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Taboo on TV: Gender, Religion, and Sexual Taboos in Transnationally Marketed Turkish Soap Operas

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Abstract

This study illuminates the ways in which men and women consume soap operas as a means of reflecting on and discussing socio-cultural taboos. Through interpretive research we examine the ways in which religion, sexuality, and gender relations are depicted in popular Turkish soap operas and how these depictions are consumed in the Balkans and the Middle East. This study challenges the assumption that consumption of taboo discourses leads to active identity modification or public defiance. Instead, in-depth interviews and online ethnography reveal that consumption of soap operas that challenge local religious and gender norms provide a liminal space for discussing taboo topics. Firstly, the findings indicate that talking about taboo topics seen in soap operas enables consumers to speak about what they expect gender and religious norms to be. Secondly, consumers get their mediated understandings of what religion is through soap operas. Thus, rather than simply offering escape, soap opera consumption facilitates the discussion of taboo topics.

Summary Statement of Contribution: Soap operas have previously been conceptualised as offering an escape from the troubles of everyday life. We show that they also provide a platform that allows consumers to confront prevalent socio-cultural taboos. Our work contributes to extant understandings by highlighting the ability of 'light' entertainment to smuggle in opportunities for engagement with 'heavy' topics. Further, we draw particular attention to consumption between countries in the Global South.

Introduction

Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) argue that "Contemporary cultures examine themselves through their arts" (p.46). What is perhaps not included in the broad definition of 'the arts' is light-entertainment Soap Operas and Telenovelas as cultural commentaries. Although regarded as low-brow, soap operas provide avenues through which consumers can examine themselves (Hobson 1982); however, popular culture products, including soap operas, regularly cover such taboo issues, such as sex and death (Brown 1994, Sabri et al. 2010). This research specifically looks at the role that Turkish Soap Operas play in discussing taboo issues in markets where religious conservatism is the predominant norm. Specifically, we look at how Turkish soap operas present gender, religion and sexual taboos through melodrama and how these depictions are used as a liminal space for taboo discussions by providing a pathway for their viewers to engage in taboo conversations.

For all the dominance of US viewing by thrillers and high quality Netflix productions (often described as 'critically acclaimed dramas') (O'Donnell, 2015), traditional melodramatic soap operas continue to attract a significant viewer base around the globe (t-vine, 2017). Turkish Soap Operas in particular enjoy a strong following across Eurasia and the Middle East, with a recent deterioration in political relationships leading to a threat to ban Turkish Soap Operas in Saudi Arabia (Chicago Tribune 2018). The fact that television shows are used as political tools to exert sanctions or control over a sovereign nation demonstrates the popularity of these shows. TV "…often focuses on our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those that are repressive and reactionary, as well as those that are subversive and emancipatory are upheld, examined, maintained and transformed"

(Newcomb and Hirsch 1983, p.48).   As an ever popular genre, soap operas "play with our cultural fantasies and fears. They sell but also give us something we may not be getting in our legitimate culture" (Brown 1994, p.8). Soap operas feature topics and behaviour that are prohibited in certain localities and thus represent an ideal site for studying consumption of taboo (see Allan and Burridge, 2006).

In particular, contemporary societies have taboos relating to gender, sexuality and religion (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, Costos et al. 2002, Kulick and Wilson 2003, Rubin 2009). Soap operas lend themselves to studying the consumption of these taboo discourses as soap opera consumption is often viewed as a gendered activity. "The popularity of television soap opera and film melodrama with women raises the question of how it is that sizeable audiences of women relate to these representations and the institutional practices of which they form part" (Kuhn 2007, p.147). The literature offers diverging perspectives on gendered viewing, illustrating the complexity at the heart of such consumption: Soap operas are often condescended to (by men) for being a silly women's pastime (Spence 1992). They are seen as a threat because of the depiction of lifestyles that may traverse into taboo topics (Brown 1994, Salamandra 2012) and because they may reproduce certain vulnerabilities (Stern et al. 2005). For example, Kahlor and Eastin (2015) report a relationship between soap opera viewing and rape myth acceptance. Studies often classify soap opera consumers vulnerable and dumb (see Modleski 1982, Seiter et al. 1989). Broadcasters are also often accused of entrenching women in the domestic sphere (Geraghty 1999).

On the other hand, Brown (1994) views women's talk based on soap opera as a site of resistance. Other studies construct the soap opera consumer as empowered/rebellious (Brown 1987), aware (Seiter et al. 1989), pleasure seeking (McRobbie 1994) and as individuals who seek resources for new ethnicity constructions (Durham 2004). Arthurs (2003) views the sort of post-feminist critique offered by *Sex and the City* as both empowering and enslaving, giving an overall sum of no progress. Accounts of soap opera consumption thus oscillate between empowerment and enslavement. Our aim is not to resolve this enslavement vs. empowerment dispute, but to investigate the gendered reception of taboo topics in soap operas and contribute to the literature on gender, social viewing, and taboo.

Through qualitative research, we investigate how gender and religion interact in the reception and interpretation of taboo topics in soap operas. By drawing on a specific phenomenon, in this case the social viewing of soap operas that cover taboo topics, we show how consumption practices can be used to express an identity and encourage freer discussion regarding taboo, especially in a conservative setting. That is, soap operas operate as a means to break socially normative behaviours by allowing discussion and expression of the taboo that would not be ordinarily acceptable outside the confines of the soap opera. In this way, we show how soap operas aid in challenging social barriers and taboos in a socially acceptable format.

Soap Operas & Taboo

Consumption is linked to the satisfaction of previously taboo desires (see Elliott 1999, Mort 1988). While taboo has been studied often in relation to advertising and product and brand

offerings (tobacco, condoms, etc.) (Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006, Sabri 2012, Sabri and Obermiller 2012) and previous studies examined characteristics of taboo-challenging advertisements and their consumption (Scott 2011, Ryus 2011), research on taboo subjects in soap operas has to date been restricted to the field of communications and media studies (Greenberg and D'Alessio 1985, Spence 1992). Various TV series such as *Beavis & Butthead* (Buckingham 2003), *Sex and the City* (Arthurs 2003), and *the Borgias* (Nayar-Akhtar 2016) have previously been regarded as showcasing/containing taboo. However, these studies have focused more on the discourses of taboo rather than its consumption and the consequences of such consumption. The few studies on soap opera consumption and taboo issues such as bigamy, incest, and maternal prostitution are based on North American and European consumers (Derry 1983, Moyer-Gusé et al. 2011, Rogers 1991), and so lack diversity and deliver only a limited understanding of taboo.

