

# CHAPTER 1

## DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN TELEVISION SERIES AS A POPULAR CULTURE PRODUCT: A STUDY ON TRANSNATIONAL FANDOM OF TURKISH TELEVISION SERIES

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### **ABSTRACT**

Turkey has become the world's second exporter of television series after the United States. At the same time, fandom related to Turkish television series has expanded in scale, and changed in nature. This chapter offers an in-depth analysis of these changes as they relate to contemporary fandom. It accounts for the emergence of devoted fans of Turkish television series all over the world, a group that offers important insight for the future development of Turkish television series.

**Keywords:** Television series, popular culture, fandom

## **Introduction**

Despite the development of communication technology, television remains the leader in mass communication and this explains why exporting television series is of great importance for a country in terms of culture, intercultural communication and soft power. Thanks to the communicative processes which television series have started and still maintain, many types of impact such as familiarity, appreciation, and admiration can be created on people from different countries. For instance, Turkish television series abroad can easily help break stereotypes regarding Turkey, Turkish culture and the Turkish nation in different parts of the world while raising awareness and creating interest that would surely affect Turkey's country branding, tourism, cultural products, economy and soft power.

This study intends to deal with the fandom of Turkish television series through an in-depth analysis. Turkish television series have been remarkably successful in many parts of the world breaking viewership records and this has resulted in devoted Turkish television fans who access Turkish television content via different channels. Meanwhile, they are also creating a lot of content regarding Turkish television, Turkish series and celebrities mostly based on voluntary work. The level of their fandom is to be understood via the current situation of fandom in Latin America, the area of the world that is nearly the furthest point that Turkish series could conquer. Understanding the current situation is valuable since it could help us consider the possible roadmap on how to plan, implement, evaluate, and hopefully manage the sustainability of this success of Turkish television series abroad.

## **Television Series as Popular Culture Products**

The world presented by television to the audience affects how the latter make meaning of the world with its fictional reality, representative nature and dramatic representation; in a nutshell, television "cultivates consciousness" and affects our future choices, uses and attitudes (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 190). While creating an economic benefit for the industry, there is also a cultural and rather more subtle benefit of television programmes which are created on behalf of the individual, society, and the nation into which they are born. In this sense, "Television programmes are both commodities and cultural products" (Bielby, Harrington, & Bielby, 1999, p. 35). One of the most dominant means of this cultural benefit and effect is surely the television series. A simple literature review on television series would show that there are many different terms related to series such as serials, soap operas, dramas, telenovelas etc. This study focuses on the concept as series since the word series is the exact equivalent of Turkish word "dizi," the main focal point of this chapter.

Series have many common points: they are broadcast on a periodical basis (mostly weekly, in some cases daily), they are open narratives and they constantly change to keep the audience's attention alive. Furthermore, they include many references to the social reality and history of the country they are produced in. Hence, in a globalizing world, television series have also an international impact which naturally makes them worth in-depth study within the context of soft power. According to Martin-Barbero, the fact that soap operas have unique features and they are attractive to many different segments in society is the key to their success (Martin-Barbero; 1991, p. 277). Although they are looked upon most of time, many people watch series and soap operas even though they deny doing so. Slade and Beckenham claim that they have become the opium of the masses as of the end of the twentieth century (Slade & Beckenham, 2005, p. 337). They speak and more importantly appeal to different classes and age groups in the society. It is quite recent that the audience of television series has started to become even more heterogeneous with internet technologies and the way they bring an end to the barriers of time and space. Through the internet, television programmes which are broadcast in a specific country, at a certain time, and most importantly in a specific language can be seen in different parts of the world. The audience is constantly changing and television programmes, mostly television series, are crossing the national or cultural borders and becoming an active carrier of cultural values and creating a space of cultural and national promotion in an international arena. According to Mattelard, "the world is in search of a global culture" (Mattelard, 2001, p. 104) and this search results in the creation of a single image market. The creation of this market is concerned with the content of creative cultural industries as well as communication technologies. Dworkin states that cultural understanding and cultural products in the new world order is a part of the "unique language we share" (Dworkin, 1985, p. 231). The continuity of this language requires a common ground for interaction and that is the point where popular culture comes into play.

