journalism as the arbiter of "taste culture" (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022; Jenkins & Jeronimo, 2021).

With respect to culture and lifestyle, *Pojok Kampung* used more daily-language of the Suroboyoan language. Several cultural tongues have been adopted in the news production that reveals the daily conversation in the Suroboyoan culture.

- Saktaek ndayak - 'Sataek ndhayak' means very much and scattered. The phrase 'sataek ndhayak' is hyperbole because it emphasises and expresses something bad or disliked.
- Badhog - 'Badhog' is a crude Javanese word meaning to eat. Badhog is rarely used in everyday language except in the language of friendship. In news about food, badhog indicates that the food is worth eating and is liked by everyone.

All of these words that have been used in the *Pojok Kampung* news content indicate the practice of dysphemism in local journalism. In linguistic studies, dysphemizing is the process of designating any phenomenon or news subject using more vulgar or rude words or expressions (Druzhinin, 2021). The adoption of dysphemism in journalism deliberately utilizes taboo linguistic forms, contributing to a negative tone in news content.

The use of the Suroboyoan language in *JTV* newsroom showed the local language to be commodified in *Pojok Kampung* content, especially when presenting the news featuring expression of anger, exaggerating, and satirizing. This condition also showed that *Pojok Kampung* primarily pushed 'problematic-news' content that are made of dysphemistic representation. Possibly, the aim of negative-language used in *Pojok Kampung* had the aim to convert lack of news value content into a taboo-tabloid writing.

Political economy of content production of JTV

JTV adopts a profit business model geared toward the production of content more suitable for securing advertising revenue. Although JTV implemented the convergence strategy, the company still derives the main revenue stream from selling advertising space and through the digital engagement (news clicks, social media statistics) and has not adopted any paywalls yet. The focus of the newsroom is directed to the news agenda that covers the beats and topics, appealing to a wider audience to get as many clicks as possible. Also, the newsroom put much attention on what is popular in the data analytics report.

This research examines the newsroom personnels' perspective on the convergence strategy by developing *Pojok Kampung* content in a multiplatform channel that is managed by JTV.

Context

To explore the contextual factors behind news platform use in *Pojok Kampung* publishing, interviews with Content Editor of Kamus *Pojok Kampung* revealed a theme between their initial decision to engage in every channel. As noted by the participants, this motivation was driven by internal and external factors.

The 'internal motivators' appeared to be driven by JTV vision of convergence, to embrace the new form of media. Moreover, it has also become the media channel to maximize the marketing strategy and revenue stream. As the Chief of Social Media Content stated, "every platform should be equipped with a fit strategy, but all of it is an overall strategy to maximize the economic potency of the content." The convergence content strategy in *Pojok Kampung* has been executed by the television production team, *portalJTV.com's* team, and the social media team. Based on the observations, different teams employed distinct content strategies to present the same information. For instance, the *Pojok Kampung* TV program utilized a clear script and voiceover to deliver precise information in Suroboyoan dialect. The journalist in *portalJTV.com* updated the information periodically, allowing for multiple news articles on the same topic. The social media team manages the content on *TikTok* and *Instagram* using a more informal and personalized approach, packaging the information in a visually engaging manner.

In addition, there are also ‘external motivators’ that appear to be related to the audience-centric view. Every *Pojok Kampung*’s channel has different audience characteristics, and it needs a different strategy to grow every content in each different channel. Based on interviews and observation, the production stage was the crucial process in *Pojok Kampung*. As the program broadcasted live, *Pojok Kampung* acted as a gatekeeper of the information that not just has newsworthiness but also is potentially engaging. This engagement factor translates into sensationalism for audiences, achieved through various methods. As the Head of Social Media stated, “We sometimes use visually striking content to create an immediate association in viewers’ minds.” Clickbait headlines on *portalJTV.com* or the selection of crime news for *TikTok* content exemplify this approach. It’s worth noting that crime is a recurring theme in *Pojok Kampung*’s news, with sensationalism often built around information related to murder, theft, etc., as a journalist acknowledged: “Crime news is easiest to obtain. You just need to visit the police station, there’s plenty of it.”

The audience engagement strategy aligns with the program format, which leverages the Suroboyoan language. This approach necessitates distinct strategies for different platforms. While the television program focuses on delivering clear information, *TikTok* and *Instagram* prioritize fostering interaction and conversation. To achieve this, the news content is formatted to be engaging and shareable, utilizing visual design, captions, hashtags, songs, and collaborations with other accounts. This “conversational strategy” aims to broaden the reach of the content on social media.

Company benefit

All the six *JTV* newsroom personnel acknowledge that there were benefits and value gained from efforts in media convergence strategy, such as reinforcement of *JTV*’s brand identity, support for marketing related activities, and audience engagement. As *Pojok Kampung* developed their content in digital platforms, the news that was published had also congruence with the TV brand image as news media in public minds. The previous exposure from television programs may not have allowed them to develop the brand association of *Satus Person Jatim* (100% representing East Java), the slogan of *JTV*. The uniqueness of the Suroboyoan culture that closely related with *Pojok Kampung* content in *portalJTV.com* and social media pages helped differentiate their brand from competitors. Thus, in order to reinforce the *JTV* brand identity as representing the Suroboyoan and East Javanese culture, *JTV*’s online channel has been strategically used by its newsroom.

Pojok Kampung's digital presence not only boosts *JTV's* audience on *Instagram* and *TikTok* but also generates revenue through strategic partnerships. The newsroom maximizes the content creation to act as a 'quasi-media distributor.' As the Social Media Specialist explained, "News related to the local economy presents opportunities to collaborate with small and medium enterprises." *JTV* capitalizes their number of followers on social media by integrating sponsored content into its *Pojok Kampung* news packages, particularly on *Instagram*. Furthermore, the Chief of Social Media confirmed that "*JTV* newsroom opens the potency of digital platforms to allow the promotion of their intra-content." This cross-promotion strategy tries to encourage new viewers from social media platforms to watch *Pojok Kampung* TV program or read another *Pojok Kampung* story on *portalJTV.com*.

Digital platform, brought the ability to engage and interact with the public. Differing from the television channel, digital media can provide a deeper level of meaningful conversations with the public. The Chief of Social Media also stated that "digital platforms allow for a two-way communication, and with the Suroboyoan language push, this happened more effortlessly." The interaction came in various ways: likes, comment, share, and re-create, which indicated a deeper level of engagement. All of those aspects in public engagement are described in the newsroom key performance index. Also, one of the biggest benefits stated by several newsroom personnel is the co-creation of content, to which the public also contributes by developing user-generated content.

All of this content strategy used in *Pojok Kampung's* social media posts is related to the discussion of maximizing the media resource. Followers and users are seen as a key resource in managing the social media platform, and *JTV* wants to produce a program with a high quality of graphic and message, and to maximize the shares, likes, comments, and how to make it viral on social media pages. However, the choices that *JTV's* social media team make on their social media posts still ride on the commodification of content. In *JTV's Pojok Kampung*, they use a word that is not necessarily related to the news rubric or issue, only to open the possibility of viral sharing. The newsroom chooses the word to create larger exposure and to increase its number of followers, engagement rate, so they can fulfill their strategy to introduce the program to the broader public in social media platforms. Another feature that has been used in *JTV* social media platform is the collaboration feature, which is achieved by the main account (@*JTV_rek*) posting about *Pojok Kampung* while featuring *JTV's* news account (@*portalJTVcom*).

Circuit of culture in JTV newsroom

The concept of the Circuit of Culture provides a framework for understanding how media content as a part of cultural artifacts are produced, represented, consumed, and regulated within society (Bødker, 2018). This model, introduced by Stuart Hall, establishes the five interconnected stages which each aspect is influencing and being influenced by others in a cyclical manner. The framework emphasizes visible and invisible aspects of cultural production. Analyzing media content through the Circuit of Culture uncover how cultural meanings are encoded into news products, the organizational and socio-contextual factors shaping these meanings, and the broader societal impact of these representations on identity and public engagement.

Applying the Circuit of Culture framework to *Pojok Kampung* newsroom reveals the dynamics of media convergence within a local cultural context. The interplay between production practices, cultural representation, and audience interaction shapes *JTV*'s newsroom vision to develop their content while adapting to the demands of a hybrid media environment.

News production

In the case of *Pojok Kampung*, news production embodies the convergence of traditional journalism practice with the affordances of digital platforms. This development has allowed for enhanced interaction with audiences, the creation of a distinctive regional identity, and the opening of new revenue streams through marketing opportunities. *Pojok Kampung* exemplifies this transformation by leveraging digital platforms to foster two-way communication channels, which extend beyond the conventional broadcaster-viewer relationship. These platforms enable organic exchanges between newsroom personnel and audiences, cultivating a sense of community engagement deeply rooted in the cultural identity of East Java, specifically in the Surabayans community.

JTV explores innovative content strategies to shift to digital spaces. By embedding the Suroboyoan language and local dialects into *Pojok Kampung*'s digital content, *JTV* strengthens its connection with regional audiences on social media platforms, particularly on *Instagram* and *TikTok*. This strategy extends to co-creating content with audiences, blending user-generated content with professional journalism. This collaborative

process underscores the newsroom's responsiveness to contemporary audience preferences and cultural nuances.

