# Turkish Soaps: Understanding Pleasure Among Iranians and the Underlying Political Economy

ALIREZA AZERI MATIN
*International University of Malaya-Wales*

## ABSTRACT

This article examines how young urban audiences in Iran derive pleasure from transnationally broadcasted Turkish soaps. Since the early 1990s, the furtherance of developments in communication technologies and the emergence of the new forces in the global television market have resulted in a profusion of free-to-air satellite TV programmes, transforming the television in Iranians' living rooms from a local and monotonous medium into a vibrant and abundant one. Flooded with a cornucopia of tele-viewing choices, Iranian audiences have particularly been enthralled by Turkish soap operas in recent years. Such popularity, especially among younger audiences, is remarkable considering the general prohibition of satellite TV in Iran and authorities' specific censure of Turkish soaps for having corrupting effects on Iranian culture. While soaps have historically been regarded as pleasurable texts primarily aimed towards women, the consumption of non-local forms of such popular cultural programmes both by male and female Iranian audiences raises questions about the kind of pleasures derived according to their gender-specificity. Through an analysis of the data drawn from a series of focus group discussions with 25-35 years old participants in Tehran, this study explores the diverse ways in which these individuals derive pleasure from watching Turkish soaps. Ultimately, the findings challenge the extrapolation of the traditional theories of political economy, which regards Turkish soaps as global purveyors of predetermined pleasure circumscribed by forces of international markets, and instead suggests that the kinds of pleasure can only be ascertained at the local level of consumption.

**Keywords**: *Satellite TV, Iranian audiences, Turkish soaps, pleasure, political economy*.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, the entrance of the satellite TV into the Iranian mediascape has marked an epoch-making era of globalisation for the nation, as this relatively neoteric and unfettered mode of delivering televisual contents established its burgeoning presence in Iranians' living rooms (Partovi, 2018; Khiabani, 2019). Soon after, the rapid proliferation of Iranian diasporic television networks and their diverse and superior contents eclipsed all the inferior, inadequate and monotonous state-provided television programmes (Alikhah, 2007; Atashi, 2018). Among Iranian diasporic television networks is the family-owned General Entertainment and Media Group, also known as GEM TV, which from 2006 began the production and broadcast of various television programmes. However, in the past few years, GEM TV started to capitalise on broadcasting dubbed Turkish soaps, which created an immense vibe, particularly amongst younger people in Iran (Alikhah, 2018). Turkish soaps, which are usually longer than their counterparts produced by other countries, instead of being perceived as lengthy and tedious, have created many talks and discussions among Iranian viewers who fervently follow their stories (Başar, 2015; Tabrizi, 2018, Kursun, 2019).

Nonetheless, Turkish soaps' exceptional popularity among Iranians did not go unnoticed by authorities who consistently condemned GEM TV for enabling just another form of the West's cultural invasion (e.g., *Iranian Officials Failing*, 2011; Karimi, 2017). Iranians'

increasing attraction to Turkish soaps has also repeatedly stirred up a series of heated debates among religious and political pundits across national media, deprecating the social and cultural impacts of these television programs (e.g., *Iran blames Turkish*, 2013; Cetingulec, 2019) and their detrimental political and economic implications (e.g., *Chera Serialhaye Torkie*, 2012; *GEM TV's $200 Million*, 2015).

In a similar vein, the scholarly works of international critics around Turkish soaps have been inundated by the approaches adopted from the Frankfurt School's political economy, which often sought to explain this cultural phenomenon from deterministic views of the classic Marxist tradition (e.g., Yiğit, 2013; Yesil, 2015; Gümüş, Zhaxyglova, & Mirzabekova, 2017; Jabbour, 2017; Cavusoglu, Horn, Jerome, & Cavazos, 2018; Constantinou & Tziarras, 2018). Revolving around culture industry and Marxist theories, such studies examined the degree to which global market forces and other economic structures influence ideological or cultural outcomes. These accounts have primarily embraced the structuralist paradigm of political economy, assuming the centrality of the ownership and control of the forces and relations of media as the sole determining factor for both what gets produced and consumed (Laughey, 2007).

