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A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE REFLECTIONS OF TURKISH TV SERIES IN IRANIAN NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

Media products such as television series have an important function in changing and transforming the mindset of society and directing and focusing social perception on certain points. Türkiye is one of the leading countries in the world in terms of TV series exports. Turkish TV series are widely followed in Iran, too. This study aims to understand the effects of Turkish TV series on Iranian society through newspaper reports. The study utilizes the concept of soft power proposed by political scientist Joseph Nye and George Gerbner's cultivation theory. The data set of the study consists of news articles on Turkish TV series taken from the websites of four major national newspapers in Iran. Qualitative content analysis was used to interpret the data and two themes were obtained: Debates on the Effects of Turkish TV Series on the Family Institution and Gender Roles, and Debates on the Soft Power Generated by Turkish TV Series and the Political Effects of these TV Series. The prominence of the image of Western women in Turkish TV series in the context of family and gender roles and its importance in terms of upbringing theory is one of the results obtained in the study. It was also concluded that the image of "Türkiye that looks Western when viewed from the East" is reinforced through Turkish TV series. Another conclusion of the study is that Turkish TV series, as an element of soft power, strengthens the image of the country not only in Iran but also worldwide.

Keywords: *Sociology of Television, Turkish TV Series, Iran, Soft Power, Cultivation Theory.*

TÜRK DİZİLERİNİN İRAN GAZETELERİNDEKİ YANSIMALARI ÜZERİNE NİTEL BİR ARAŞTIRMA

Öz

Televizyon dizileri gibi medya ürünleri toplumun düşünce yapısını değiştirip dönüştürmede ve toplumsal algıyı belli noktalara yönlendirip odaklamada önemli bir işleve sahiptir. Türkiye dizi ihracatı konusunda dünyanın önde gelen ülkeleri arasında yer almaktadır. İran'da da Türk dizileri yaygın bir şekilde takip edilmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı Türk dizilerinin İran toplumu üzerindeki etkilerini gazete haberleri üzerinden anlamaya çalışmaktır. Çalışmada siyaset bilimci Joseph Nye tarafından

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ortaya atılan yumuşak güç kavramı ve George Gerbner'ın yetiştirme kuramından faydalanılmıştır. Araştırmanın veri setini ise İran'da ulusal ölçekte yayımlanan dört büyük gazetenin internet sitelerinden çekilen Türk dizileri üzerine yazılmış haberler oluşturmaktadır. Verilerin yorumlanmasında nitel içerik analizi kullanılmış ve Türk Dizilerinin Aile Kurumu ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Rolleri Üzerindeki Etkilerine İlişkin Tartışmalar ve Türk Dizilerinin Oluşturduğu Yumuşak Güce ve Bu Dizilerin Yarattığı Siyasal Etkilere İlişkin Tartışmalar olmak üzere iki temaya ulaşılmıştır. Türk dizilerinde Batılı kadın imajının aile ve toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri bağlamında ön plana çıkması ve bunun yetiştirme kuramı açısından önemi çalışmada elde edilen sonuçlardan biridir. Ayrıca "Doğu'dan bakınca Batılı görünen Türkiye" imajının Türk dizileri aracılığıyla pekiştirildiği sonucuna varılmıştır. Araştırmanın vardığı sonuçlardan bir diğeri de Türk dizilerinin bir yumuşak güç unsuru olarak ülkenin imajını sadece İran özelinde değil, dünya genelinde güçlendirdiği yönünde olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Televizyon Sosyolojisi, Türk Dizileri, İran, Yumuşak Güç, Yetiştirme Kuramı.*

Introduction

In an ever-changing and evolving world, political, cultural and social boundaries are being crossed through the mass media. Likewise, media products are produced and consumed very quickly. Just like industrial products, media products are exported to different parts of the world beyond the borders of the country where they are produced. Television transborderization brings with it a new media order (Chalaby, 2005). This is an important issue from a sociological point of view because the mass media has an important function in changing and transforming the mindset of society and directing and focusing social perception on certain points. According to Cereci (2016, p. 36), television has spread to large masses starting from the second half of the 20th century and attained the power to shape the world.