However, the adoption of digital practice in *JTV's Pojok Kampung* is also facing challenges. Balancing the immediacy and interactivity of digital platforms with the traditional practice of journalism requires a negotiation of professional norms and evolving media practice. Through these strategies, *JTV's* newsroom presents innovative formats like *Kamus Pojok Kampung* on *Instagram* and informal *TikTok* news, demonstrating a dynamic interplay between content and cultural adaptation that integrates journalism and digital storytelling that is engaging for audiences.

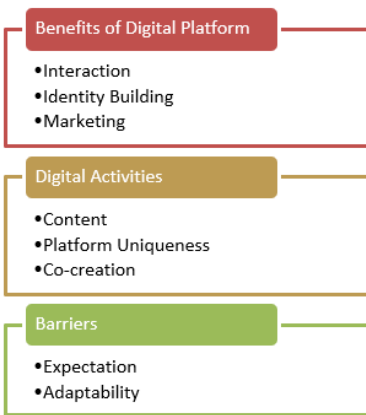
Cultural representation

In the case of *Pojok Kampung*, cultural representation is a central element of *JTV's* newsroom strategy, particularly in their effort to engage with audiences through the lens of regional identity. *JTV* reinforces its commitment to the cultural authenticity of East Java by embedding the Suroboyoan dialects into their flagship program. The use of local dialects of Suroboyoan, often characterized by their informal and direct tone, reflect the everyday vernacular of the East Java community. This linguistic choice also positions *JTV* as a cultural custodian, maximizing the appearance of regional identity as their capitals in the digital age.

JTV tailors their news content to suit the character of each digital channel, ensuring that the media's cultural representation resonates across diverse platforms. Using *portal. JTV.com*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok*, *JTV's* nuanced understanding of platform specificity and its role in enhancing cultural representation. For example, *Kamus Pojok Kampung* that has been published in *Instagram* comes as a feature that decodes Suroboyoan news for broader audiences. This content blends information with entertainment, expanding the cultural accessibility of local dialects using an attractive format of graphic. The appearance of *Pojok Kampung* in *Instagram* and also *TikTok* allows audiences to actively participate in the storytelling process. Furthermore, the virality of content related to social issues and crime, prominent in *Pojok Kampung*, highlights the dual role of cultural representation: addressing societal concerns while strengthening audience engagement.

On the other hand, informal and harsh tones associated with the Suroboyoan dialects sometimes challenge traditional perceptions of journalistic professionalism. However, these linguistic characteristics also reflect the authenticity of local discourse, resonating deeply with audiences and reinforcing the *Satus Persen Jatim* vision. *JTV's* approach exemplifies how cultural representation can be both a tool for community connection and a strategy for navigating the evolving expectations of media audiences.

1. News Production



2. Cultural Representation

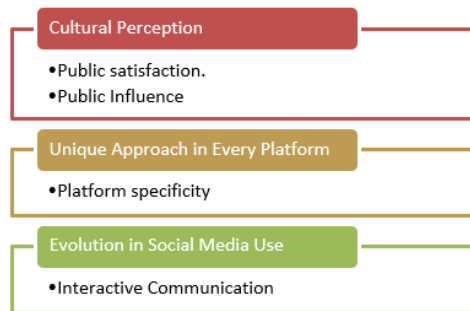


Figure 3. Circuit of cultural commodification in *JTV*

Source: Research Findings

Discussion and conclusion

This study elucidates the process of cultural commodification in local media. By applying the commodification framework, the analysis reveals how *JTV's* strategic use of the Suroboyoan language enhances audience engagement while reinforcing cultural stereotypes. This adds depth to existing theories on media commodification by demonstrating how cultural elements are repurposed for commercial gain within a regional media context, highlighting the balance between cultural integrity and economic objectives

JTV newsroom strategically commodified the Suroboyoan language to resonate their product with local audiences and differentiate themselves from national or global media. But, this study found that it is more than just a linguistics choice or newsroom strategy, but also showed the editorial agenda which exemplifies Vincent Mosco's commodification theory, by transforming the Suroboyoan languages as cultural identity and the news content into marketable commodities. The vision is closely related with

the political economy of media, which enhances the audience engagement, attracts advertisers, and sustains them in the evolving media landscape (Liu & Gao, 2020).

Using Mosco's argument in the case of media's commodification strategy, *Pojok Kampung* came as a program that turned culture and language into a commercial product that the industries could package and sell. While *JTV's* approach still represents the local dialect as a second-class language to generate viral content, its contribution to culture is overshadowed by its perpetuation of stereotypes about the dialects. It also showed that local dialects are leveraged as assets for the local media industry, especially if they can be utilized by the newsrooms. The findings of this research align with Vincent Mosco's commodification theory, illustrating how local dialects can be transformed into commodities that drive audience engagement and brand identity of *JTV* as a media company. The Suroboyoan language serves not only as a cultural marker but as a utility for marketable content, confirming the dual function of cultural elements as both identity anchors and commercial assets for the media industry.

JTV adaptation to digital platforms and utilizing media convergence strategies present ethical concerns. *JTV's* diverse platforms have broadened the agenda for *Pojok Kampung*, their flagship program. Strong editorial decisions are crucial when arranging content strategies for each platform, encompassing television, *portalJTV.com* news sites, *Instagram*, and *TikTok*. These strategies must balance key performance indicators (KPIs) measured by engagement metrics with ethical considerations. Building on Mosco's argument regarding media commodification, *Pojok Kampung* could be seen as a program that packages cultural elements like language for commercial purposes. *JTV's* approach of using Suroboyoan dialects to generate viral content risks blurring the lines of cultural contribution by perpetuating stereotypes.

The Suroboyoan dialects serve a dual function: a cultural marker and a tool for creating marketable content. It reveals how local dialects can be commodified to generate viral content, attract audiences, and highlights the ethical considerations associated with commodifying cultural elements. Several studies have shown that language commodification by media contributes to stereotypes of the cultural identity, such as the local dialect in Egypt (Bassiouney, 2018), English in Spanish culture (Gomez Cerdeno, 2010), and dialects in local Chinese media (Sun, 2012). The data-driven editorial approach in *Pojok Kampung's* content illustrates that the TV channel only considers its market position and audience reach, without offering any quality-driven journalism to the public.

Future research could delve deeper into the commodification of regional dialects within Indonesian media or in comparable Southeast Asian contexts. Comparative studies could provide broader insight into the interplay between commercial and cultural objectives in the regional media industry. Methodologically, quantitative approaches like sentiment analysis and audience surveys could measure the long-term effect of commodification on public perception and engagement with culturally commodified elements.

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How past-present-future interconnect in China: CDramas as a tool of cultural governance and the possibility of a ‘Chinese wave’ in the case of GenZ

Çin’de geçmiş-şimdi-gelecek nasıl kenetlenir? Kültürel yönetim aracı olarak Çin dizileri ve GenZ dizisi örneğinden ‘Çin dalgası’nın olabilirliği

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Abstract

This article aims to identify the discursive practices of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) cultural governance through the GenZ series (2023) and examine how transnational audiences perceive the series. In this context, two different research analysis techniques are used in a coordinated manner. Thematic discourse analysis is employed to reveal the series’ discourse themes, and the netnographic research technique is applied to discuss the compatibility of audience reviews with the series’ discourse. The research questions are as follows: How do the series’ themes reproduce the Chinese government’s cultural governance? How do audiences on global streaming platforms interpret the discourses of the ‘Chinese Dream’¹ and ‘rejuvenation’ subtly embedded in *GenZ*, and do transnational audiences develop an interest and curiosity towards China? Can these two reactions be understood as the potential of Chinese television dramas (CDramas) to create a ‘China Wave?’ This study finds that the series’s discursive themes align with President Xi Jinping’s two ideological discourses and the CCP’s cultural governance goals. As can be seen, the series’ contribution to China’s cultural governance policy is evident. However, its role as a soft power tool is limited because while transnational audiences are interested in Chinese dramas, their focus differs from that of Chinese audiences, which in this series are more interested in traditional Chinese medicine as a cultural heritage. Artistic quality and idol culture are not enough for CDramas to create a ‘Chinese Wave’ among transnational audiences, the nature of the government’s cultural governance policy needs to change first.