This unique language and the understanding of the world that comes along with it is mostly shaped by the American media industry. Since there is a global circulation of American programmes all over the world, the long-term result is that we see the world through American eyes. As Jenkins explains, 'Western economic dominance of global entertainment both expresses and extends America's status as a superpower' which means "almost no agency to the receiving culture' (Jenkins, 2004, p. 118). Globalization has succeeded thanks to new technology that supports the circulation of American cultural products while also giving way to alternative cultural movements. There are new actors in the global circulation of culture instead of the one-way communication activities and cultural impact that used to come mostly

from the West; a new cultural flow is on the rise (Biltereyst & Meers, 2000, p. 394). American cultural products are not the only ones on the market anymore, there is place for contra-flows that have surprisingly succeeded in having a considerable success and have gradually created alternatives to the long-time leaders' products. For instance, in cinema there are popular examples from Iran, India, or the Far East. When it comes to cartoon and animation, Japan is also considered to constitute a cultural flow. Likewise, "the success of Turkish television series can be assessed within the framework of the international cultural flow" (Arisoy, 2016, p. 36). As Sarvaes calls it "a television program is a process of legitimizing cultural meanings, global expansion and production, distribution, media consumption within the framework of concepts such as local presentation of a global product" (Servaes, 2008, p. 42) and Turkish television series serve as an example of this legitimization process generating remarkable content on behalf of Turkey and the Turkish people. In the global circulation of Turkish television series, some of the main actors are fans who act as mediators and more importantly producers of the Turkish television content.

### **Fandom of Television Series Today**

Thanks to recent developments in technology, the way popular culture is generated is changing with the active participation of the target groups that should be reconsidered within the scope of intermediality and interactivity. "The first consequence of the advent of the Internet, digitalization, and new social media could be described as the empowerment of audiences" (Galuszka, 2015, p. 27). This results in a certain rise in the level of engagement and the sense of belonging that lead to a participatory culture. Participatory culture is directly related to the change in the way we consume: Consumers "do not consume things without changing them; they cannot 'consume' a good without it becoming them and them becoming it; they cannot 'consume' services without engaging in a dance with the service provider, where the dance becomes the service. Participatory culture is everywhere" (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2012). This is a concept that is also underlined by Jenkins. He suggests that in today's world, we need to mention a convergence culture where the audience is also a producer just like the companies. Jenkins summarizes the change of the way we consume culture comparatively: "In the old days, the ideal consumer watched television, bought products, and didn't talk back. Today, the ideal consumer talks up the program and spreads word about the brand. The old ideal might have been the couch potato; the new ideal is almost certainly a fan" (Jenkins, 2007, p. 361). Hence, it would not be wrong to state that the protagonist of the convergence culture is the fan. A fan is not the audience. There is a certain difference in

terms of involvement: The distinction between a television viewer and a television fan is an important one. “To ‘view’ television is to engage in a relatively private behavior. To be a ‘fan’, however, is to participate in a range of activities that extend beyond the private act of viewing and reflects an enhanced emotional involvement with a television narrative” (Bielby et al., 1999, p. 35). In other words, this involvement is the source of the feeling of need that would result in active participation and the creation of convergence culture.

The rise of this new understanding of culture was surely possible through the digitalization and globalization of communication. This development changed the way we communicate and transfer our cultural values in addition to the way we admire cultural products: “The digital revolution has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production” (Pearson, 2010, p. 84). Today’s fandom is quite active compared to fans of the recent past. People who are fans of a cultural product can easily get together and participate in an interactive production regarding that cultural product. The content they create is very visible and easy to evaluate for the producers. In other words, today’s fans have more voice. “Intermediality is of course also produced and encouraged by fan groups. Individual fans are encouraged to use various media to express their fandom and build their fan status” (Nikunen, 2007, p. 124). Jenkins signals at a consciousness created among today’s fans. “There is a new kind of cultural power emerging as fans bond together within larger knowledge communities, pool their information, shape each other’s opinions, and develop a greater self-consciousness about their shared agendas and common interests” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 363). This consciousness gives the fans the power to be involved in the production of cultural material: “The fan is not merely a ‘viewer’ but also an active and knowledgeable producer of ‘cultural capital.’” (Soukup, 2006, p. 323).

How do people who watch television series regularly become producers of cultural capital? “This process begins with an investment of time, but for some viewers it expands into a commitment to acquire additional information about the characters and the fictional world they inhabit” (Bielby et al., 1999, p. 36). As Bielby et al. explain, the very first investment of the viewer who watches a television series without losing an episode is time. Then comes the need to talk more of the television series with the people who share this passion. At this point, there may also be a certain feeling of identification with the characters which explains the celebrity fandom that co-rises with the series fandom. According to Soukup, digital technology has increased the cultural importance of fandom and celebrities: “The

complex identification processes of celebrity and fandom are at the intersection of a number of compelling contemporary communication processes including media production, reception, public discourse, identity, and community development” (Soukup, 2006, p. 334). Today, celebrity fandom is very visible in social media accounts that play a crucial role in fans’ active participation in the global circulation of cultural products.