Especially after the 2007s, there has been a significant leap in the export of Turkish TV series to different countries around the world (BusinessDiplomacy, 2024). So much so that, as of 2024, Turkish TV series, which have successfully made a name for themselves in all corners of the world, have provided the country with great financial income. The sector's impact on Türkiye is not only limited to the economic sphere, but also extends to many other areas such as culture, tourism, and education. TV series have the potential to affect almost every age group directly or indirectly. The socio-cultural dimensions of these effects are an important field to be examined.

Turkish TV series are also widely watched in Iran, Türkiye's eastern neighbor. According to the 2022 census data, Iran has a population of 83 million (AMAR, 2022) and is composed of various Turkic tribes (Azerbaijani Turks, Turkmens, Kashkay Turks, Halach Turks, etc.) and ethnic groups such as Persian, Kurdish, Arab and Baluch. Turkish TV series are followed by almost all Iranian ethnic groups. The considerable influence of Turkish TV series in Iran brings with it different interpretations by Iranian rulers and

intellectuals. Rather than being just a means of entertainment or passing the time, Turkish TV series are generally perceived as an element of soft power created by Türkiye and it is argued that they have significant effects on the sociocultural structure (Berg, 2017; Sığın & Ghanbarlou, 2020). While studies on the impacts of Turkish TV series on certain countries and geographical regions, such as the Balkans, Azerbaijan, Algeria, Kenya, Mozambique, Senegal, and Qatar, were carried out (Nuroğlu, 2013; Berg, 2020; Sığın & Ghanbarlou, 2020; Benrazek, 2022; Ruiz-Cabrera & Gürkan, 2023), no study specifically focused on the case of Iran to the best of the researchers' knowledge. From this point of view, the present study examines news about Turkish TV series in four major national newspapers in Iran in an attempt to understand the views on the socio-cultural effects of these media products from the eyes of Iranians themselves.

1. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual and theoretical framework of the study is shaped around the concept of soft power put forward by American political scientist Joseph Nye and the cultivation theory of Hungarian-born communication scientist George Gerbner. Explanations of the concept of soft power and cultivation theory are given below.

1.1. Soft Power

The concept of soft power was introduced and discussed by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s. The concept was popularized with Nye's book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power" published in 1990 and developed in his other book "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics" published in 2004. Until the period when Nye started to discuss this definition, the concept of power was mostly considered a concept with concrete connotations based on the material resources that states use to influence other states in some way (Gallarotti, 2011, pp. 26-27). In order to better understand this concept, which is placed in opposition to the concept of "hard power", it is deemed appropriate to first understand the phenomenon of hardness, which is traditionally associated with power. In English, the word "hard" corresponds to concepts such as difficult, tough, concrete, solid, rigid, and violent. Hence, in political science, hard power can be defined as the behavior-changing power that a state exerts on another state by using its military, economic, or technological assets.

In the case of hard power, it is a process of behavior change that one political entity imposes on another, often by force. This aggressive behavior can be used to suppress, intimidate, or change the policy of a target country with less military or economic power. On the other hand, the target country may try to repel the source country by using its own hard power. In this context, hard power is closely related to hot war in the classical sense. It

should be noted here that sources of hard power can be directly tangible (e.g. an embargo imposed by one state on another state) or symbolic (e.g. a state threatening another state).

On the other hand, when it comes to soft power, the process of persuasion, rather than threats and coercion, gains importance. Nye's conceptualization of soft power emphasizes intangible assets over hard power's tangible assets. According to Nye (2004b),

> *"A country may obtain its preferred outcomes in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. In this sense, it is just as important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics as it is to force them to change through the threat or use of military or economic weapons. This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them" (p. 5).*

In other words, soft power refers to a country becoming a center of attraction in world politics by creating a positive image through its intangible assets (Gallarotti, 2011, pp. 27-28). This attraction is more effective than coercion, and many phenomena such as democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are highly attractive (Nye, 2004b, p. 56), and the mass media plays an undeniably important role in portraying a country as a center of attraction.

The American media is one of the most striking examples of this. In fact, "American culture" and the "American dream" have long been able to influence people living in other societies. The reason for this is not so much the "military successes" (hard power) of the United States in other countries, but the American life (soft power) transmitted through American TV series and movies, literature, and music. In addition to its traditional media hegemony, the United States also exists as a new media monopoly and has an important role in shaping the digital space. It can be said that what produces the American dream is the lifestyle that prioritizes freedom and individualism and the narrative of a world of opportunities that emphasizes minority rights and democracy, which are prominent in the majority of American media products.