Keywords: Xi Jinping, Chinese wave, cultural governance, GenZ, CDramas, traditional Chinese medicine

Öz

Bu makale, GenZ (2023) dizisi aracılığıyla Çin Komünist Partisi'nin (ÇKP) kültürel yönetişiminin söylemsel uygulamalarını tespit etmeyi ve ulusötesi izleyicilerin diziyi nasıl alımladığını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, iki araştırma tekniği eşgüdümlü bir şekilde kullanılmıştır. GenZ dizisindeki söylem temalarını ortaya çıkarmak için tematik söylem analizi, izleyici değerlendirmelerinin dizinin söylemiyle uyumluluğunu tartışmak için ise netnografik araştırma tekniği kullanılmıştır. Çalışma kapsamında belirlenen araştırma soruları şöyledir: Dizinin temaları Çin hükümetinin kültürel yönetişimi ne şekilde üretmektedir? Küresel yayın platformlarındaki izleyiciler GenZ'ye incelikte yerleştirilen 'Çin Rüyası' ve 'canlandırma' söylemlerini nasıl yorumluyor ve ulusötesi izleyiciler Çin'e yönelik ilgi

ve merak geliştiriyor mu? Bu ilgi ve merak, Çin dizileri bir 'Çin Dalgası' yaratma potansiyeli olarak anlaşılabilir mi? Çalışmanın bulguları, dizinin söylemsel temalarının Xi Jinping'in 'Çin rüyası' ve 'canlandırma' ideolojisi ve ÇKP'nin kültürel yönetim hedefleriyle uyumlu olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Görüleceği üzere, dizinin Çin'in kültürel yönetim politikasına katkısı aşikardır. Ancak, Çin hükümeti için bir yumuşak güç aracı olarak rolü sınırlıdır. Çin dizilerinin ulus ötesi izleyiciler arasında bir 'Çin Dalgası' yaratması için yalnızca sanatsal kalitesi ve idol kültür yeterli değildir. Öncelikle Çin hükümetinin kültürel yönetim politikasının mahiyetinin değişmesi gereklidir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Xi Jinping, Çin dalgası, kültürel yönetim, GenZ, Çin dizileri, geleneksel Çin tıbbı

Introduction

“Going forward, China will be a country that has great expectations of its younger generation. A nation will prosper only when its young people thrive. For China to develop further, our young people must step forward and take on their responsibilities. Youth is full of vigor and is a source of hope. Youngsters should keep their country in mind, cultivate keen enterprise, and live youth to the fullest with great drive, to prove worthy of the times and the splendor of youth.”

— President Xi Jinping, 31 December, 2022

The People’s Republic of China (PRC), a leading country of the Global South, has historically used the media as an essential element of governance. In particular, television, which has been controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since its establishment in 1958, has played an important role in the party’s cultural governance strategy (Zhao & Guo, 2020, p.460). Yuezhi Zhao and Zhenzi Guo (2020) provide a comprehensive analysis of Chinese television’s evolution, delineating four distinct periods marked by social, economic, technological, and political shifts: “Mao era (1958-1977), early reform era (1978-1989), market reform era (1990-2012) and Xi Jinping era (2013-present)” (p.459). The fourth period is characterized by an intensified emphasis on television’s political and ideological functions, aligning them with the nationalistic goals of the ‘Chinese Dream’ and ‘rejuvenation.’

The Governance of China (2017), a collection of President Xi’s public speeches, explains his vision of the country’s future as well as the mission and responsibilities assigned to the CCP, different segments of society, and especially the youth. His speeches on those two nationalistic goals emphasize China’s cultural continuity and the interconnectedness of past-present-future. The first goal’s narrative emphasizes “continuities with the greatness of China’s historic power and influence through a romanticization of traditional doctrines, especially Confucianism and the imperial past” (Ng & Xiaomeng, 2023, p. 616). Xi identifies the youth as this dream’s primary agents, thereby prioritizing their ideological and political education. The CCP’s concerted efforts to shape the youth’s ideology are evident in the 1994 Patriotic Education Campaign, the 2012 “Document Number 9” (warned against ‘the cultural penetration of Western hostile forces’) (Bram, 2023, para. 9), and the 2019 ‘Outline for the Implementation of Patriotic Education in the New Era.’ Furthermore, the 2022 White Paper, “Youth of China

in the New Era," commemorating the Youth League's centenary, reaffirms the emphasis on ideological awareness and national rejuvenation under Xi's governance (Svensson, 2023, p.73).

In sum, the CCP under Xi's governance has intensified its efforts to re-ideologize Chinese society, with a particular focus on cultivating a strong sense of national identity and purpose among the youth through strategic media narratives and educational initiatives. In this context, CDramas, broadcast through both traditional television and digital platforms, serve as a direct or indirect instrument of the CCP's cultural governance. While the primary target audience on digital platforms includes both domestic and international viewers (Keane, 2019, p.245), their broader function aligns with the 'Chinese Dream' discourse. The CDramas are employed to cultivate nationalism and propagate cultural values of Chineseness within the domestic population and the diaspora, while simultaneously serving as a form of 'soft power' on the transnational stage.

Robert Albro (2015) points out that China began to use soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye (2004), in the mid-2000s, and that cultural materials were seen as its soft power tool in this sense. For instance, at the 17th CCP National Congress in 2007, General Secretary Hu Jintao presented the doctrine of a 'socialist harmonious society' and emphasized developing China's cultural soft power. While constructing socialism with Chinese characteristics, Confucianism was also recirculated because of its emphasis on 'harmony.' Xi, on the other hand, sharpened the emphasis on a "harmonious society," "harmonious coexistence," and "harmonious world" initiated by Hu and positioned the virtues of China's Confucian-based national culture against the West's extreme individualistic values and materialism (Albro, 2015). Thus, the part of Confucianist values aligned with the CCP and the 'Chinese Dream' has become part of China's cultural governance.

Initially, in China, we saw the use of traditional cultural materials as a soft power tool, representations of traditional cultural materials and the dissemination of the Chinese language through Confucius Institutes. However, Xi's emphasis on 'good Chinese narratives' has made the soft power and cultural diplomacy role of cultural content circulating in the media and new media ecosystem part of the agenda. Therefore, dramas, game shows, and even travel programs produced in China have begun to circulate the country's virtues and the values of Chineseness based on the party-state's cultural policy.

In these narratives, cultural nationalism is subtly circulated differently from the propaganda techniques of the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution. Aligned with the ‘Chinese Dream’ discourse, we claim that these television dramas serve as a vehicle for propagating the nationalist sentiments and cultural values of Chineseness both domestically and within the diaspora, while simultaneously functioning as a form of ‘soft power’ on the transnational stage. In particular, China’s economic rise; the development of its military power; its independence in information technology (IT), space, and military technologies; the outbreak of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in Wuhan; and the delay of its authorities in managing the health crisis and preventing the global spread of the virus have led the world to perceive China as a threat. Negative images have begun to circulate. Human rights violations against the Uyghur Muslim population in the Uyghur Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the Buddhist clergy in Tibet, and the suppression of student protests in Hong Kong have led the world to question its record on freedom of expression and human rights. For this reason, this ‘China threat’ gradually increased in the Western media during the 2020s. In response, the CCP has started implementing a more rigorous and meticulous approach to cultural governance within media and new media content, aiming to construct a positive image through strategic cultural messaging.

There are a few examples of studies that analyse how the CCP produces the discursive practices of cultural governance and the dominant ideology through television programmes such as Chinese dramas, and competitions in the literature (Wu & Bergman, 2019; Zhong, 2010; Jiang & González, 2021; Song, 2022). However, there has been no study of the *GenZ* series in this context. The specificity of this article is that, through the series *GenZ* (2023), it aims to identify the discursive practices of the CCP’s cultural governance and examine how transnational audiences perceive the series. It will also contribute to the literature by evaluating how this series is interpreted by transnational audiences in terms of its potential to create a ‘Chinese Wave’. The literature on Chinese governance on CDramas is discussed in the following section of the article.

Cultural governance through CDramas

K. V. Mulcahy (2010) and Füsün Üstel (2022) define cultural governance as the nation-state’s adoption and shaping of cultural materials as the ideological state apparatus, from educational institutions, media content, production and performance of artworks, public space design, monuments, and museums to architecture. The more minimal or

extensive the state's arm length is, the more liberal, democratic, or authoritarian and censorious the cultural governance becomes. In authoritarian states, cultural governance can be realized through repressive regulation mechanisms, particularly censorship as an ideological state apparatus (Mulcahy, 2010; Üstel, 2022).

As mentioned above, cultural governance practices have intensified during the Xi era. At this point, the evolution of propaganda into cultural governance and the changed target audience of these practices over time are important. Wanning Sun (2015) states that the CCP has engaged in propaganda activities since its establishment. Some newspapers were published in the early 1930s for Western countries and sought to explain the party's vision of revolution to them. During the early 1940s, Xinhua began English-language broadcasting in Yan'an under CCP control. In 1949, with the founding of the PRC, the need for media-mediated propaganda to publicize the new state's ideology and legitimacy became apparent. In 1955, Chairman Mao emphasized Xinhua's duty to give China a global voice, to "take control of the earth" (Mu, 2013, cited by Sun, 2015, p. 403).

Chinese scholars such as Tang (2013) and Wang (2010) divide China's propaganda activities towards global public opinion into three periods: the development of publishing and journalism (1949-1965), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the use of extreme propaganda techniques, and from 1977 to the present, a time to develop different narrative techniques to tell its story to foreign audiences. Sun points out that in the third period, policymakers differentiated between inward and outward propaganda (Sun, 2015). For years, China's media has functioned as the "throat and tongue of the Party." (Sun, 2015, p.404). Commercializing it through economic reforms and cooperation with international TV companies required the production of more sophisticated propaganda techniques aimed at influencing foreign public opinion.