TV viewing, and especially soap opera consumption, is a ritualistic act (Katz and Dayan 1987). We therefore refer to Van Gennep's (1967) and Turner's (1969) notions of ritual and liminality. Ritual is a process rather than an end product, which applies to the act of TV viewing (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983). Liminal spaces refers to spaces and places that are betwixt and between, spaces that are familiar, and spaces that are unknown, controversial or novel (Turner, 1969). Liminality is typically unsafe and taboo. As a result, it is a place where social structures and normative practices may be challenged as a new identity is formed. TV helps produce such a liminal space in which discussion takes place. In the liminal, one is neither their old identity nor fully immersed and accepted in the new space they are travelling towards. In a society that is becoming increasingly socially conservative, the use of sexualised television soap operas acts as a means for viewers to enter into a

space that is not part of their old identity but is equally not powerful enough to form lasting new identities. As such, the expression and engagement of taboo through TV leads to a situation where viewers are neither in nor out of society. They are not the conservative but equally they are not the sexually liberated. They enter into a challenging space that may not be safe to discuss in an open forum, but the presence of the rituals associated with the transition into the liminal space allows discussion to take place.

Liminal is the stage of licence. In this realm, rules can be broken or bent, roles may be reversed, or categories may be overturned (ibid). However, enacting such practices outside the confines of the space created by the taboo television context could open one to scrutiny from the conservative hegemony. When contained within the schema and settings of the soap opera, the participants are free to engage in conversation, discussion and examination of taboo topics, in a fashion similar to the way illegality is forgiven and tolerated within a contained space, described by Goulding et al. (2008). For example, one may feel unable openly to discuss issues of pregnancy outside marriage in a socially conservative society, but within the space created by the soap operas a more open discussion can be had. The soap opera offers an opportunity for topics and subjects that may be taboo and liminal to be discussed and may challenge identities as new normative structures are formed. Moreover, liminality has previously only been studied in terms of how certain characters such as aboriginals or ethnic minorities are represented in soap operas (McKee 1997). Again, the focus was on representation rather than the consumption of that representation or the viewing act itself. Thus, our general aim is to study how soap operas that contain taboo topics are received. However, unlike previous research, we focus on the gendered reception of non-Western soap operas, for reasons alluded to below.

Context of the Study

Across disciplines, the transnational flow and reception of soap operas have been treated either as cultural imperialism (e.g. Tomlinson 1991), as empowerment through active interpretation (see Fiske 1987), or as resistance through the use of goods, services, and ideas in a way that mixes the local with the hegemonic (Hall 1980). On the other hand, the audience is "rational, capable of acting, of resisting influence, of reporting about itself, and able to choose and purposively use the media to find satisfaction or to gratify needs" (Spence 1992, p.36). For example, Miller (1995) studied the consumption of the American soap opera *The Young and the Restless* in Trinidad and found that it transformed the nature of everyday gossip. Liebes and Katz (1990) found that Israeli viewers, through being morally, aesthetically, and ideologically involved, used another American soap opera *Dallas* as a means to reflect on their identities. However, these studies focus on the flow of cultural goods from the West to the East. Similarly, studies of popular culture that aimed to reflect on contemporary society through audience reception (Hall 1990, Hall 1996, Morley 1999) focused on the Western empires' post-colonial aftermath, leaving out the flow and reception of popular culture among non-Western countries. In contrast, very few studies explore the transnational movement of non-Western popular culture (Kim 2012, Lopez 1995; Iqani, 2016; Ryoo 2009, Schement and Rogers 1984; Straubhaar, 1991) and there are no studies that focus on taboo and its transnational flow in the Global South.

Although a number of studies focused on the transnational flow of Turkish soap operas (e.g. Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013, Salamandra 2012), their analysis centred on notions other than taboo such as geopolitics, nation-branding, and desire. Building on this premise, we study the consumption of Turkish soap operas (TSOs henceforth) in the Middle East and the

Balkans because of the high volume of TSO trade in this region, in which the Turkish entertainment industry has achieved major player status. Soap operas are one of the most highly traded products between Turkey and its neighbours in the Middle East and the Balkans. In Saudi Arabia, 85 million viewers tuned in for the finale of *Noor* (Salamandra 2012). Turkish soap opera exports have grown from US $1 million in 2007 to nearly US $200 million in 2014 (KDK 2014). *The Magnificent Century* was watched in 43 countries by 200 million people (Rohde 2012*).* Around 100 TSOs are exported to North Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. The Middle East and North Africa's combined population equals that of the EU (IMF 2014) and the population of the Balkans exceeds 70 million (World Population Review 2016).

Despite the established significance of non-Western markets and consumers (e.g. Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008; Dicken 2007; Ger and Belk, 1999; Jafari et al. 2012) and the use of post-colonial lens to understand consumption in the aftermath of Western colonialism (e.g. Thompson and Tambyah 1999, Varman and Belk 2012), marketing and consumption in post-colonial markets of non-Western empires have not had the attention they deserve. As the Ottoman Empire adopted a colonial mindset starting from the 1800s, the relationship between the Ottoman rulers and people living on the periphery of the Empire became colonial (Deringil 2003). Therefore, we focus on this non-Western post-colonial context to extend our understanding of taboo through soap opera consumption.

Gender, Religion, and Ethnicity

Within audience reception studies, gender and sexuality have always been a fruitful research ground. First, Hobson (2003) notes that initially soap operas aimed to "attract

women listeners and enable sponsors to advertise and sell their products" (p.8), paving the way for soap opera consumption to be seen as a women's pastime. Spence (1992) notes that the belittling of female soap opera viewers by men under the guise of concern for their welfare masks an anxiety over their potential power. Although the Turkish Civil Code is progressive, gender relations in Turkey are deeply troubled (Lee 2011). With a few exceptions, the gender relations and equality in the Middle East and the Balkans largely mirror those of Turkey's (European Commission 2017, Promundo 2017). As holders of religious and patriarchal power (men) reportedly perceive TSOs as 'wicked and evil' (see Hammond 2009), we are interested in gendered reception of taboo topics in TSOs.