Turkish media, which has increased its coverage area considerably in recent years, can also be said to be an important soft power tool (Ağırseven & Örki, 2017, p. 850). So much so that, when the keywords "soft power TV series" are entered into academic search engines such as Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar, the results that come up consist mostly of studies carried out on Turkish TV series and how they function as soft power tools. The common findings of these studies include the use of Turkish TV series to represent Türkiye, the Turkish people, and the Turkish culture as attractive. The point of attractiveness varies from the physical attractiveness of people/characters to the touristic attractiveness of cities/landscapes as well

as the welcoming characteristics of the sociocultural structure (Nuroğlu, 2013; Berg, 2020; Sığın & Ghanbarlou, 2020; Benrazek, 2022; Ruiz-Cabrera & Gürkan, 2023).

1.2. Cultivation Theory

From the past to the present, the mass media has been the messenger of ideas, thoughts, and new ways, values, norms, and behaviors. Some thinkers believe that in today's societies, the belief systems and beliefs of the younger generation of any society, as well as their behavior patterns, are somehow influenced by the messages they choose or are forced to receive directly or indirectly through the mass media (Deflor, 2009, p. 402). One of these thinkers is George Gerbner.

Cultivation theory, which has an important place in sociology and communication sciences, was developed by Gerbner in the 1960s. Born out of Gerbner's cultural indicators project on the causes and prevention of violence for the Annenberg School, cultivation theory can be considered as a critique of the strong effects and limited effects periods of communication research. In these periods, it was first suggested that exposure to television programs (such as violence) had a strong effect on the formation of certain behavioral patterns in the short term and a limited effect later.

The main argument of cultivation theory is that the more time people spend in the world of television, i.e. the more television programs they are exposed to, the closer social reality and the reality shown on television become to each other. The emphasis here is not on the short-term effects of television broadcasts as in previous periods but on the long-term effects of these broadcasts. Just as social life does not change in short periods of time, the impact of television on the masses can best be understood in the long term.

The images and ideological messages disseminated through the mass media affect perceptions of social life, and therefore the more people are exposed to these images and messages, the more their perceptions change. The more these images and messages are repeated, the more likely it is that the world portrayed on television will be realized. Cultivation theory also suggests that prolonged exposure to television broadcasts shapes individuals' shared assumptions about the world around them.

The theory, which focuses specifically on television, acknowledges its long-term effects and argues that these effects are limited. This is because television is regarded as part of a larger socio-cultural system. Therefore, according to cultivation theory, it is more logical to talk about concentrated influences where a direction is given rather than the effects of any television program broadcast at any given time (Gerbner et al., 1980). Television viewers begin to perceive the world within the symbolic framework presented by the medium.

Culture is a system of stories, narratives, and other artifacts that are increasingly mass-produced and play a mediating role between existence and existential consciousness, thus contributing to both. Television is the most pervasive form of storytelling that plays an important role in the cultivation of ideology, values, and shared beliefs. In this context, cultivation theory contends that the formation of culture cannot be considered independently of mass-consumed television broadcasts. In other words, television plays the role of a culture producer in the long run, shifting the consciousness of the audience in the direction where effects are intensified.

Gerbner's theory has been widely used in studies on crime, violence, victimization, attitudes about racism studies, feelings of alienation and anomia, and gender stereotyping (Potter, 1993, p. 567). While there is substantial empirical support for the propositions of cultivation theory, the strength and consistency of these effects can vary based on numerous factors. Hawkins & Pingree's (1981) study confirmed that heavy television viewers were more likely to have distorted perceptions of reality, particularly in areas such as crime rates and personal safety. Morgan & Shanahan's (1996) meta-analysis of cultivation research found consistent, though often modest, support for the theory across various studies. They concluded that television viewing does have a measurable impact on viewers' perceptions of social reality. Nabi & Riddle's (2008) study examined the nuances of cultivation effects and found that while there is a relationship between television viewing and perceptions of reality, the strength and nature of this relationship can vary depending on the specific content and context. More recently, Shanahan et al. (2012) argued that despite changes in the media landscape, the core propositions of cultivation theory remain relevant. In conclusion, the theory remains a valuable framework for understanding media influence, though it continues to be refined and adapted in light of new media developments and research findings.