When China opened up in the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping, the aim was to change China's foreign public image from a "poor country" to a developed country (Wang, 1998, p.2, cited by Sun, 2015, p. 406). With its economic rise and middle-class empowerment under Xi's rule, the media's job has become that of informing the world about the 'Chinese Dream.' In undertaking propaganda activities for foreign public opinion, Wang Chen pointed out that foreign audiences are not homogeneous (Sun, 2015). Emphasizing the subsequent need for diversity in the cultural content for these specific target audiences is also an important development. Therefore, we observe that

the CCP's ideological discourse is disseminated through means of cultural governance other than propaganda.

At this point, let us briefly explain how the party-state's ideological discourse is constructed in media texts. The media, which heavily influences the people's social life, has remained the party's primary method of guiding the masses and engaging the public since the PRC's founding (Cao & Lang, 2021, p. 3). According to Beijing, Chineseness represented and constructed by the media texts and thus operating as the ideological state apparatus, reinforces and justifies the party-state's domination. Song contends that it constitutes a form of loyalty to the nation-state, knowledge of "traditional" Chinese culture, and transformation of Confucian moral codes (Song, 2022, p.8).

Using the entertainment industry for propaganda and education is one of the CCP's main strategies. Celebrities influence youth's lifestyles, consumption habits, and cultural values. The CCP makes sure that this influence is in line with its ideology and reaches out to the public through media content (Xu & Yang, 2021, pp.202-203). In this context, we can consider television dramas as discursive tools that Xi envisions for China's future.

In his study of popular CDrama (dianshiju), Florian Schneider (2012, p.17) finds that melodramas, idol dramas, historical costume dramas, nostalgic family dramas, family comedies, crime dramas, youth dramas, and the wuxia genre (historical dramas involving martial arts) contain conservative and didactic messages in line with the CCP's teachings. He argues that the party's discourses of cultural governance are fundamental to all narratives, regardless of genre. It has always used television broadcasting and its content as the ideological apparatus of the party-state, whether centralized, regional, or local (Song, 2022, pp. 21-24). In this context, television drama series (dianshilianxuju), the most watched genre in China, produce both a CCP-loyal public and consumers favorable to the market economy's growth. With the transition to a Chinese-style socialist market economy, the trend towards commercialization and privatization was first seen in television broadcasting. The transition to satellite broadcasting, cable TV broadcasting, and, finally, catalog broadcasting via OTTs (over-the-top) increased the need for television drama series.

The production of television content in China operates through two different production mechanisms: party-state production companies (state-owned production companies) and private companies (non-governmental production companies)

(Schneider, 2012, p.108), which need a production permit from the government. Dramas are important in forming traditional television's broadcast streaming and viewing practices across platforms in the local market. For this reason, production companies and television channels pay special attention to drama series production. Both infrastructure and service platforms, such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu, have entered the media industry as investors and producers, described as a "game changer for Chinese television" (Song, 2022, p. 27).

Since Xi came to power in 2012, China's growing authoritarianism has been reflected as increased state control over the mass media and, thus, the entertainment industry (Xu & Yang, 2021, p.204). Media formats and narratives are known to change with digitalization. Online platforms have become the center of content production and consumption. The change in the platforms on which audiences consume content and content formats has changed celebrity culture in China. This change has enabled the CCP to increase its control over these platforms and introduce new regulations (Xu & Yang, 2021, p.209).

For Jian Xu and Ling Yang (2021, p.213), manipulating public opinion through celebrities in today's globalized environment constitutes an important pillar of the party's cultural governance policy, one that allows it to legitimize its political activities and maintain its hegemony. Popular movie artists and singers even produce counter-contents (ruhua) to Western contents (e.g., movies, TV series, songs, advertisements, and social campaigns) that degrade China. Geng Song (2022, p. 3), who works on producing gendered Chinese nationalism through television broadcasting in China, says that Chinese television has a new symbol and is a carrier of China's soft power in this era.

Under Xi's rule, patriotism is seen as a fundamental and eternal component of "core socialist values," (2022, p.7) and thus what Yingjie Guo calls "cultural nationalism" (2004, as cited in Song, 2022, p.7) is promoted by China's media and creative industries to be expressed as a core element. Moreover, Xi also openly promotes 'good Chinese narratives.' In his speech at a recent conference on propaganda, he stressed the importance of communication and propaganda activities in harmonizing the teachings of traditional Chinese culture with modern values. He also noted that traditional Chinese culture, one of the pillars of modern China, has the potential to produce solutions to both internal and external problems (Xi, 22 August 2018, cited by Song, 2022, p.178).

The “14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development,” prepared by the General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council in August 2022, states that under Xi’s rule, “The core socialist values and China’s excellent traditional culture have been widely promoted” (p.1), and to achieve “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation... culture is an important source of strength.” (p.2) There, the Plan emphasizes the following: “...culture is an important soft power; we must strengthen strategic determination, tell the Chinese story well, and provide lasting and profound spiritual motivation for promoting the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind” (p.2). The Plan underlines the promotion of new themes for media production combined with major national strategic themes, such as patriotism and the youth’s nationalist rejuvenation (p.7). In addition, it stresses the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture (p.8).

As seen in the Plan, Xi’s mission and emphasis on good Chinese narratives is in place. Therefore, TV dramas have played an important role in cultural governance, and their narratives mediate between the state and the individual in favor of the party’s ideology (Song, 2022, p.183). According to the producers Schneider interviewed during his fieldwork, “good” and “healthy” television dramas have three qualities: ideological quality (*sixiangxing*), artistic quality (*yishuxing*), and viewing quality (*guangshangxing*) (2012, p.129). As one can see, harmony with the party-state’s teachings comes first. The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) is a direct agent that provides the infrastructural regulation and general framework for media production and broadcasting (Schneider, 2012, p.157). This institution aligns with the CCP’s propaganda departments and the Ministry of Education (2012, p.163).

SARFT was recently renamed the National Radio and Television Administration. However, the party’s leadership has not changed (Song, 2022, p.194) and cultural governance operates subtly (Schneider, 2012). In this context, the three qualities listed above have developed in Chinese dramas in recent years, and especially the development of artistic quality has attracted the attention of transnational audiences to CDramas. In addition to the rise in artistic quality, the inclusion of idols (i.e. Wang Yibo, Lee Hong Yi, Dilruba Dilmurat, Xiao Zhan, Yang Yang, Zhao Lusi) in leading roles increases the interest of both domestic and transnational audiences in CDramas.

It is worth noting the ideological quality common to all the dramas. The adoption of Chinese values, dedication to the country’s rise, pride in its deep-rooted civilization and culture, and Confucian ethical principles (e.g., respect for elders and family harmony)

are emphasized in the dramas' narrative dialogues and visual images, whether they are costume historical dramas, career dramas, or romances set in the metropolis. Given that these images and narratives operate in conjunction with all other discursive practices produced in everyday life, an imagined China is being produced for the Chinese. From the rhetoric of the CCP and Xi on billboards in rural and metropolitan cities, from party slogans on skyscraper lighting to social media applications, ideological teaching is everywhere. For example, the globally renowned South Korean SBS series *Descendants of the Sun* (2016) is about the love and hardships of two soldiers on a peace mission abroad. The Ministry of Public Security supported the serial's remake and renamed it *You Are My Hero* (2021). This remake is designed to meet the CCP's ideological requirements and the market's as well (Yu Xian Tan, 2024, p.207).

This drama disseminated militarized masculinity; a similar trend is evident in Chinese cinema. *Ace Troops* (2021) is a drama about the Chinese army's modernization through two male and one female soldier. The narrative concludes with a display of China's military capabilities: a successful operation to neutralize pirates disrupting trade routes in the South Indian Sea, culminating in a grand military parade in Beijing. At the end of the series, Xi's speech sets the tone for the military parade. The series produces the discourse of a strong army and a strong state. Blockbusters such as *Operation Red Sea* (2018), *Wolf Warrior I* (2015) and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017), *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021), and *The Battle at Lake Changjin II* (2022) have similar discursive practices. Such productions serve the strong state discourse of the Chinese state by aiming to strengthen masculinity against the images of androgynous masculinity propagated by the Korean Wave (Binark & Karataş-Özaydın, 2020).

The 'sissyphobia' (hatred of effeminate men) produced by the CCP and the Chinese media is a product of this policy. The production of content on social media and in the news that emphasizes masculinity against effeminate or androgynous-looking stars is the result of this hatred, the result of the conflation of masculinity with Chinese nationalism and militarism. In the romances, Chinese culture, China made-productions, and the superiority of Chinese technology dominate the narratives. For instance, in the series *Rising With The Wind* (2023), the first sneakers produced in China and that factory's history are narrated with an emphasis on the China-made production's value and its role in the history of Chinese industrialization. *Our Interpreter* (2024) tells the story of a romantic relationship between a male programmer and a female translator who develop artificial intelligence (AI) in different languages, emphasizing the superiority

of Chinese technology and AI applications developed in China for the global market. The narrative states that Chinese technology no longer imitates the world, but is a pioneer. If we talk about a Chinese Wave like the Korean Wave in the consumption of global transnational media content, it should be noted that the former's content includes the roles of femininity and masculinity imagined by the party-state and the images of a strong and omnipotent China that the 'Chinese Dream' seeks to construct. Are these contents liked by the transnational audience? This question will determine whether the party's cultural governance of foreign publics succeeds. With this question in mind, we will consider the discursive analysis of the drama *GenZ* (2023) and how the transnational audience discusses these discourses.