Soap operas, especially those that are marketed transnationally, contain themes related to religion. Religion comprises cultural or normative patterns that define the expectations agents hold about each other's behaviour (Lopez and Scott 2000). It is therefore intertwined with understandings of what is/is not regarded as taboo. Religion plays a role in defining political, sexual, and economic norms that affect consumption behaviour (Hirschman 1983). It also impacts on how sexuality is governed in a society (Salazar 2006). Normative expectations on sexuality, virginity, and women's place in society in general are commensurate between Turkey and the Arab states. However, TSOs from relatively more 'secular' Turkey depict a rather Westernised yet Eastern lifestyle. They might be perceived as degenerating, threatening, and taboo. For example, one key characteristic of TSOs is the presence of 'emancipated' heroines who are career-oriented and aware of their sexuality (Georgiou 2012). The presence of these characters and their celebration by the audiences are condemned by religious and political conservative leaders (Buccianti 2009, Salamandra

2012). These condemnations range from negative publicity in the form of opinion pieces to *fatwas* issued by religious clerics (Nosratian 2015, Rohde 2012).

On the other hand, a majority of the Balkans are a Christian people, as they were during Ottoman rule (Mazower 2007). Thus, they are likely to view religion and ethnicity as taboo because conversions through 'child tax' as a result of Ottoman victories (ibid) in the region have created ethno-religious animosities (see Drakulic 2011). Also, since Muslim women could not be enslaved, harem women were usually Christians and pagans who were bought or kidnapped (Malieckal 2008) and most were converted to Islam. Thus, the presence of the soap operas originating from the former coloniser are likely to contain taboo topics that refer to the relationship between the Balkan countries and Turkey. For example, the historical drama *Magnificent Century* has as one of its central themes kidnapping and conversion of Christian girls for purposes of employment in the harem.

In sum, this paper examines the consumption of soap operas in the Middle East and the Balkans with a specific focus on taboo in order to develop a theory of popular media and taboo in Eastern post-colonial contexts. Thus our research question is: *what role does the consumption of soap operas play in the reception, interpretation and discussion of taboo in non-Western post-colonial markets?*

Method

Similar to previous studies of soap opera consumption (e.g. Hall 1980, Hobson 1982, Lee and Cho 1990, Spence 1992) , we are using an ethnographic approach in order to get a contextualised understanding of the phenomenon in question. Drawing on Ger (2013), we anticipate that connections among culture, religion, politics, and economics play a role in

the reception of TSOs.   In order to chart the territory in as much detail as possible, in-depth interviews, online ethnography, collating and reviewing materials, and observation were used simultaneously and in an emergent fashion across locations.

The type of soap operas chosen was the most popular sub-genre across localities and genders: drama, which included elements of love stories, crime, and suspense. The specific type of political soap operas such as the *Valley of the Wolves* which focus on Middle East heroes vs. the West were excluded because they were not relevant for the Balkans. **Table 1** below provides the list of soap operas' titles and a brief synopsis for each, highlighting the gender and religious depictions. The data collection started in late 2010 and finished in May 2016. Respondents were varied in terms of gender, country, education, and frequency of watching soap operas, qualifying the sampling as maximum variation purposive sampling (Patton 1990).

In-depth interviews were used to get "empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives" (Gubrium and Holstein 2003, p.3). Due to the instability following the eruption of the Arab Spring, data from the Middle East (except for Lebanon) was collected through in-depth Skype interviews, talking to tourists at various sites in Istanbul, and through the use of research assistants in different countries. The data was collected by the researchers on-site in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Lebanon, and Serbia, and through online in-depth interviews or in-depth interviews carried out in Istanbul with informants in other countries.

Table 1. Synopses of TSOs

Name	Genre	Plot
Noor (Gümüş)	Drama	Noor is a needlework instructor from a poor provincial family under wealthy Fikri's patronage. Fikri betroths her to his grandson Muhannad. A typical secular but untypically wealthy family is featured.
1001 Nights (Binbir Gece)	Drama	Sehrazat agrees to sleep with her boss in exchange for the money needed to have her son's life-or-death operation, they fall in love. Features a typically secular group of people.
Time Passes By or As Time Goes By (Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman Ki)	Drama	Captain Ali and wife Cemile have 4 children. Ali has an affair with Dutch woman Caroline which leads to the disintegration of the family. Religion is present to the extent that it is present in everyday secular life in Turkey, but the characters are not entirely non-religious. Traditional morals are invoked throughout the series.
Forbidden Love (Aşk-i Memnu)	Drama	Young woman has affair with her husband's nephew. When discovered by her husband, the heroine commits suicide. Features a typically secular but untypically wealthy family. Includes many scenes of fine dining and alcohol consumption.
Ezel	Drama/Suspense	Betrayed by his trusted friends and the woman he loved, Ömer Uçar returns as Ezel for vengeance. Often featured scenes of alcohol consumption.
Magnificent Century/Suleiman (Muhteşem Yüzyıl)	Historical drama	Life of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent seen from a harem-centric series of power-struggle events, focusing his favorite concubine of Ukrainian origin. Religion and sexual relations are displayed often and form a substantial part of the storyline, along with warfare and imperial glory.
Kuzey- Guney (North- South)	Drama/Suspense	Two brothers fall in love with the same girl, Kuzey is devastated when Güney gets together with her. Güney gets involved in a car accident, Kuzey takes the blame on himself. (Adaptation of Rich Man, Poor Man). Often features contested moral stances.

What is Fatmagul's Fault (Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne)	Drama	Rape victim Fatmagül refuses to stay silent after perpetrators walk free. There series is focused entirely on the problem of rape and the consequences afterwards for the victim.
Sıla (Sila)	Drama	Sila is forced to marry the boss of a tribe in order to repay her brother's debt. She fights the injustice but Boran is willing to kill her to comply with tradition.
Kurtar Vadisi (Valley of the Wovles)	Action-Drama-Conspiracy	Agent Polat Alemdar wages a vigilante struggle against four Turkish families that control the national economy and against a former CIA agent in Turkey.