2. METHODOLOGY

The data set of the study consists of news articles on Turkish TV series taken from the websites of four major national newspapers in Iran (Hamshahri, Mashragh, Entekhab, Etemad). As part of the purposive sample selection, the keywords "Turkish TV series" (سریال ترکیه ای) and "Turkish media" (رسانه ترکیه ای) were entered into the search engines of these websites. The period from 2010 to 2022, when Turkish TV series started to be widely shown in Iran, was selected as the date range for the search. As inclusion criteria, it was deemed appropriate that the news articles were published in the above-mentioned date range and that they contain the above-mentioned keywords in their title and/or content. As a result, five news articles containing these keywords were selected from the Hamshahri, Mashragh, and Entekhab newspapers and four from the Etemad newspaper.

Qualitative content analysis was used to interpret the research data. The main purpose of content analysis is to bring together similar data under certain concepts and themes and to organize and interpret them in an understandable way (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2000, p. 162). In this direction, firstly, recurring codes in the texts were revealed. The researchers observed that codes such as "family", "women", "politics", "power", "culture" and “tradition” were frequently repeated in newspaper articles. It was decided that these codes could be grouped under two main themes. The emerging themes are as follows:

1. Debates on the Effects of Turkish TV Series on the Family Institution and Gender Roles (“family”, “women”, “culture”),

2. Debates on the Soft Power Generated by Turkish TV Series and the Political Effects of these TV Series (“politics”, “power”, “culture”, “tradition”).

These themes were then discussed within the framework of the concept of soft power and cultivation theory.

The researchers spent a long time on the data collection process and reviewed the data repeatedly to ensure the reliability of the data. In addition, the research design, data collection method, and the codes and themes extracted were reviewed and approved by an independent researcher (who was not involved in the data collection and analysis processes and had no conflict of interest).

3. FINDINGS

This section presents the main results obtained during the research. The findings of the research are discussed under two subheadings.

3.1. Debates on the Effects of Turkish TV Series on the Family Institution and Gender Roles

The family has a central importance in Turkish society. The same importance is also reflected in Turkish TV series. In Turkish TV series, various threats such as incompatibility, disintegration, death, financial problems can await the family. This differentiates Turkish TV series, which emphasize the family rather than the individual, from Western alternatives such as American or European TV series. At this point, the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures comes to the fore. Countries such as Türkiye and Iran have collectivist cultural characteristics to a great extent (Hofstede-Insights, 2024). The Hamshahri newspaper makes the following statement on the subject:

> *“In the years when the family played a lesser role in Hollywood and Western productions and this focus was less visible, the Turks went against this trend and portrayed the family as very important and reflected very well both in terms of subject matter*

and technique in the series that the family is instinctively important to people" (Hamshahri Newspaper, 2021).

As seen in this statement in the aforementioned newspaper, the focus of Turkish TV series on family problems and relationships has also attracted the attention of Iranian commentators. Iranians' interest in Turkish TV series is a tendency that has been formed by a combination of different factors. Türkiye and Iran are two old neighbors and share many cultural elements as they belong to the Islamic civilization basin. However, from this perspective, Türkiye and Iran have been seen as examples of two different poles at some points. The following comment was made in the Mashragh newspaper on the subject:

"Türkiye is a Muslim country, and the Shiite and Sunni sects are numerous in this country. In a news article about Turkish TV series, it is said that if you walk around Istanbul, you will see many women wearing headscarves and hijab, but in almost none of the Turkish TV series there is any sign of women wearing hijab. It is as if there are no headscarves worn in the country like the women in these TV series. This is the first thing you will notice in a 5-minute walk in Istanbul. Turkish women often show their faith by attending ceremonies such as funerals wearing headscarves and praying. They have both altars and mosques and active nightclubs and cabarets. Since the consumption of alcoholic beverages is very high among the characters in the series, small amounts are consumed on different occasions, even by slightly religious characters. Pre-marital and extramarital relationships in the TV series are completely normal, so it is not felt that the characters in the series are Muslims" (Mashreghnews Newspaper, 2020).