Aim and methodology

In this section of the article, after explaining the aim and methodology of the study, the narrative and characters of the series will be introduced.

Aim

This article aims to identify the discursive practices of the CCP's cultural governance through the *GenZ* (2023) drama and to examine how transnational audiences perceive it, thereby revealing the possibility of a 'Chinese Wave' through CDramas. To achieve this, the concept of cultural governance and how it functions through the media will be presented first. The drama's themes will then be revealed via thematic discourse analysis, and the relationship between the discourse and the drama's reception will be discussed by analyzing the audience's reviews using the netnographic research technique.

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1) Are the series' discursive components coordinated with Beijing's cultural policy and Xi's 'Chinese Dream'?

RQ2) How do audiences on global streaming platforms interpret the 'Chinese Dream' and 'rejuvenation' discourses that are subtly embedded in *GenZ*, and do transnational audiences develop an interest and curiosity towards China?

RQ3) Can this interest and curiosity be understood as the potential of CDramas to create a 'China Wave'?

Methodology and discursive practices in *GenZ*

The *GenZ* (后浪) (Houlang) series, a 40-episode narrative co-produced by Dragon TV, JSTV, and *Youku*, was directed by Han Xio Xun and aired every weekday between May 14 and June 5, 2023, on *Youku*, the pioneer of online streaming platforms in China (Keane & Su, 2018, p.95). This study traced the CCP's cultural governance policies in Chinese drama techniques using two different research approaches: Analyzing the drama's discursive components and then examining its reception by a transnational audience through netnography. Firstly, the study employs thematic discourse analysis to the 40 episodes to trace the influence of the CCP's cultural governance policies and extracted themes. Then the study utilizes the netnography technique to analyze the transnational audience's reviews to uncover whether the themes explored in the series correspond with the themes emerging from the audience reviews. At the end, the differences and similarities between these two analyses were discussed.

Through thematic discourse analysis, which constitutes the study's first stage, the study traced the extent to which the issues inherent in the CCP's governance policies are reflected in the *GenZ* series and revealed the narratives that overlap with them. Discourse analysis enables social reality to be constructed through language, as well as the power and ideological narratives embedded in language, to become visible. Critical discourse analysis and ideology can be defined as intertwined concepts that shape social roles, construct and maintain power relations, and maintain or transform the status quo (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Dani Singer and Myra S. Hunter (1999) use thematic discourse analysis to identify common themes and inconsistencies within the texts being analyzed. According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, this type of analysis is grounded in post-structuralism and focuses on uncovering recurring patterns of meaning within a narrative, keeping in mind the notion that meaning is not static and can be reshaped through language (2014, p. 1948).

Through netnographic analysis of audience reviews, which constitutes the study's second stage, researchers analyzed how the narratives in the *GenZ* series, those that are compatible with the CCP's governance policies, resonate with transnational audiences. The netnography method, developed by Robert V. Kozinets in 1995, is a qualitative analysis

method that can be briefly defined as the adaptation of the ethnographic method to the online environment. Grounded in traditional ethnographic approaches, netnography involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data within the online environment (Kozinets, 2015, p.1). Academic interest in netnography is steadily increasing, and the method is becoming a subject of research and publications in a wide range of disciplines, from geography and sociology to nursing and education (Kozinets, 2015, p.2). By adapting traditional ethnography to the online environment, netnography enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of communities, communication patterns, and cultural practices by examining digital data. Positioned between big data analysis and discourse analysis, it provides a framework for understanding human interactions in online environments, drawing from a diverse range of data, including text, visuals, and audio recordings (Kozinets, 2015, pp.3-5). Thus this method, which is based on observation in the online environment, seeks to understand the cultural worlds in which audiences are involved or from which they benefit. In the netnographic method, the collected data is interpreted by the researcher's process of thematization.

According to Keane (2019, p .245), *YouTube* is the leading platform to disseminate Chinese content outside of China. Therefore, Audience reviews of the *GenZ* found on it are analyzed by netnographic research technique in light of the research questions mentioned above. The first episode of *GenZ* was broadcast on YouHug Media's^[4] *YouTube* channel on May 14, 2023 and the last one on June 5, 2023. Audience reviews were limited to the date range of May 14, 2023 - July 1, 2023, taking into account the number of episodes and the size of the data. From May 14, all audience reviews of all episodes were manually recorded until July 1. As of the date, 9.630 audience comments were recorded manually (see Table 1). Reviews are mainly in English, but others are in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Indonesian, French, Arabic, Malay, Hindi, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Turkish. Of these reviews, 4.893 can be classified as English, 923 as Chinese, and 3.814 as other languages. A total of 5.816 reviews were included in the analysis (Appendix 1).

In this study, English and Chinese reviews were included in the sample, taking into account the language competencies of both authors other than Turkish. Reviews consisting of emojis or gifs expressing appreciation and no opinions about the content were excluded from the sample. Fabrication technique was used to convey examples of audience reviews related to the themes. According to Annette Markham (2011), "For researchers working within interpretive paradigms, fabrication is an apt and ethical description for a process of interpretation," for it allows researchers to anonymize the reviewer's content.

Table 1: Review numbers per episode (14 May-1 July 2023).

	Review number		Review number		Review number		Review number
Episode 1	574	Episode 11	348	Episode 21	204	Episode 31	169
Episode 2	285	Episode 12	188	Episode 22	193	Episode 32	277
Episode 3	167	Episode 13	178	Episode 23	206	Episode 33	306
Episode 4	236	Episode 14	240	Episode 24	239	Episode 34	135
Episode 5	205	Episode 15	196	Episode 25	211	Episode 35	257
Episode 6	218	Episode 16	436	Episode 26	202	Episode 36	297
Episode 7	151	Episode 17	218	Episode 27	239	Episode 37	203
Episode 8	210	Episode 18	146	Episode 28	350	Episode 38	148
Episode 9	150	Episode 19	133	Episode 29	163	Episode 39	144
Episode 10	380	Episode 20	194	Episode 30	196	Episode 40	634

What does *GenZ* say?

The story of *GenZ*, told through three generations living under the same roof, is built on traditional Chinese medical practices and relationships within the family and between the young people. The story progresses mainly through Professor Ren Xin Zheng, who is dedicated to learning Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and Sun Tou Tou, who grew up in an orphanage and is considered the heir to TCM. Professor Ren Xin Zheng opens a classroom to teach this knowledge through the master-apprentice relationship (viz., the father-child hierarchy). Researchers follow the students' learning journey over 40 episodes, including that of Sun Tou Tou and the professor's son Ren Tian Zhen. The aim is to train new generations to carry the wisdom of TCM forward. The translation of the Chinese title to English, 'Rising Tides,' is meaningful in this respect. As explained above, Xi's mission for China's youth is to carry the flag to achieve China's goals under the 'Chinese Dream' are 'rejuvenation' and 'modernization.'

"Realize Youthful Dreams" is the title of Xi's 2013 speech on the anniversary of the May 4th^[2] movement, in which he assigns an important role to youth as part of the "Chinese Dream" (Gullotta & Lin, 2022, p.4): "Looking ahead, we can see that our younger generation has a promising future and will accomplish much. It is a law of history that the waves of the Yangtze River from behind drive on those ahead. It is the responsibility of young people to surpass their elders" (2013, para.7). After this, Xi has also expressed that young people should have more nationalist attitudes and behaviors. For him, the 'nationalist' youth who will realize the 'Chinese Dream' will not only embrace socialism, but also unite China's past, its culture and traditions. Xi's 'China Dream' promises to give China a status and power similar to that of the Middle Kingdom.^[3] This is precisely where

cultural governance serves as a tool for the country to reintegrate its historical heritage, including Confucian values, into contemporary society. From the very beginning, the drama 'Rising Tides' emphasizes the responsibility of young people to transcend the older generations and their role in moving society forward.

In *GenZ*, two generations of the Ren family practice TCM. Tian Zhen, the only male descendant, is expected to practice this cultural heritage. However, he does not want to embrace the tradition, clashes with his father, and wastes his time practicing extreme sports. However, over time his on-and-off relationship with Tou Tou turns into a romantic relationship and throughout the narrative Tian Zhen becomes the model Chinese youth. His relationship with Tou Tou makes him realize the importance of cultural heritage, family, and obedience to one's father.