Serbian and Bulgarian contexts were also studied using netnography (Kozinets 2002) to gain an insight into ethno-religious issues. This strategy was also used to identify negative cases, as informants often preferred not to talk about [ultra] nationalist taboo issues. Although informants mentioned knowing others who were strongly anti-Turkish, they refused to make referrals and provide contact information. The researchers extensively studied a particularly anti-Turkish thread on the website *www.slavorum.com* to grasp deep-rooted negative sentiments which may not have been articulated in face-to-face interviews. This web-site was chosen as it focused on protecting the Slavic ethnicity/heritage and most of it was centred on anti-Turkish discourse. While in-depth interviews (both online and offline) allowed increased contact time, observations (and related field notes) and netnography (Kozinets 2002) allowed for a wider reach to diversified viewpoints. The final sample included both consumers who watched TSOs and those who did not but were familiar with them for various reasons. The table of informants can be found in **Table 2** below, and the question guide can be found in **Appendix 1**. Being from the same region and consuming the same soap operas helped the first author establish rapport and recruit more informants.

Table 2: List of Informants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country	Occupation	Method	Viewing habits
Kostas	31	M	Greece	Marketing Director of an MNC	In-depth interview	Watches once a week alone
John	37	M	Greece	Electronic Technician	In-depth interview	Watches 2-3 times a week with wife
George	32	M	Greece	Judge	In-depth interview	Watches very rarely to keep up with popular culture
Eleni	28	F	Greece	German teacher	In-depth interview	Watches once a week alone
Anna	30	F	Greece	Accountant	In-depth interview	Watches once a week alone
Joanna	31	F	Greece	Chemist	In-depth interview	Watches twice a week with sister
Vicky	64	F	Greece	Housewife	In-depth interview	Watches 2-3 times a week with husband
Maria	66	F	Greece	Retired Magistrate	In-depth interview	Watches once a week alone
Christina	58	F	Greece	Housewife	In-depth interview	Watches 2-3 times a week with husband
Leo	25	M	Greece	Student	In-depth interview	Watches occasionally with friends
Sarah	33	F	Egypt	Political Scientist	In-depth interview	Watches maybe once a month
Nina	29	F	Egypt	Marketing Executive	In-depth interview (skype)	Watches once a month alone
Edward	35	M	Egypt	Engineer	In-depth interview (skype)	Watches once a week alone
Konstantine	38	M	Bulgaria	NGO executive	In-depth interview	Watches occasionally alone
Dimi	40	F	Bulgaria	Academic	In-depth interview	Watches once a week alone
Mark	42	M	Bulgaria	Bank Clerk	In-depth interview	Watches once a week with wife
Gail	66	F	Bulgaria	Retired	In-depth interview	Watches 3-4 times a week with Husband
Diana	29	F	Bulgaria	Sales Assistant	In-deph interview	Watches 3-4 times a week alone
Yasmeen	20	F	Lebanon	Student	In-deph interview	Watches every weeknight with Friends
Razane	26	F	Lebanon	Beautician	In-deph interview	Watches every weeknight with sister friends
Reza	22	M	Lebanon	Student	In-deph interview	Watches once a week alone
Dora	54	M	Lebanon	Own business	In-deph interview	Watches 1-2 times a week alone
Amina	46	F	Syria	Housewife	In-deph interview	Watches everyday alone

Lilly	35	F	Syria	Housewife	In-deph interview (istanbul)	Watches everyday alone
Akram	42	M	Syria	TV executive	In-deph interview	Watches 2-3 times a week with wife
Ahmad	58	M	Syria	Shop owner	In-depth interview (skype)	Watches 2-3 times a week with wife
Gina	47	F	Saudi Arabia	Housewife	In-deph interview (istanbul)	Watches everyday alone
Ella	36	F	Saudi Arabia	Housewife	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches 3-4 times a week alone
Naz	33	F	UAE	Photographer	In-deph interview	Watches 2-3 times a week with sister
Marwan	33	F	UAE	Make-up artist	In-deph interview	Watches 2-3 times a week with sister
Samira	60	F	Jordan	Housewife	In-deph interview (istanbul)	Watches 1-2 times a week with husband
Lea	28	F	Jordan	Family business	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches 2-3 times a week with friends
Anas	33	M	Jordan	Media buyer	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches occasionally alone
James	28	M	Palestine	Investment Banker	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches occasionally alone
Alexandra	31	F	Ukraine	Lawyer	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches occasionally alone
Nora	72	F	Ukraine	Housewife	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches 2-3 times a week alone
Nicola	28	F	Romania	Advertising	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches 3-4 times a week alone
Teresa	22	F	Romania	Student	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches 1-2 times a week with friends
Michaela	26	F	Romania	Unemployed	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches 3-4 nights a week alone
Dina	57	F	Serbia	Nurse	In-deph interview	Watches 3-4 nights a week with Daughter and husband
Rosa	65	F	Serbia	Retired	In-deph interview	Watches every weeknight with Husband
Sylvia	26	F	Serbia	Graduate Student	In-deph interview	Watches 1-2 times a week alone
Tomas	22	M	Serbia	University Student	In-deph interview	Watches once a week alone
Theo	66	M	Serbia	Retired	In-deph interview	Watches every weeknight with wife
Yasmin	26	F	Yemen	Graduate Student	In-deph interview (istanbul)	Watches 3-4 times a week with Friends
Mina	38	F	Yemen	Housewife	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches alone during the day and with husband during the night
Jan	42	M	Yemen	Private Business	In-deph interview	Watches less than once a month

					(skype)	Alone
Nena	60	F	Yemen	Housewife	In-deph interview (skype)	Watches alone during the day and with husband during the night
Anita	N/A	F	Bulgaria	N/A	www.slavorum.org	N/A
Luca	N/A	M	Serbia	N/A	www.slavorum.org	N/A
Dimo	N/A	M	Serbia	N/A	www.slavorum.org	N/A

Material from local and international press outlets rendered contextualised understandings easier. The data analysis took a hermeneutic approach (Thompson 1997). The analysis and interpretation of data were based on the guidelines provided by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Spiggle (1994). Researchers read through the entire set of transcripts independently to identify themes participants used; and discussed and compared these themes. Emergent themes were marked and previous codes were allowed to shape later ones, as described by Spiggle (1994). Each individual transcript was re-read after the global themes had been established.