As seen in the transcription above, the secular lifestyle evoking the West in Turkish TV series has been a source of concern for at least the conservative population in Iran. The reason for this is that, as emphasized in cultivation theory, individuals who are exposed to media products for a long time will try to construct their own lifestyles and reality through the messages produced in the mass media. From this point of view, it can be claimed that the perception that the lifestyle in Türkiye is far from the traditional codes as shown in the TV series may spread among the Iranian people. It can be argued that this situation may be effective in the Iranian people's emulation of the secular state in Türkiye. Potter (1993, p. 566) discusses Gerbner's example of what may happen if television presents a very different portrayal from real life: Higher rates of criminal activity on television, as opposed to real-world records, could lead people to believe that "the world is mean and violent". Similarly, Iranians who are constantly exposed to Turkish TV series are led to believe that a "European" (in lifestyle, state governance, etc.) country neighbors Iran, concerning as it may be for the regime.

These concerns are far-reaching. Mashreghnews published an article titled "The broadcasting of obscene Turkish TV series on TV channels" in which the author of the text states the following:

> *"According to Mashregh, Turkish TV series have been aired on satellite channels for some time, but the question always arises: Who and which institutions are licensed to broadcast these series? These series do not have content suitable for the Iranian family structure. Therefore, the authorities are expected to prevent the broadcast of such series in our country" (Mashreghnews Newspaper, 2022).*

The roles defined for women by the patriarchal system are largely preserved in Turkish TV series. For example, although the female figure in Turkish TV series is successful in business life, she should not forget her roles as a good mother and devoted wife. She should also have a beautiful and well-groomed body and be able to hold the "strong man" in her hands (Özer, 2019). Some Iranian commentators believe that Turkish TV series are effective in synthesizing Turkish (Eastern) culture with Western culture. In conservative and nationalist readings in Iran, Turkish TV series are interpreted as an extension of American culture. In fact, what is meant here is that one of the main functions of Turkish TV series is to create alternative cultural values against the Iranian family system and values and to convey the Western lifestyle in the form of a "Turkish version". Turkish TV series reach Eastern women in two ways; they both convey Western values to them and reinforce traditional gender roles. In other words, Turkish TV series "adorn" the traditional female identity and make it acceptable or likable by both Western and Eastern audiences alike (Sancaktaroğlu Bozkurt & Şirin Okyayuz, 2021).

Iranian society is regarded as a traditional as well as a patriarchal society (Moghadam, 1992; Moghissi, 1999). Women mostly fulfill traditional gender roles in the private sphere (housework, childcare, etc.) and are limited in terms of their presence in the public sphere (especially professionally). This condition might lock women in front of the television and lead them to watch TV series. Women's (positive) perception of (Turkish) men was raised as a concern, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"A few years ago, in a news article about dramas, it was reported that many characters and storylines in Turkish dramas were taken from the files of psychologists in this country in order to have a deeper impact on their viewers. By focusing on psychological cases, Turkish writers try to create stories inspired by them that are close to people's daily lives and make the audience identify with them. Stories that are not myths and have a lot of credibility are included in these series. From the surveys, it is well known what kind of characters they like most in life, and characters are created according to this interest. For example, in the study of Turkish dramas, it has been well studied that men*

> *in Turkish dramas are more in love and have more romantic behavior than male characters in other dramas in the world, and this is deliberately done in Turkish dramas because women are interested in this category of men" (Hamshahri Newspaper, 2017).*

According to statistics, 30% of the TV series watched by Iranians via satellite are Turkish TV series and about 30% are US TV series (Tasnimnews, 2014). The American and Turkish female identities portrayed in these series are similar in some cases, while other times cultural differences come to the fore.

The characteristics of a female character in American TV series can be listed as follows:

- A working woman whose career success is considered the most important asset in her life,

- A woman who often has relationships with two or more men. These relationships are normal for her and do not devalue her,

- She does not believe in love and her relationships are often based on sexual pleasures or superficial and temporary friendships,

- An independent woman who is not too dependent on her parents, father, and husband,

- In some cases, she has had several failed marriages and has therefore been forced to have a personality completely independent of her family and husband,

- Drinking wine, smoking, and the like are her normal pastimes, sometimes to excess (Morin & Kramer, 2018; Završni, 2020).

The common characteristics of the female identity in Turkish TV series can be listed as follows:

- A traditional woman in transition to modernity (bearing traces of Turkish cultural traditions),

- She tries to assert superiority and is ostentatious and boastful,

- Female competition is among the prominent components of her personality,

- She seeks fashion in dress and variety in appearance,

- She is extravagant in celebrations and parties, attentive to luxurious and expensive rituals,

- She prefers not to betray her love, but she does not hesitate to betray her family and husband to get her love,

- In some critical situations she takes refuge in wine, cigarettes, and the like. But a little alcohol at parties is normal for her (Orta, 2013; Khan & Pembecioğlu, 2019; Sığın & Ghanbarlou, 2020).