According to Bielby et al, fandom leads to a feeling of ownership among the devoted series fans: “The on-going, open-ended narrative of soap operas requires fans to make substantial cognitive and affective investments to derive value from the product, and fans’ participation in public sites for discussion and criticism in effect make them co-authors or co-producers of the narrative” (Bielby et al., 1999, p. 47). Discussion and criticism is one of the main roles fandom plays and the content that fans produce regarding their favourite television show is remarkable. As is easily seen in social media accounts, fans can be somewhat harsh on the cultural products or celebrities they admire. This may be related to the feeling of ownership that fans may have as the “co-authors” of the narration. The content they produce is valuable for the circulation of the television series, which in consequence means more attention and coverage.

Another type of content produced by fandom is fan translation. Lee states that fan translation is a question mark due for many reasons (Lee, 2011, p. 1143):

Fan-translation and distribution, as a participatory media fandom, exist on the growing contrast and disjoint between different forces in the global mediascape: the incongruence between the ownership of copyrights of cultural products and that of technical means to copy and share; the blurred distinction between copyrighted contents and free knowledge; and gaps between the territorially bounded distribution of foreign cultural products and the transnationality and immediacy of consumer desire.

Fan translation is valuable to fans of alternative cultural products since alternatives created along the contraflow of cultural circulation are mostly not in English. This hardens the reachability of the product. The movie, the song, or the series are to be translated by fandom and this usually relies on voluntary work which creates a grey space in terms of copyright and quality.

## **Transnational Fandom of Turkish Television Series**

This section includes the study of Turkish television series in different parts of the world with a focus on Latin American fandom. It aims to analyze the current situation as a case study while addressing the ways fandom solves problems such as physical and cultural distance.

Turkish television series have had a notable success in many parts of the world. Apart from

the Arab world and the Balkan countries where this success is explicable due to historical and physical proximity, Turkish series are also broadcast in Africa, America and Europe. Since their adventure began as of 2001, they have been among the top-rated programmes in the countries they were broadcast. This success has been studied in many different regions and countries such as Middle East (Yörük & Vatikiodis, 2013; Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013) or the Balkans (Panjeta, 2014) and in many different contexts such as foreign policy (Constantinou & Tziarras, 2018), content creation (Öztürkmen, 2018) or even taboos (Yalkin & Veer, 2018).

Besides the regions where the success of Turkish television series is not surprising at all, there are also some other countries and regions that could be considered unexpected. One of these regions where Turkish television series have had a great success with some cultural, economic, and social implications is Latin America. Actually, thanks to the recent success in Latin America, Turkish TV series have become one of the main actors of cultural flow in different parts of the world. The success and possible contribution of Hispanic fandom probably caused the spread of Turkish television series to the United States and Europe where the craze has already started from Spain as of 2019.

The adventure of Turkish television series in Latin America began when the Chilean television channel Mega began to broadcast the series *1001 Nights* in 2014. After this series created a great sensation when the first episodes gradually rose to the top, Turkish series started to be broadcast in different channels and began to regularly come up among the most watched programmes of the day, week and even the year. They broke rating records and the protagonists became quite famous in Chile. For example, Halit Ergenç (protagonist of *1001 Nights*) is a real celebrity in Chile and he is one of the most admired and followed actors in the country.

Today, this craze is not limited to Chile. A wide range of Turkish TV series have been broadcast in many different Latin American countries from Uruguay to Mexico, Cuba to Peru. In Latin American countries, Turkish TV series are mostly broadcast on national television channels. Whenever you turn on the television, it is likely you will see a Turkish series and they are almost always among the most popular programmes of the day with high ratings. Numerous Turkish series are dubbed and broadcast in both national and cable television channels and there are devoted fans who watch the series with great interest.

In addition, the Latin American audience also follows the Turkish series on various web pages and forums. What is more interesting, Turkish series can be seen live via You Tube in recent years, and the fact that people from many different countries see them in Turkish despite the time difference and language barrier is also worth noting.

One of the key concepts of the success of Turkish television series in Chile and, more generally, in Latin America, is the spread of internet technologies. Internet makes it easier to reach the most up-to-date content regarding Turkish television series. The fandom of Turkish television series in Latin America is quite active in terms of fan production. They produce content in Spanish in two main areas: by translating series and by producing content regarding television series, celebrities, and Turkey and both activities are possible with internet technology.