Triangulation was key to interpretation of data and the modification of interview guides. More than 120 pages of field notes helped in further understanding the informants. The researchers challenged each other's perspectives, suppositions and interpretations and these were subsequently made subject to member checking. The localised understandings of one of the researchers added to the holistic understanding of the phenomenon (see Kjeldgaard et al. 2006).

Findings

The following themes outline a gendered perspective in which taboos are challenged and counter-challenged. Both ethnicity and religion interact with gender to amplify the differences in reception between males and females. The plots reflect various taboos in societies such as alcohol consumption, mode of dress (modest vs. non-modest), and sexual relationships. They enable women to talk about conservative and/or patriarchal structures in order to communicate their expectations regarding gender relations and religion. This

utilization of soap operas induces fear of secularism in Muslim males where TSOs are perceived to be in opposition to Islamic values such as piety, and induce fear of ethnic oppression in males from the Balkans where TSOs are seen as foretellers of ethno-religious oppression, which are reactions based on historical relations and current politics.

Women Talk About Taboos

Gender posits a layer of norms and operates as a pattern of social arrangements (Connell 2009) and religion posits behavioural expectations (Lopez and Scott 2000). Consumers must negotiate what certain normative expectations mean at the intersection of religion and gender. Women find TSOs empowering and use the plots and lifestyles as resources to draw on in order to talk about the religious and patriarchal expectations of their own society and to aid them in talking about their own understanding and expectations of religion, gender, and desires. In this way, the women interviewed expressed that TSOs, through the topics in their plots and general themes, were a means of building understanding and exploring possibilities around what are currently considered taboo lifestyles and subjects.

Taboo discourses in TSOs provide resources for women to renegotiate the limitations of their identities and assist in forging (imagined) identities. These identities range from the real (lived or practiced as in the case of wearing fully 'Western' attire to the Dubai World Cup) to the imagined project (as in the case of informants arguing that having wine and being virtuous could coexist and imagining themselves as doing both):

> *"Arab females think that Turkish lifestyle is very different from the Arab conservative lifestyle. Turkish people are very open concerning the relationship between men and women. This openness in discussing and dealing with this issue in some Turkish soap*

operas is a misrepresentation of Islam especially that Turkey is an Islamic country after all". (Mina, 38, Yemen)

Identity markers such as secularist or Islamist become slippery as "the search for certainties is regularly frustrated by the fluidities of transnational communication" (Appadurai 1990, p.44). This mid-way negotiation of being modern and respecting Islam depends on the way Islam is interpreted:

"*In Turkish soap operas, having a sexual relationship before marriage is something acceptable…this issue is not acceptable in our society and in most of the Arab countries*" (Lea, 28, Jordan)

The gendered understanding of how representative Turkey is of an Islamic country and how this reflects on consumption choices must be noted. Women do not see a problem in viewing lifestyles that are not in their view fully respectful of Islam:

"*Each day there is a specific soap opera that I follow. Some of them don't respect Islam while others do. In Ask-i Memnu characters have relationships before marriage. They are not similar to us…it is a beautiful and open-minded country but they imitate the West a lot. They don't represent Islam.*" (Razane, 26, Lebanon)

Unlike the "torn self" experienced by informants in Jafari and Goulding's (2008) study, these contradictions are not problems for female informants. They are used as markers of (dis)similarities and they facilitate discussion:

"*I watch two Turkish soap operas a day…They are secular, no respect for Islam…Not like us. On the other hand, **As Time Passes By** discusses social morals and traditions that is shared among Arabs and Turks. In those soap operas the similarities between the two cultures become clear*" (Nena, 60, Yemen).

The private quarters, designated for women as a place where they could approach public affairs (Nelson 1974), are now a site where they can consume the secular lifestyle because television helps forge a liminal space (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983). This causes fear in power-generating and power-sustaining patriarchal figures ranging from the private (family members) to the public (religious clerics). The female informants talked about the *fatwas* issued by religious clerics against the broadcasting of TSOs. Gina (47, Saudi Arabia) indicated that "*this is an overreaction, just to scare women to stay in line*".

Arab Islamists and cultural conservatives often accuse Western powers and secular Arab elites of cultural invasion aimed at undermining Muslim societies (see Kassab 2006). Although it raises concerns on the part of conservatives, secularism as depicted through TSOs seems to be a benefit sought by women. Norms of gender and religion are now hybridised with imagery encountered on TSOs:

"*They can wear those clothes, have a glass of wine, and still be good (virtuous)… I like that.*" (Naz, 33, Emirates)

"The West" was imagined as sexually and morally degenerate (Lee 2011), partly due to the modernisation/Westernisation projects implemented by the Arab States in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, the necessary education for Muslim women was seen as one that instilled a sense of domesticity in women to prevent them from becoming like Western women (Abu-Odeh 1996). Naz's interview attire was completely 'Western', similar to that of the informants in Sobh et al.'s (2009) study on modesty/vanity in Gulf countries. Thus, women were looking to challenge the Islamic (male-sustained) discourse that such clothing is not pious or virtuous. Marwan, who showed pictures of herself taken at the Dubai World Cup (a more expensive version of the Royal Ascot races) in exquisite short (but not mini) dresses, noted:

"*Where do they get the idea that if we look like this, we are going to turn Christian,*

what does aesthetics have to do with my faith…" (Marwan, 33 Emirates)

While representations of alcohol and fashion consumption increase the attractiveness of TSOs, and help consumers to try out 'otherness' vicariously (Vicdan and Firat 2013), references to virtue and religion help consumers to avoid confusion in doing so. It is argued that separating faith from one's appearance is a secularised understanding of Islam, hence we see that Marwan is hybridising her understanding of the norms of Islam with material from TSOs.