Tables 2 and 3 below identify Ren Xin Zheng's family members and those who attended his TCM class. An examination of character portrayals, based on gender, education, profession, and general features, reveals the narrative's ideological influence on both Chinese youth and international audiences. The main and secondary young characters transform throughout the narrative and embrace the CCP's mission given to Chinese youth. Therefore, it is important to recognize the characters in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: *GenZ* main characters

Name	Gender	Education	Profession	General features
Ren Xin Zheng	Male	Faculty of Medicine	Prof. and Master of TCM Heritage Class	He aims to raise generations that will keep the TCM heritage alive. A determined, yet stubborn, character.
Sun Tou Tou	Female	Faculty of Medicine	Motorcycle Courier-Student at TCM Heritage Class	An orphan, Ren Xin Zheng announced her as a TCM successor. She is brave, overhasty, talkative, headstrong, and kind hearted.
Ren Tian Zhen	Male	Faculty of Medicine	Student at TCM Heritage Class	Xin Zheng's son, a rebellious young man, doesn't want to continue his family's tradition. He also doesn't get along with his father.
Yang Xiao Hong / Rebecca	Female	Faculty of Law	Lawyer-Student at TCM Heritage Class	Former lawyer. After a bad experience while working as a lawyer, she begins to question the meaning of life. With TCM, she aims to open a new chapter in her life.
Song Ling Lan	Female	Faculty of Medicine	Doctor-Teacher TCM Heritage Class	Xin Zheng's wife, a TCM practitioner, symbolizes the position of women in the traditional and modern Chinese family structure. She supports her husband despite his mistakes.

Table 3: Supporting characters of *GenZ*

Name	Gender	Education	Profession	General features
Zhao Li Quan	Male	Faculty of Medicine	Student at TCM Class	His family lives in a rural area and expects him to save them from poverty. He graduates from school but can't find a job. He joins the TCM class. He makes wrong decisions because of his family's demands.
Zhang Ji Ru	Female	—	Doctor	Ren Xinzheng's mother-in-law. She makes sensible decisions. Supporter of her daughter.
Song Yi Ren	Male	—	TCM practitioner	Ren Xinzheng's father-in-law. Also a master of TCM. Ren Xin, Zheng's main supporter, has a good relationship with his grandson.

In this study, all episodes were watched in the original language (Chinese) with Chinese and English subtitles. The traces of the cultural governance policy produced for the youth under Xi's rule are found by conducting a thematic discourse analysis. In the case of *GenZ*, this type of analysis helps reveal how the party-state uses television dramas as a tool of cultural governance to achieve the 'Chinese Dream.' It reveals the embedding of three main themes: 'the production of Chineseness and Chinese nationalism; the meeting of traditional and modern and the importance of intergenerational communication; and the meeting of traditional and modern and the importance of family.' TCM is portrayed not only as a treatment that supports Western medicine, but also as the treatment to be used when Western medicine is helpless. It is constructed as a cultural heritage to be appropriated through intergenerational communication and knowledge transfer. *GenZ* explains its principles and implementation principles with references to Confucianism and teachings such as "goodness, good son, ceremony, loyalty, truthfulness, accuracy, knowledge, reliability, courage" (Konfüçyüs, 2021, pp.xxii-xxiv).

The series also covers the COVID-19 outbreak in the first months of 2020 in Wuhan and re-propagates the dominant narrative of how the Chinese people are united in such a major crisis. In the next part of the study, the three main discursive themes with examples will be discussed. Then, based on these themes, the transnational audience reviews will be analyzed.

Findings

In this part of the study, the themes that emerged from the thematic discourse analysis of the *GenZ* series are first explained with examples from the series. Then the themes that emerged from the netnographic analysis of the audience reviews of the *GenZ*

series are listed and explained with examples from the audience reviews. It is discussed whether the themes of the series overlap with the themes that emerged from the audience reviews.

Main discursive themes of *GenZ*

Three main themes are intertwined in the *GenZ* series. These are, as mentioned above, 'the production of Chineseness and Chinese nationalism;' 'the meeting of traditional and modern and the importance of intergenerational communication;' and 'the meeting of traditional and modern and the importance of family.'

The production of Chineseness and Chinese nationalism

The series portrays moral, hopeful, socially harmonious, and nationalistic Chinese youth who practice TCM by combining Chinese history, traditional culture, and its core values with the values of contemporary Chinese society. Both this series and Zili Lin, Charity Lee, and Surinderpal Kaur's study on Chinese reality TV shows that the contents of Chinese television are aligned with Xi's "Chinese Dream" policy and that its entertainment products are filled with the party's indoctrination cultural governance principles (2024, pp.1-21). Chinese researchers argue that China will be more successful if youth possess traditional Confucian virtues (p.8). In this respect, the advice given by TCM instructor Ren Xin Zheng, the main character, to those young people who have completed their training in the final episode is in line with Xi's 'Chinese Dream' policy. In his discourse, Ren Xin Zheng emphasizes that the Chinese state has a responsibility to educate its younger citizens in the practice of TCM and to ensure its continued transmission to subsequent generations.

In *GenZ*, the plot and characters draw an example of a 'masculine nationalism' that supports the Chinese party-state's current discourse. Similarly, in line with its ideology, women serve the national family (*guojia*) by reproducing the roles of loyal wife, mother, and child care provider. In the epidemic's aftermath, Song Ling Lan, Ren Xin Zheng's wife and a medical doctor, takes on the mission of keeping the family together and sacrifices for her husband and her country, despite having major problems with her husband. Lin, Lee, and Kaur's research findings similarly highlight the same point: "In the socialist tradition, women are expected to embody the essence of the national tradition while actively engaging in the nation's societal life or the 'soul of tradition-

within-modernity' " (2024, p.12). When the pandemic strikes, Song Ling Lan gathers her husband's parents, her parents, and Sun Tou Tou, whom she learns is her husband's illegitimate daughter, under the same roof to protect them from the disease. She then travels to Wuhan to provide support to her husband.

In the series' last episode, we see Sun Tou Tou completing her TCM training. She represents the model Chinese young person who does not lose hope, remains moral, and works for her country by upholding traditional values. This episode also highlights Xi's emphasis on youth and Confucian doctrine, which views 'past, present, and future' as a unified whole, acknowledges traditional Chinese cultural history, and embraces Chinese national identity. Sun Tou Tou, now entitled to become a TCM practitioner and a member of the Ren family through her romantic relationship with its third generation, reflects on the gains she achieved from living with them and receiving TCM training as follows:

Sun Tou Tou: Confucius was heartbroken at Yan Hui's death. It's because he thought no one would inherit his legacy. But he had never seen Mencius before. But Mencius wanted to pass on his ideas. So, I was thinking about this. Is bloodline really that important for the Chinese? But I figured it out now because I saw you. Now that I saw you, I think it isn't important. I am not your biological child. But the effort you put into me is much more than your son. So, for me, bloodline isn't important. Who my biological parents are isn't important as well. No. Parents are important. Look. The reason why Chinese culture has such a long history and successors is actually not because of lineage. It's actually the cultural lineage. It's not the bloodline. It's actually the Confucian orthodoxy. In fact, the real inheritance should be the thought. It is a continuation of the spirit (Episode 40).

Confucianist morality and doctrine dominated the Chinese Empire's state administration, educational structure, and domestic relations for 2.500 years until the founding of the CCP. Especially with Mao's struggle against this doctrine, which produced the hierarchy of upper-lower, older-younger, male-female, and patriarchal social regime, the doctrine's decisive role in social life was weakened. However, with the transition to a Chinese-style socialism and a market economy, Confucianism has recently begun to be used as a tool of cultural diplomacy. This pragmatic appropriation aims to produce social harmony internally and arouse interest in Chinese civilization externally, pointing to the moral values and the unity of heart and mind that the West should learn from Chinese culture and civilization.

The importance of intergenerational communication

In *GenZ*, three generations of Chinese people live under one roof, and TCM plays a role in uniting them. With a 3.000-year history, TCM is a holistic healthcare system that encompasses the diagnosis, etiology, and treatment of diseases, with a particular emphasis on the interconnectedness of physical and psychological well-being. This medical system aims to treat the patient with natural healing resources in light of experience and knowledge gained over thousands of years. Its methods of disease detection, which proceed through the teaching of 'Yin Yang Wu Xing' (negative, positive, causes, and treatments of diseases) in treatment, are listed as 'looking examination, listening and smelling examination, asking examination, pulse taking and manual examination.' In addition to medicines obtained by processing "herbal, animal, mineral, chemical and biological substances" obtained from nature and mixing different substances in different proportions, massage and acupuncture are other treatment methods used in TCM (Tang & Yin, 2015, pp. 87-199).

We know that Beijing often uses TCM and Chinese food as a cultural heritage to create soft power, and TCM is given special attention in the 14th Plan. The Plan mentions "excellent traditional Chinese culture and revolutionary culture" as a medium of cultural governance and then stresses that TCM should be researched and developed (2022, p. 8). Martin Jacques explains its role as a soft power instrument as follows:

Every Chinese hospital has a department devoted to Chinese medicine, with doctors frequently qualified in both Western and Chinese medicine. When Western-style drugs are prescribed they are often combined with traditional Chinese treatments (which was my own experience in a Beijing hospital) [...] The contrast between Chinese and Western medicine eloquently sums up the difference between civilizational wisdom and scientific knowledge. Chinese medicine, rather like the world's cuisines, is a product of thousands of years of trial and error, of the everyday experience and resourcefulness of hundreds of millions of people and their interaction with their plant environment; Western medicine is a rigorous product of the scientific method and the invention and refining of chemicals (2009, p.701).

