

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, duygu 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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