Taboo is societal stigma, and if a stigmatised practice becomes attractive for some, this brings forth power struggles among different groups (Sandikci and Ger 2010). For some informants, depictions of alcohol consumption in TSOs are consumption acts of a stigmatised nature. While wine is not a taboo in the sense that it can be talked about, it is a stigma among some Muslim informants because it is tied to social rules and (sometimes) legal sanctions (Goffman 1963). While only some of the Muslim informants reported seldom drinking alcohol, and therefore avoiding the 'deviant', they imagined how their everyday lives would be if they performed certain elements of the modern yet modest female identity depicted in TSOs:

"*I do not drink…some of my friends do. I used to drink when I went to university*

abroad. I like seeing (Muslim) women in Turkish series that are modern but modest…

in some ways… in Noor they drank but they have decency… but not backward or

corrupted" (Lea, 28, Jordan)

When probed about what "corrupted" meant, Lea pointed out that both local and global sources claim that in many non-Muslim countries drinking may lead to degenerate

lifestyles. She also talked about the observations she gathered on the "girls' nights out" in the UK.

Contrary to Stern et al.'s (2005) view that soap operas unilaterally perpetuate the image of the vulnerable woman as role model, the TSOs consumption allows consumers to discuss taboos and to set expectations regarding gender relations. While it is not at all suggested that all TSOs feature healthy role models, some of the soap operas such as *Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne* and *Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman Ki* do feature female role models who are powerful, and this resonates with viewers. The prominent example of this is *Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne* (*What is Fatmagül's Fault*), a soap opera centred on the rape survivor Fatmagül, who fights back against the perpetrators rather than staying silent and conforming to societal expectations.

In the case of *Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne*, female consumers challenge the patriarchal hegemony that perpetuates a culture of silencing women in the face of violence. The 26-year old Sylvia sees the featuring of reactions to violence against women as a gateway to carrying such important issues into the public sphere:

"*I think that what they're trying to do, even in Turkey, is to use TV series to start up public debates on important issues…There was an entire series filmed about rape…throughout the whole show the issue of rape was discussed, along with all the issues of condemnation from both men and women and everything else rape victims have to face…were expressed in the show*" (Sylvia, 26, Serbian)

Because colonisation was violent (Bhabha 1994), the informants believe the former Ottomans must be interpreted as violent; however, the former Ottomans are raising issues about violence, which prompts the informants to negotiate their understanding of Turkey and Turks. Women are perceived as being more accepting and welcoming while men are

more suspicious. Even though Turkey is troubled with violence against women (Lee 2011) and this partially figures in the informants' interpretations, the informants get their understanding of gender discourses in Turkey and relevant taboo issues for their lives from TSOs. Therefore, what becomes important is not how the Turkish gender cosmology is in reality but the stories that the Turks tell about their gender cosmology. This is similar to Chytkova's (2011) work on how female Romanian immigrants in Italy view Italian women as liberated because they get their understanding of Italian society and gender roles from the media. Public discussion of rape seems to have resonated with female viewers especially in the former Yugoslavia:

> "*I know… women in Turkey are killed and raped, but they talk about it instead of hiding it…even though they are a conservative country*" (Dina, 57, Serbia)

Dina is using conservative as a synonym for Muslim, which was the case for many of the informants from the Balkans. Hence, there is a mismatch in the idea of the violent and backward former imperial ruler and the very same former ruler sparking a debate about violence against women.

> "*The series called **Asi**, it's important because of the issue of rape, I also liked **As Time Goes By**. We need to discuss these difficult issues more openly.*" (Nina, 29, Egypt).

Gender inequality and gender-based violence spans across nation-states. Dealing with it is achieved through a form of disobedience in which the current forms of hegemony are challenged through talking openly about taboo issues such as rape.

Anita explains why the consumption of TSOs, especially those that contain themes related to the Ottoman Empire, may disturb some viewers:

> "*Of course many people are scared that it is going to be an Ottoman invasion again, the Turks again*". (Anita, F, Bulgarian)

Many women reported watching the *Magnificent Century* (*Sultan Suleiman*) for the love story and because the main character was an empowered Ukrainian female (Roxalena, or Hurrem Sultan). They value *the Magnificent Century* because it depicts empowered women, challenging the local gender cosmology:

"*I would like to be powerful like that (Roxalena)… and manage… love, power games, beauty…I don't believe that coy wins…but they tell us that men want coy*" (Diana, 29, Bulgaria)

Diana challenges the widespread idea that being coy is the acceptable way for women to behave in her society. She is imagining a hybrid identity that is both feminine and powerful.

Women use soap operas to try out a hybridised form of Islam, to open up discussion of violence and rape, and to explore female empowerment. Men, on the other hand, use the Turkish origin of these soaps to dismiss them as not really Muslim, and use politics and history as a means to counteract the potential power of the soaps.

Men Talk About Taboos

Appadurai (1990, p.45) notes that "work and leisure have lost none of their gendered identities…but have acquired ever subtler fetishised representations, the honour of women becomes increasingly a surrogate for the identity of the embattled communities of males". Thus, men challenge these discussions on religion:

"*This is worse than the West, it is pretending to be Muslim but disrespecting our values. At least you know in American series they are not pretending…Turkey pretends to be Muslim, and modern, and leader, and strong…*" (Jan, 42, Yemen)

Interestingly, informant Jan regularly watches the series *Ezel*, arguing that it is a well written series because of its plot about power and conspiracy. Although a more sleek suspense drama, *Ezel* shares almost all of the qualities of the other TSOs such as powerful female characters, use of guns, alcohol, and drugs, and power battles.