In the series, Ren Xin Zheng explains the difference between TCM and Western medicine and its importance for a healthy social order. From the very first episodes,

we do not see TCM as the opposite of Western medicine, but as a primary health service to prevent diseases before they occur. Balance, the body in equilibrium, is fundamental in TCM.

The CCP adapts some traditional cultural practices into discursive practices to suit its agenda: stressing the uniqueness of Chinese culture as a component of ideological doctrine. For example, the rule of virtue, the Socialist Harmonious Society, and the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianxia*), all discursive practices of the party, are incorporated into its agenda (Zeng, 2016, p.136). In 2001, President Jiang Zemin (1993-2003) officially declared that “rule by law” has been combined with “rule by virtue” as the CCP’s governing strategy (Zeng, 2016, p.136). A socialist harmonious society is defined by Jinghan Zeng (2016) as one under Heaven’s rule, with national unity and integrity, socially serene, and economically developed. The Mandate of Heaven is also embedded into the party’s propaganda. The discourse on it implies the national unity, social stability, and economic growth that the party must achieve (p. 139). The continuity of Chinese culture is seen as an asset for a socialist and harmonious society.

While the series teaches TCM, it also emphasizes that success in this field is achieved by complying with Confucianist values. The values emphasized in the series also align with Confucianism’s governing principles, listed by Nurcan Kalkır (2018, p.97), as “abiding by tradition, being virtuous and moral, being an exemplary son, behaving in a manner appropriate to one’s position, and honesty.” In *GenZ* we see all these principles put into practice in the relationship between father and son, husband and wife.

One of the diseases TCM treats in the series is COVID-19. In episode 37, we witness its rapid spread. We see Tian Zhen, son of TCM class instructor Ren Xin Zhen, respond to the outbreak in a small town and develop an appropriate prescription. Thus, the third generation has also become a TCM practitioner, embracing the role assigned to youth.

Ren Xin Zhen and his students went to Wuhan, closed due to the epidemic, for support. Where Western medicine falls short, they step in. In episode 38 Ren Xin Zhen tells his students that during the outbreak, a hospital patient he had treated with acupuncture told another doctor about its ensuing benefits. The other doctor asked Ren Xin Zhen for help in reducing their epidemic-related burden. In conclusion, *GenZ* demonstrates the utility of TCM in epidemics, underscoring the contribution of China’s

ancient civilization to the universal human heritage. TCM acts as a bridge connecting older and younger generations in China.

The meeting of traditional and modern and the importance of family

In East Asian societies, often unlike in the West, the individual's success within the group and organization to which he or she belongs is more important than his or her personal responsibility or success. The individual is part of an extended family, and the patriarchal structure remains dominant (Kang & Kim, 2012, p.132). This culture of 'familism' is also important in *GenZ*. In the family, the father assumes the role of authority. The family's place in modern or traditional society is still very important in China. Unlike Western societies, families take a stricter approach to their children's education, future, behavior, and responsibilities, and families want children to take responsibility for their parents (Jacques, 2009).

In today's context, digitalization and platforms provide dynamic means of communicating traditional Chinese culture, such as Confucianism, to diverse audiences from various cultural backgrounds. This approach warrants special attention from Chinese media professionals (Xiao & Hu, 2019, p.160). In *GenZ*, the second generation assumes responsibility for both their children and their parents. Additionally, women serve as the family's backbone in their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters. Song Ling Lan, Professor Ren Xin Zhen's wife, supports her husband both financially and morally. She offers to sell the family heirloom, its house, to pay off his debts; remains at home despite his infidelity, and does not abandon him during his illness caused by the pandemic virus. The role of women as wives is among the fundamental relationships that Confucius considers essential for maintaining societal harmony, or 'social harmony.' Even Sun Tou Tou, who has a strong and independent personality, adopts the role of a wife's caretaker and protector when she and the son of the Ren house become lovers.

Netnographic analysis: Interpretation of the *GenZ* series by transnational audiences

The *GenZ* series narrative embodies President Xi's socio-political imagination of Chinese youth through the character of Professor Ren. It is, therefore, a convenient contemporary CDrama to see how the party-state's cultural governance is produced. It should be noted that President Xi emphasized that "good Chinese narratives" revitalize the nation's cultural roots and serve the role of transmitting Chinese values to all humanity (Song,

2022, p.178). Thus, CDramas try to create a 'Chinese Wave' effect for transnational audiences.

The audience defines *GenZ* as a series with educational and informative content as well as entertaining. Its reviews reveal that the series' combination of different genres is an important factor in the audience's interest. In addition, the fact that actors admired by young people are also featured adds an idol drama feature. The actors and actresses are also famous in China. Zhao Lusi, aka Sun Tou Tou, one of the female leading characters, is very popular among the younger generation and has a huge national and transnational fan community. Audience reviews particularly praise Zhao Lusi and her acting. Also Luo Yizhou, aka Ren Tian Zhen, is among the rising male idols. Wu Gang, aka Ren Xinzhen, and Jiang Shan, aka Song Linglan, are veteran actors and actresses. In addition, this coexistence of young idols and veteran actors is an attractive aspect for the audience to watch regarding intergenerational communication and conflicts.

Audience reviews are categorized based on the thematic discourse analysis applied to the series. Its prominent themes can be listed as follows: 'TCM and its relationship with Chinese culture and values, family relations and the meeting of the traditional and the modern, intergenerational communication, and generational conflict.'

TCM and its relationship with Chinese culture and values

Audience reviews emphasize that the series' main theme is transmitting TCM, an important element of cultural heritage, to younger generations. Audience reviews perceiving TCM as a part of Chinese culture and tradition overlap with the Chinese identity, emphasized as one of the series' main discursive components. The reviews frequently emphasize its benefits and significance in promoting health and well-being. Not only is there a growing interest in TCM in Chinese reviews, but also in English reviews. In particular, including it in modern Chinese dramas, rather than just historical Chinese dramas, is encouraged. Chinese-language reviews suggest that political support for TCM will help it restore its lost value in society. These reviews align with the thematic discourse analysis, in which TCM is considered as part of the significant cultural heritage.

The reviews suggest that audiences are particularly interested in including TCM teachings in modern Chinese dramas rather than historical dramas. By melting the

traditional with the modern, the series provides information about traditional Chinese culture, enabling those unfamiliar with it to learn about it.

Praise for TCM is accompanied by praise for Chinese civilization. The reviews emphasize the history and depth of Chinese culture and civilization. For instance;

It's amazing to find traditional Chinese medicine in historical dramas as well as in modern Chinese dramas.

..It is the duty of the Chinese people to keep alive the values of Chinese civilization, such as virtue, truthfulness, justice, and benevolence.

Chinese medicine is the most important part and medium of Chinese culture.

In the reviews, such as the audience review "...Traditional Chinese Medicine, which now complements Western medicine, is an ancient practice," TCM is not seen as an alternative to Western medicine, but as a complement to it and a knowledge-enhancing practice.

Praise for TCM is accompanied by praise for Chinese civilization. Emphasis is placed on the history and depth of Chinese culture and civilization.

This drama beautifully illustrates the depth and importance of Chinese culture, encouraging its preservation for future generations. Exposure to diverse cultures fosters a deeper appreciation for China's rich heritage, which evokes immense pride and inspires unwavering belief in its enduring legacy.

From Episode 37 onwards, we see that a villager returning from Wuhan is caught in the epidemic; Ren Tian Zhen goes for help. Thus, the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak begins in the series. We witness the sacrifices of health workers and the use of TCM as a complement to Western medicine in treating patients. In the audience reviews, we see the sadness in remembering the global pandemic that caused millions of deaths. While some reviews still blame China, other reviews praise its unity and integrity. For example: 'Covid-19 is proof of the potential and what the Chinese people can achieve together. "Chinese medicine or Western medicine, it doesn't matter which one is the medium. Health workers who sacrifice themselves to save lives should be honored."

Family relations and the meeting of the traditional and the modern

The reviews draw attention to the traditional family structure; emphasize the humanitarian aspect in the dialogues among employees, spouses, and lovers; and praise the kindness and virtue of older people. But in the reviews, the traditional features of the father-son relationship (Ren Xin Zheng and his son) and the family relationship (Zhao Li Quan's family asking for money from their son) are evaluated as culture-specific. These relationships are defined as Asian-specific through a comparison of East-West values. Parents criticizing their children, pressuring and expecting too much from them, and discriminating between them are among the negative qualities specific to Asians.

...What Li Quan is going through is the reality of Asian culture. Although my parents don't directly push me to study, their frequent comparisons to others who appear more intelligent and well-mannered create significant pressure on me to excel.

Li Quan is clearly struggling under the weight of his parents' expectations and financial burdens. This precarious situation could lead to an emotional breakdown, highlighting a common challenge faced by many in Asian cultures.

The reviews also criticise the belittling of Eastern culture by Asians through the comparison of Eastern and Western values, as seen in this audience review: "This drama teaches us to embrace our own culture instead of thinking that the West is superior, which originated in the colonial period."