The internet is the key point for Turkish television series fans worldwide and Latin America due to the physical and cultural distance. The time difference and language barrier make fans have a hard time reaching the Turkish television content and, to a degree, the internet offers a solution to these problems. However, the hard work of the Latin American fandom of Turkish television series is also worth analysis. Although many Turkish television series are broadcast on national television channels in Latin America, loyal fans of Turkish television series aim to reach the most up-to-date content. As a solution, many fans watch the latest episodes via the internet since they want to be familiar with the latest episodes as soon as possible. This means that they live according to Turkish television time. They are online at prime time of Turkish television watching Turkish series with the Turkish audience. They watch series in Turkish, a language they are completely unaware of. This means every week they watch four to four and a half hours of their favourite Turkish television show without understanding what the characters say. They base their ideas on the music and famous glances of Turkish series. There is also help from “live translators” who translate (or rather summarize) each scene by means of comments on a Facebook post in a Facebook group called the television show. In this case, the internet is used to access the Turkish television series and its translation at the same time.

Translation of the online Turkish television content is totally based on voluntary work. Turkish series that are longingly looked forward to are translated by voluntary translators who happen to be fans themselves. They usually have limited Turkish which raises a question regarding the quality of the content they create. Translated episodes are uploaded to websites and announced on fan pages. Today, many Turkish series are already seen and liked in many parts of the world including Latin America before national or cable television channels begin broadcasting them. For instance, Spanish subtitled versions of the Turkish series have been watched by millions on platforms like You Tube or social media. In this circulation, the fandom regarding Turkish TV series has a great effect since they create awareness and interest in the possible audience along with the existing Turkish television fans.



The process of bringing the Turkish content into Spanish is also based on volunteerism. Many volunteers translate all the content that is Turkish into Spanish including the news about television series, news about celebrities and Turkish media industry. This content production and translation is quite up-to-date. A person who would follow Turkish television content and the Spanish version of it could see that they are nearly the same. This means fandom is very active in content production since they again aim to have the latest news as soon as possible. This means the fandom in Latin America follows social media accounts of Turkish television series, Turkish celebrities and media. Recently, this resulted in the production of Spanish content by Turkish celebrities or producers as they feel the need to interact with the Hispanic admirers. Another indicator that fandom in Latin America is quite active in content production is that social media accounts have high numbers of followers. For instance, as of September 2019, the Turkish Spanish group on Facebook has 42,000 followers whereas another page with the same name has 45,000 followers. Every day, they post many threads regarding Turkish television, celebrities, and even Turkey. They talk about different Turkish television series creating an open space for people who would like to refer to their favourite television show or actor. In another example, the Facebook page for the series *Turcas* has 112,000 followers as of September 2019. There are posts about the Turkish television series that have never been broadcast in Latin America and yet have a huge fandom. This is an important indicator of the level of interest Turkish television series have created in Latin America. All web pages, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts are administered by volunteers who devote time and effort to these social media accounts creating valuable content.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

According to Bilbassy-Charters (2010), Turkey and the Turkish government should be grateful to the Turkish television series stars who have conquered the hearts and minds of the people in various parts of the world on behalf of Turkey. When it comes to Latin America, there are other actors playing a crucial role and producing positive results on behalf of Turkish television: Latin American fans who have no relation to Turkey apart from the television shows that have been imported quite recently and become a part of the daily life since then. Turkish television series have become so successful in Latin American countries that they have changed the theory and practice of television tradition which is well established and internalized in Latin America. This success is greatly thanks to the effort made by Latin American fandom which has translated and uploaded Turkish series making it accessible to the Hispanic community. They have also created Spanish content for Latin American fans regarding Turkish media

and celebrities contributing to the sustainability of the success of Turkish television series in Latin American countries. Thanks to their voluntary work, fandom in Latin America is gradually getting bigger. All in all, it is possible to say that Turkish television series fans in Latin America contribute to the spread of Turkish media, culture, and values by translating Turkish content and producing new content regarding Turkish television. Since they make use of internet technology in both reaching, producing, and distributing content Turkish television series they doubtlessly serve as good examples of the digital transformation of fandom.

Besides the questions that can be raised on copyrights and the quality of the content produced, the contribution they make in terms of cultural distribution and Turkey's contra-flow against the cultural hegemony is valuable as well as in terms of the sustainability of the success of Turkish television series worldwide. Further study regarding unique cases on web pages, social media accounts or content created regarding Turkish television series could be fruitful to see the short, middle and long term effects on Turkish series fandom as well as their future with newer forms technology.

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