Central to their criticisms were many of the male informants' claims about imperialism and how Turkey was used by 'Western powers' in the promotion of secular Islam. Turkey is perceived as being the 'West' by proxy because it practices a form of Islam that is seen as acceptable by "Westerners". It must be noted that although this cultural flow is not between countries in the East and the West (Kraidy and Murphy 2008), the informants use the categories of East and West to discuss these topics. Above, Jan is invoking current political discourses in interpreting Turkey. Former Prime Minister Erdoğan claims to be the leader of the Muslim Middle East, a discourse consistently supported by the Turkish foreign policy. This discourse reached its climax during the 2009 Davos summit when the Turkish Prime Minister strongly reacted to the Israeli President (the Guardian, 2009). In the opinion of the informant, this positioning is challenged by Turkey's Islamic stance. Male viewers invoke religious norms to frame their judgment and denigrate the consumption choices of women:

> "*The rules of Islam are clear… you shouldn't drink [alcohol]. They are showing people drinking, and they call themselves a Muslim country*" (Ahmad, 58, Syria)

Golley (2004) found women's positions and colonialism as interconnected in the Arab world and suggested analysing gender relations in terms of religion. Turkey's positioning as the more secular/modern yet Muslim other in the Middle East, a discourse supplanted by Turkish foreign policy from 2002 onward, is challenged by male consumers:

"A lot of Arab women are following Turkish soap operas on a daily basis. I know some people watch one to three different series a day. Housewives are the most attracted. They think that they are very romantic, modern. Nonsense." (Jan, 42, Yemen)

Male consumers challenge the "*modernness*" and devalue the consumption experience as something only housewives would do:

"[My] wife…wants to go to Turkey…I don't see how the Turks are Muslim" (Ahmad, 58, Syrian)

When probed, Ahmad reported that his wife watches *Kuzey Guney* and *Noor* among other TSOs, and that these shows regularly feature female protagonists who live alone, have pre-marital sex, and consume alcohol.

 "Islamic economics exhibits a lot of readiness to accept market realities" (Ger 2013, p.499). Despite this compatibility, when the issues at stake are market offerings that are not completely compatible with local tastes, values, and norms, and veer into taboo topics such as images of more 'liberated' women encountered in the TSOs, friction arises between Islam, the rules of which are maintained by men, and women's consumption.

 Similar to Takhar, Maclaran, and Stephens' (2012) informants who use Bollywood as an important space for negotiating various tensions between family-based and more individualistic value systems, Muslim informants use the TSO consumption as a liminal space to address taboo topics such as the secular Muslim and the non-secular lifestyles and value systems. The TSO industry offers consumers a hybridised representation of everyday life (regarding professional and personal, public and private life) that veers beyond limits of taboo but is yet familiar and in touch with tradition. These representations are neither fully foreign nor fully culturally proximal (Straubhaar 1991). This prompts consumers to search for ways to reconcile secular-Muslim and non-secular Muslim gender role ideals and

oppositional cultural discourses. This is attained differently by male and female informants: females see the possibility of other selves (Muslim, yet more empowered), whereas men see the opportunity to challenge both women's and Turkey's version of Islam to sustain local religious and patriarchal norms.

Men also communicate a strong distaste and a fear of ethnic 'contamination' (Turkification), arising from historical-political tensions. During fieldwork, it was observed that Bulgaria still partially defines itself through anti-Ottoman sentiments. Local shop owners and interviewees informed researchers that some of their friends prefer not to have any Turkish friends. They mentioned that petitions against Turkey's accession to the EU collected by the nationalist party amounted to 300,000 signatures, which we verified (Balkan Insight, 2010). The hated neighbour truism (Miscevic 1999) contributed to the lack of contact that meant knowledge about the Turks from Turkey was previously drawn from current politics and history textbooks.

For example, some Serbian informants claim that being anti-Ottoman is a part of Serbian identity. Thus, cultural proximity (see Buccianti 2009) does not overcome post-colonial resentment:

> "*It's all part of the same plan, to make south Slavs more open towards Turks…Serbia and Croatia are full of Turkish soap-operas. This show about Sultan Suleiman is…certainly the worst one in terms of Turkish propaganda*". (Luca, M, Serbian)

The rhetoric of imperial occupation is present in the informants' interpretations of current taboo topics. Men used history and politics to counter-argue women's discussion of taboo. They invoke the slave trade and argue that the 'Turkish invaders' are after the Slavic genes:

"of course if they could, they would take our girls… like they always did… better genes…" (Dimo, M, Serbian)

When compared and contrasted across contexts that exist to the East and West of Turkey, women's discussion of taboo is perceived as defiance more by the patriarchal apparatuses of the religious institutions in the Middle East and by the males who strongly identify with their Slavic origins in Christian Orthodox communities. Hobson (1982) argues there are as many interpretations of a programme as individual viewers bring to it. This partially explains the gendered readings of TSOs in the viewers' social and discursive contexts, which determines the range of interpretations (Storey 2010). In this regard, gender demarcates interpretive communities (Fish 1980, Yannopoulou and Elliott 2008).

Muslim consumers use TSOs with secular storylines and lifestyles to define their fears and desires and to understand taboos. The male informants from the Balkans are more threatened by historical dramas like *Magnificent Century* as these products enable women to talk openly about such taboo topics as women's empowerment. This indicates that, in addition to religious affinities, historical relations should be taken into account to understand consumption of cultural goods containing taboos.

These gendered interpretations illustrate that understandings of gender and religious norms and consequent expectations are being simultaneously modified through the consumption of soap operas. These kinds of commonalities across localities represent politics as relations among strangers (Young 1990), indicating that a Greek woman and a Saudi Arabian woman may have more in common than meets the eye: articulating thoughts related to taboo issues, and in turn, being challenged by men. Consumption of taboo produces new imagined identities such as the new Muslim woman or the empowered/aware/outspoken Balkan woman. According to Barker, "[n]ew forms of identity

are forged out of shared concerns along the axis of class, ethnicity, gender, age, etc. This is an anti-essentialist position in which similarity is strategic and created." (1997, p.616). Here, women strategically identify and ally themselves with other women. Ethnic and religious identities are cut across by gender when expectations about local gender norms and religious impositions are being reformulated. These have been made possible by viewing the cultural products of the 'other'. The consumers are freed to discuss contemporary concerns in a way that would not be possible if the stories were their own.