From the critical perspective of Iran, one can infer the message that Turkish women want to modernize and become like American women. For Iranian conservatives, such a message undermines the dignity of women in Islam. This is because of the importance that Islam attributes to women's roles as mothers and wives. The multiple love affairs commonly portrayed in Turkish TV series evoke a Western lifestyle that does not fit the Iranian female identity. Turkish TV series have also been criticized for promoting openness in clothing that is incompatible with the Iranian family structure, promoting and intensifying fashionism, and undermining the Islamic tradition of hijab. Issues such as emphasizing bachelor houses, encouraging people's hedonism, and distracting young people from being responsible and living a healthy family life together were also considered negative points.

In most of the aforementioned cases, the family and especially the female figure were interpreted through the Western values portrayed in the series. As a result, according to Iranian commentators, there appears to be a threat of a new and Western identity replacing the local culture and social values. The researchers believe that these concerns can be meaningful if they are addressed in line with the propositions of cultivation theory.

3.2. Debates on the Soft Power Generated by Turkish TV Series and the Political Effects of these TV Series

One of the basic premises of cultivation theory is that television programs contribute to social transformation. The focus of these changes is the transformation of values and lifestyles and how identity is defined and shaped. It is thought-provoking how these changes and transformations in lifestyles and consumption patterns are accepted by television viewers (Giddens, 2008, p. 271). The media in general, and the TV series in particular, which are constantly followed, have a serious function in shaping and maintaining the social structure while occupying a wider place in the life of the individual by penetrating daily life patterns. The mass media is seen as an effective element in the individual's acquisition of social status, socialization process, formation of personality, and participation in social groups; in short, in the formation of social patterns, groups, institutions, and culture (Cereci, 1996, p. 14).

Since TV series continue every week, audiences can also be said to become emotionally attached to them. Due to this emotional attachment, audiences may not be aware of the meanings produced by the series and possible attempts to change values. According to Bitmez (2021, p. 349), television brings new societies, new lifestyles, and new family structures to the agenda with its own principles and approaches in its broadcasts. In this case, the mass media can often take away the freedom of the individual while designing their daily life, which it usually does unbeknownst to the individual with its endless shows.

When we look at the manifestation of the results of the Turkish TV series on Iranian society, it can be argued that the traditional way of life and,

accordingly, the way of thinking have been undergoing a change. The trajectory of this change is in the direction of modernization. The following statement was made in an issue of the Hamshahri newspaper:

> *"The appearance and race of the Turkish people are not very far from the Iranians. You rarely see blond and blue-eyed Europeans in Turkish TV series. Therefore, Türkiye is a very active country in the field of fashion and clothing, and the fashion world of this country directly influences the people of the region every year. So if you watch Turkish TV series, you will notice the similarities in hair, makeup, and clothing with fashion followers in Iran. For example, having a special facial style in the form of a beard and thick mustache has become very popular among Iranian men. Turkish actors, especially popular actors of the country, such as Burak Özçivit, have been influential in the formation of this fashion. Characters in Turkish TV series are exaggeratedly well-dressed. Both men and women wear formal clothes such as suits and ties, party outfits, and even high heels at home, creating an exaggerated look" (Hamshahri Newspaper, 2020).*

As seen in the above statement, the well-dressed characters in Turkish TV series have become a source of reference for Iranian audiences and reveal their effectiveness in daily life. This finding is consistent with the literature on the impacts of Turkish TV series on foreign audiences. For example, Berg's study (2020, pp. 228-229) revealed that one of the reasons why Turkish TV series are successful in the Arab world is because Arabs perceive Turks as people who "look very similar to them" and that the two people "are very alike", physically, culturally and otherwise. This similarity makes it easier for Arab audiences to not only follow these TV series but also to internalize them and be influenced by them. Turkish TV series seem to have a similar effect on Iranian audiences.