The series' depiction of TCM and family values as cherished parts of the cultural heritage resonate strongly with Chinese audiences. Transnational audiences become interested in Chinese society and China through TCM. However, the ideological emphasis on the father-son hierarchy and the youth's social responsibility neither resonates with them, nor does Xi's 'China Dream' discourse.

In Asian collectivist cultures, family obligations are paramount. Li Quan's actions, though seemingly harsh, reflect the immense pressure and cultural expectations he faces. The show effectively critiques the impact of such parental pressure.

These dramas often portray a common dynamic in many Asian families, particularly in China, highlighting the significant influence of familial expectations and cultural norms.

The father's biased treatment of his children, favoring his son while criticizing his daughter, exemplifies a pattern of demotivation prevalent in some Asian families.

The family has a special place and meaning in Xi's 'Chinese Dream.' Young people are expected to contribute to its realization by embracing family values. However, the audience criticizes parents who are oppressive, discriminate against their children, and expect them to find jobs and take care of themselves. Chinese critics even see that such families are positioned as too Asian compared to Western families. In this definition, the West represents modernity, while Asianness represents traditionalism in a negative sense. In addition, the definition of the ideal person in modern Chinese society with Confucian values, such as respect for family and parents, does not resonate with audience reviews.

Intergenerational communication and the conflict of generations

Another prominent theme is intergenerational communication and the conflict of generations. The fact that Sun Tou Tou, one of the main characters, does not respect her ancestors, behaves outrageously, and being a maverick is seen as a characteristic of *Generation Z* and is judged negatively.

Tou Tou's character comes across as unnecessarily irreverent. Her unwillingness to engage in the customary act of bowing to ancestors is jarring and out of place.

Tou Tou personifies the disregard for tradition often seen in *Generation Z*, reflecting a broader trend of rejecting established norms and customs.

However, scenes showing generational conflicts are sometimes praised in the reviews, which stress that younger generations will be more self-confident. These reviews echo Xi's vision of generational responsibility, suggesting that these youth are expected to build upon and surpass their ancestors' achievements. Such reviews remind us of the proverb about the Yangtze River's rising tides.

The show establishes Tou Tou's initial disregard for tradition to pave the way for her personal and spiritual evolution. Her immersion in TCM acts as a catalyst for this transformation, gradually shifting her perspective and fostering a deeper appreciation for her cultural heritage.

To sum up, this study observes that Chinese and transnational audiences discuss *GenZ* under different themes, and the narrative's potential to produce a 'Chinese Wave' in line with the goals of President Xi and the party-state is not sufficiently realized due to the limited sharing of cultural, social, and political experiences of different audiences. The dominant discourses, such as Chineseness and the nationalism attributed to Chinese youth, do not touch transnational audiences, who focus more on the idols, the love relationship between the main characters, and the generational conflict.

Discussion and conclusion

The *GenZ* series provides a convenient lens through which to examine the recent developments in youth politics as promoted by the CCP. This article employs the example of *GenZ* to examine the extent to which the reception of a drama by diasporic Chinese and transnational audiences aligns with Xi's 'Chinese Dream' and 'rejuvenation' objectives, as well as the party's cultural governance policy. To what extent do party-state policies on cultural governance and their associated implementation strategies benefit from the use of CDramas? The analysis of the discourse themes revealed that the discourses presented align with the rhetoric espoused by Xi and the CCP's cultural governance objectives. The question thus arises as to how the ideological messages embedded in the drama are received by the audience.

In terms of soft power, as Song points out, while the party-state makes efforts to create sympathy for China and the "Chinese Dream," the success and popularity of CDramas in East Asia has the chance to create a "China Wave" of its own (2022, p. 178). Beijing is investing in the opening of Confucius Institutes worldwide, sponsoring the translation of Chinese classics in the West (Song, 2022, p.178). The Belt and Road Initiative and BRICS members' co-operations are financially supported by China. However all these investments have a limited effect on creating the 'Chinese Wave,' compared to the easily accessed CDramas through streaming platforms. Reviews in Chinese language indicated that the Chinese diaspora did not demonstrate a sufficient level of interest in *GenZ*. Additionally, the majority of reviews are provided by non-Chinese individuals. This finding is significant in demonstrating the limitations of CDramas in generating a 'Chinese Wave' within the diaspora.

Transnational audiences can watch CDramas through both Chinese streaming apps and *YouTube*. Song notes that one successful outcome in the realm of cultural governance

is that foreign fans have started to learn Chinese thanks to *GenZ* (p.179), a finding confirmed by numerous reviews. This study also observes that the TV channels of *YouKu* and *WeTv* on *YouTube* broadcast CDramas with Turkish subtitles and that Turkish fans are eagerly waiting for new episodes.

Therefore, for China, as the most important actor in the Global South, to effectively reach a transnational audience with its cultural governance in contemporary narratives such as *GenZ*, it must first open up democratic issues for debate within its own domestic sphere. In addition to assigning responsibility for the future to the youth, social problems such as unemployment, fierce competition, inequality in income distribution, segregation between rural and urban settlements, excessive consumerism, gender inequality, age discrimination and psychological depression should also be covered in and by youth policies. The youth are idealized in *GenZ*. In reality, however, they are very concerned about the future (Jilin, n.d.). Against the “Rising Tides” discourse, movements such as “lying flat” (Gullotta & Lin, 2002, p. 5-8), which already exist among young people in China, need to be discussed in CDrama texts in a way that makes sense, apart from the need to tame young generations. But realistically confronting these concerns and negativity is a very difficult step, as doing so would question President Xi and the party’s hegemony.

For Chinese dramas to create a ‘Chinese Wave’ among transnational audiences, it is not sufficient to rely solely on the production’s artistic quality and the appeal of idol culture. It is first necessary to modify the nature of the Chinese government’s cultural governance policy. The potential of CDramas to create a ‘Chinese Wave’ can be enhanced by democratizing the cultural governance policy, and, of course, cultural policy, in an authoritarian regime like China. Thus, the ‘rejuvenation’ of the country produced in the narratives can find credibility.

The perception of China’s cultural governance by the transnational audience has demonstrated the limitations of the Chinese Wave in the case of this series. However, how would the audience interpret Chinese culture and Chineseness if a different narrative were taken into consideration in which the CCP’s cultural governance did not infiltrate the series’ narrative? Is there a potential for dramas or historical costume dramas to create a Chinese Wave, especially when President Xi’s cultural governance is not so crystallized? These deserve to be studied as new research questions.

ENDNOTES

1. The 'Chinese Dream' and 'national rejuvenation' are intrinsically linked concepts at the heart of China's contemporary political discourse. Introduced by Xi Jinping in 2012, these concepts represent the aspiration for China to regain its historical prominence and achieve 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. The "Chinese Dream" is the Chinese state and people reaching the highest level of civilization and living in prosperous harmony (Kırımlı, 2023).
2. Following Pankaj, "The May Fourth Movement – named for the protests of May 4, 1919. [...] Chinese students and intellectuals rallied to protest against the country's continued international subjugation – part of the Century of Humiliation – by the Western powers and, more specifically, Japan. It has been a public holiday since 1949 and remains an important symbol of nationalistic patriotism in the People's Republic of China, celebrated across China as Youth Day" (Pankaj, 2023, para. 1).
3. A brief explanation of the Middle Kingdom: Throughout the past 5.000 years of China's history, the country has been referred to by various names, but the most prominent one is Zhongguo, which translates to 'Middle Kingdom' or 'Central Kingdom'. Historically, the country was divided into several independent states until they were unified under the Qin dynasty [221-206 BC]. The term 'Middle Kingdom' was used during this period to refer to states in the central part of the region. [...] During the 19th and 20th centuries, use of the term shifted to refer to the country as a whole rather than individual states, in an attempt to show solidarity among China's population. Following the Chinese Civil War, the country's official name was changed to the People's Republic of China. However, the term 'Middle Kingdom' is still popularly used in China, particularly to highlight the country's significance to the world ("Which Country is the Middle Kingdom?", n.d., para. 3-4).
4. YouHug Media's YouTube address: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8E25Sz4q7C0>

Appendix 1: Number of viewers for each episode of *GenZ* on *YouTube* (12 November 2024)

	Number of audience		Number of audience		Number of audience		Number of audience
Episode 1	3.924.806	Episode 11	876.742	Episode 21	813.059	Episode 31	757.538
Episode 2	1.595.333	Episode 12	867.152	Episode 22	770.786	Episode 32	710.264
Episode 3	1.238.066	Episode 13	814.741	Episode 23	774.325	Episode 33	666.248
Episode 4	1.114.171	Episode 14	822.679	Episode 24	773.791	Episode 34	698.637
Episode 5	1.030.329	Episode 15	853.390	Episode 25	753.121	Episode 35	699.874
Episode 6	962.286	Episode 16	812.507	Episode 26	757.247	Episode 36	655.290
Episode 7	950.292	Episode 17	815.094	Episode 27	791.439	Episode 37	643.865
Episode 8	906.142	Episode 18	762.653	Episode 28	881.189	Episode 38	625.340
Episode 9	890.198	Episode 19	787.577	Episode 29	829.476	Episode 39	659.656
Episode 10	867.033	Episode 20	787.378	Episode 30	762.217	Episode 40	908.965

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