Discussion

Despite soap operas being frequently dismissed as escapist, we demonstrate that soap operas have been viewed as dangerous by certain societal forces. TSOs are perceived as offensive and as a challenge to patriarchy because of the taboo topics they feature. In particular, we illustrate that TSO consumption opens up a liminal space for discussing such taboo subjects as sex, drinking, and rape. In this way, everyday talk becomes imbued with topics and discourse borrowed from TSOs, enmeshing the local understandings and normative expectations of gender and religion with what is 'foreign', and addressing taboo. In addition, TSOs function as the liminal, where the taboo can be experienced without traversing extensively into a new identity project or without having to visit Turkey. TSOs allow consumers to sample the 'other' lifestyle and to imagine identity projects that may or may not be tried by drawing mediated understandings of Turkish people.

Although women's position in soap operas are definitely not free from patriarchal hegemony and are coded within 'modern' gender roles (O'Neil 2013), we also illuminate that women are not necessarily victim subjects. This is precisely because the patriarchal

hegemony views talking about transgressing norms as dangerous, and women do talk about the possibility of transgressing norms. Thus, informants challenge Stern's (2005) work that soap opera consumption teaches consumers vulnerability. Also, we show how marketing and consumption open up avenues for discussing taboo issues and bring forth debates and understandings about who is entitled to 'define' Islam and whose version of Islam is a 'better' Islam. In the predominantly Muslim countries, TSOs are perceived as challenge by men as the consumption of TSOs trigger discussions about 'real Islam', thus questioning the patriarchy's monopoly over making the religious rules and designing gender relations. Men do not want re-interpretation of these Islamic guidelines. In this way we extend Jafari and Suerdem's (2012) work in terms of gendered consumption. Finally, taboos are also used for conjuring mediated understanding of Islam, Turks, Turkey, and the former Ottoman Empire. Thus, this cultural product, and how taboos are communicated and consumed through it, lie at the intersection of history and politics.

Soap operas have previously been conceptualised as offering escape from everyday life. What we find is that they provide an immersion platform, a liminal space which allows for confrontation of, rather than escape from, socio-cultural taboos. We are offered an alternative conceptualisation: that 'light' entertainment smuggles in opportunities to engage with 'heavy' topics. This is not to say that soap operas are uniformly empowering (and neither do we agree with the discourse that they are all-enslaving), but that they provide windows of opportunity for viewers in this context to engage with and to articulate their opinions regarding taboo topics. By drawing on the phenomena and consumption practices shown in this research, we have been able to explore a previously under-

researched area of taboos, the ways in which popular media are able to express taboo topics within conservative societies, and how these topics are received.

Jafari and Süerdem (2012) argue that "in their everyday life consumption practices, Muslims (re)interpret religious guidelines in different ways and refer to Islam as a transcendental set of guidelines to make better sense of their cultural practices" (p.61). Here, we have illustrated that whether these guidelines can be interpreted, talked about, or practiced in different ways is underpinned by gender. We draw the conclusion that although merely discussing taboos is enacted as dissonance rather than public defiance about issues such as gender equality, patriarchy and rape, they are nevertheless perceived as defiant by men and other patriarchal figures such as clerics precisely because they are spoken about. Thus, it is the articulation of the taboo that poses problems for the local patriarchy or hegemony. Although women may never act based on their analyses, merely talking about taboo topics is perceived as defiance. Furthermore, although one *fatwa* was issued to behead the broadcasters of the TSOs, the audiences continued to watch TSOs thus adding to our understanding of consumption of taboo products under Fatwa (religious ruling) (Muhamed and Mizerski 2013).

Moreover, "when market offerings conflict with religious control of nonmarket social institutions, believers are forced to re-evaluate what it means to be faithful" (Mittelstaedt 2002, p.13) and "when notions of right and wrong conflict directly with market offerings, followers are forced to choose between market actions and faith" (ibid). Through TSOs, female consumers re-evaluate what it means to be a good Muslim and the related norms of gender, both taboo subjects. This results in a discussion and a revised set of expectations. In

this vein, they perform a societally acceptable, exploratory self that seeks to understand, express and delve more deeply into taboo topics.

Finally, we bring insights from a non-Western post-colonial context, thus contributing to the previous literature on transnational consumption of popular culture. As the previous studies examined taboo in Western soap operas, they cannot necessarily offer insight into the consumption of those from Eastern contexts. Thus, our study illuminates how taboo topics are circulated and received in the Global South and the gendered reception of such topics. In this way, we build on Izberk-Bilgin's (2010) call to study the market(ing)-based relationships between Global South countries and provide a more inclusive account of transnational consumption of popular (taboo) texts.

We illuminate that gendered discussions of taboos are underpinned by former imperial and current political relationships. Unlike previous studies, our focus is on how relationship between countries with common (religious) pasts manifests itself in current understandings of market offerings. Spivak (1985) argues that both local and colonial rulers allow the subaltern women no discursive position from which to speak (for) themselves. In this context, TSOs provide such a liminal avenue for subaltern women to speak because the shows are used to challenge the norms in local gender relations by communicating expectations.

This research represents a 6 year snapshot in time, and is therefore limited by that frame. During and since the end of data analysis, many political changes and tragedies occurred in several of the research locations. Thus, the limitation is that the context is now different.

Although the TSOs continue their popularity, their reception may have changed. Future

research could investigate whether TSOs have a use in tumultuous times, and whether the

women initiate any actual changes as a consequence of being exposed to TSOs.

Furthermore, future research could focus further on how the audiences make use of

historical and contemporary [geo]political discourses to interpret taboos in soap operas (see

Yalkin 2017). Finally, as there are a multiplicity of interpretations (Storey 2010), future

research could investigate whether consumers in this context form interpretive

communities (Fish 1980).

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Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Question Guide

When did you start watching TSOs?

Where did you hear about them?

Which TSOs do you currently watch?

How many do you watch in a day/week? (Does this include weekends?)

Do you watch alone or with friends or family? (probe)
(If both: Do you enjoy the TSOs more when you watch them alone or with company?)

Would you say you enjoy the same TSOs as your wife/husband?

Which TSOs are your favourites? Why?

Are there any that you think talk about difficult/special/off-limits issues?

What do you think about the protagonists? (probe)

What do you think about the plots? (probe)

What is the best aspect of watching TSOs?

Are there any negative aspects of watching TSOs?