Another impact of Turkish TV series on Iranians' daily life practices has been on language learning. The discussion in the Hamshahri newspaper reveals the following:

> *"One of the most important reasons why Turkish TV series are very popular among Iranians is that Turks share the same language with a large part of Azerbaijani Turkish-speaking citizens who do not need dubbing or subtitles to watch Turkish TV series, and they get used to pronouncing different words after a few episodes. Turkish is a very easy language compared to other foreign languages and by watching a few episodes of Turkish TV series, one can easily get used to this language and reach a proficient level. Because there are many common words in Persian and Turkish, in recent years, the tendency to learn Turkish has increased among many young Iranians after*

watching Turkish TV series. So if you pay attention to English language schools, Turkish-Istanbul language education is now one of the most routine subjects. However, it was not possible to see this before the popularization of Turkish TV series" (Hamshahri Newspaper, 2021).

In a similar vein, Turkish TV series have had a direct impact on the Iranian public's interest in Türkiye as a tourist destination. In fact, these TV series seem to have the same "alluring" impact not only on Iranians but also on audiences from all around the world. Nuroğlu (2013) notes that Turkish TV series play an important role in Balkanian and Arab tourists' preference to visit Türkiye. Accordingly, the portrayal of Türkiye as a tourist destination has resulted in a positive perception of Türkiye in Iran. This soft power created through Turkish TV series has been so great that it has also influenced Iranians' desire to migrate to Türkiye (Ghanbarlou & Sığın, 2022, pp. 245-246).

In Turkish TV series, it is possible to feel the emphasis on the Turkish flag and the aesthetic image of the city (usually Istanbul). In Turkish TV series, the prominence of the Turkish flag in various views of Istanbul visually emphasizes nationalism. Turkish cities are presented in the TV series as centers of attraction with attractive, modern, stylishly-dressed people, as well as extraordinary natural beauty. It can be said that even in Iran's most important movies and TV series, aesthetic city portrayals pale in comparison to Turkish TV series. This has become a sought-after dynamic, especially by audiences looking for novelty. According to Özdemir (2021), there is a statistically significant positive relationship between the attitudes towards Turkish TV series and Türkiye's image and the effect of Turkish TV series on Arab tourists' preference for visiting Türkiye. As was stated before, a similar case is true for Iranians. The following statements were made in two different news articles in the Hamshahri newspaper:

"After America, Türkiye is the biggest producer of television series. So much so that 150 Turkish TV series have been exported to more than 100 countries around the world, and perhaps a small unknown city like Söğüt, with a population of 12,000, has been publicized. With 150 episodes, each episode lasting between two hours and two and a half hours, the city has become a familiar place due to the presence of this city in the Ertuğrul series" (Hamshahri Newspaper, 2020).

"Turkish dramas are created based on challenges that appeal to many viewers. In addition, the creators of Turkish dramas pay a lot of attention to the visual beauty of their works and often shoot them in open spaces and real buildings. The characters of these series are created and discussed in such a way that viewers all over the world can identify with them regardless of cultural and political differences" (Hamshahri Newspaper, 2022).

The sample quotations above show that, as the Turkish TV series have made a name for themselves worldwide, they can be employed as a soft power tool. Ruiz-Cabrera & Gürkan (2023) note how Turkish TV series have been used as tools of soft power in Kenya, Mozambique, and Senegal. The matter of Turkish TV series as a soft power tool has also attracted the attention of Iranian newspapers. Iranian newspaper writers have underlined that the impact of Turkish TV series is not limited to Iran. The commentary on the subject in the Mashreghnews newspaper is as follows:

> *"Turkish TV series have now become one of the most valuable products for the country's exports, and in addition to being economically profitable, they play a crucial role in promoting Türkiye to the world. On a continent across the Atlantic Ocean, thousands of kilometers beyond Türkiye's borders, millions of people are eagerly waiting for this country's TV series" (Mashreghnews Newspaper, 2021).*

The Entekhab newspaper also published a commentary on Turkish TV series reaching across continents and reaching the world:

> *"Turkish TV series are now dubbed in Spanish and Portuguese and broadcast in many South American countries. The number of Turkish TV series entering the South American market is increasing every day and these programs are often among the most watched programs. For example, the series "Fatmagül" has more than 12 million viewers in Argentina alone, while in Chile in 2014 the Turkish series "One Thousand and One Nights" was among the most watched programs in that country" (Entekhab Newspaper, 2013).*

On the other hand, it is also observed that Turkish TV series are analyzed from a negative perspective, especially when it comes to Iranian politics. In the article titled "The division of Iranian land in Turkish TV series" published in the Mashreghnews newspaper, it was stated that the Turkish TV series cover issues targeting Iran's territorial integrity:

> *"Look, in this Turkish TV series, the capitalist representatives of America, Israel, and Türkiye talk about the division of Azerbaijan with the help of Israel and say that Israel will be a neighbor of Türkiye" (Mashreghnews Newspaper, 2022).*

One of the concerns of the circles that are concerned about the popularization of Turkish TV series in Iran is that the series, especially those with historical content, emphasize neo-Ottomanism. In other words, these circles emphasized that the AKP government is trying to revive the old Ottoman power in the countries of the region by using the mass media as a propaganda tool. Berg (2017, pp. 36-37) also drew attention to Turkish soft power and neo-Ottomanist foreign policy in an attempt to understand the impact of Turkish dramas on Arab audiences. The statement in Etemad on the subject is given below:

> *"In 2015, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stopped the broadcast of Turkish TV series on Saudi channels. Bin Salman had accused Türkiye of reviving the Ottoman Caliphate in the region" (Etemadonline newspaper, 2020).*

Similarly, the Etemad newspaper made the following statement on the subject in another issue:

> *"Of course, politics cannot be completely excluded from this game. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for example, did not look favorably on the series "Magnificent Century", believing that it did not do much to portray the Ottoman period. On the other hand, this politician is one of the main supporters of the series " Resurrection: Ertuğrul", which tells the story of the beginning of the Ottoman Empire" (Etemadonline Newspaper, 2021).*

The debates above show that Turkish TV series function as an effective soft power element in Iran, but this situation is not always evaluated from a positive perspective. Considering that soft power is ultimately a form of power, it becomes understandable on what grounds these debates have sprouted. Neo-Ottomanist foreign policy has been regarded as an intimidating prospect for both the Arabs and Iranians.

Conclusion

This study has examined the multifaceted impacts of Turkish TV series on Iranian society, drawing insights from analysis across four prominent Iranian newspapers. The discussions predominantly centered on their influence on family structures, gender roles, and their broader implications in terms of soft power and politics.

Notably, discussions in Iranian media reflect concerns about the portrayal of Western women in Turkish series and its perceived impact on Iranian family dynamics and cultural values. Traditional perspectives often criticize these portrayals as challenging societal norms, yet Turkish family values depicted in these series contribute significantly to their acceptance among Iranian audiences.

Turkish TV series effectively project Türkiye as a Westernized nation from an Eastern perspective, emphasizing its appeal in tourism, economics, socio-politics, and culture. However, historical dramas like Resurrection: Ertuğrul and Magnificent Century have sparked controversy for their portrayal of neo-Ottomanist themes, drawing scrutiny and concern in Iranian political discourse.

A key finding of this research underscores the global success of Turkish television, enhancing Türkiye's international image and popularity. Iranian commentators have noted these series' global appeal alongside their local popularity, highlighting their role in shaping social norms and everyday life. As Lefebvre posits, media, including television series, play a pivotal role in

social transformation by influencing daily routines and cultural narratives (Bitmez, 2021, p. 349).

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the literature in two key ways. Firstly, they validate the assertion that Turkish TV series function as a soft power tool, consistent with previous studies (Ağırseven & Örki, 2017; Berg, 2017; Sığın & Ghanbarlou, 2020; Benrazek, 2022). This study affirms that Turkish TV series are indeed perceived as a soft power instrument within the Iranian context. Secondly, departing somewhat from prior research, the impact of this media influence is not uniformly positive in Iran. Concerns about the potential erosion of Iranian cultural values, particularly regarding family dynamics and female identity, highlight a critical perspective on the influence of these series. The conservative factions in Iran view these issues critically, a viewpoint best explained through cultivation theory: Increased exposure to Turkish media portraying a more modern lifestyle compared to traditional Iranian norms may lead to the internalization of these values. Additionally, Neo-Ottomanism is seen as a political concern among Iranian nationalists, reflecting apprehensions about the Turkish government's intentions.

In conclusion, Turkish TV series wield significant influence in Iranian society, serving as both a cultural bridge and a source of contentious political debate. Their portrayal of societal norms and values contributes to ongoing cultural shifts, reflecting the complex interplay between media influence, cultural exchange, and national identity in a globalized context.

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