Other studies, however, have frequently relied on media 'effects' or 'uses and gratifications' theories, trying to find out about Turkish soaps' social/behavioural influences on various local populations or to identify the predetermined motives for audiences' selection and consumption (e.g. Aljammazi & Asil, 2017; Rymbayeva, 2019; Pothou, 2020). By the same token, the majority of scholars in Iran have researched political/economic implications of Turkish soaps in the region and/or statistic-based investigations that have sought to establish some generalisable correlations between consumption and behaviour or attitude (e.g. Tarzaminejad & Sefidgar, 2016; Gholamian, Farashbandi, & Zangeneh, 2017).

However, this study, rather than looking at what media do to the audience or, even more appropriately, what audiences do with the media, brings to light the concept of *pleasure,* which has also been central to feminist and cultural studies. This reminds us of how Ien Ang answered the self-imposed question of why people watched *Dallas* by stating that "clearly because they find it enjoyable" (1985, p.9). In this view, the primary task of the present study is to identify the kinds of pleasure derived from Turkish soaps for a specific group of Iranian audiences who live under more or less similar circumstances. Furthermore, this study draws on cultural studies' conceptualisation of pleasure as a social construction. It emphasises the inevitability of the audience's interplay in the communication process, which is often taken for granted in generally structuralist views of the traditional political economy (Biltereyst & Meers, 2011).

From this standpoint, media industries and states and markets are not the only shapers of the world; rather, individuals' local circumstances and the different ways that they perceive the world can profoundly shape the reception of Turkish soaps and the pleasures derived thereof. Hence, this study neither intends to downplay the idea that Turkish soaps' production and worldwide distribution are first and foremost aimed for capturing new markets and increasing profitability (Doyle, 2013), nor to disregard their hegemonic cultural capabilities. Nevertheless, it resists the absolutist implications of Adorno's notion of the culture industry that regards Turkish soaps as standardised popular cultural commodities and predetermined pleasurable texts circulating globally for the mass audiences' consumption and their presumably limited palette of pleasure (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Soap Operas and Gender*

The studies on soaps tend to suggest that this genre is dominantly about women (Kuhn, 2007; Bhowmick & Sharief, 2020), as they are usually based on personal relationships and emotional dramas (Geraghty, 1996; Spence, 2005). Soaps are also about the dramatisation of inherent gender distinction and the desire for intimacy (Nochimson, 1992). As Burton (2010) noted, soaps share the common characteristics with women's novels and magazines or melodrama movies. In this way, they are generally about feelings, state of relationships, sense of security or lack of it, subtleties in social behaviour and personalities, and 'uses and effects of talks' in their verbal and non-verbal forms (Burton, 2010). Besides domestic concerns (Modleski, 1982) and the talks about feelings as well as many other issues in soaps that most women can relate to, there are specific social roles taken up by female characters which are in accord with patriarchal culture, suggesting the soaps' particular organisation for addressing female viewers (Mumford, 1995).

The evolvement of the soaps, however, included endeavors such as the incorporation of different programme structures as well as the representation of women as individuals rather than group, which has changed the perspectives on this genre, especially the idea that once regarded soaps as daytime television for housewives (Calvert, Casey, Casey, French, & Lewis, 2007). The early assumption about soaps that considered them as women's programmes has been controversial as today, television companies more and more strive to increase their programmes' viewership by recognising gender differences in the appeal of specific programs. As at present, soaps are watched by many people of both sexes, the research on their audiences that formerly were commonplace for feminist altercations is now open to a more diverse range of arguments (Watson & Hill, 2015).

*Soap Operas and Pleasure*

It was not until the 1980s that the concept of pleasure was brought into view by communication and cultural studies, which was only defined in psychological terms as individuals' sensation of desirable feeling or gratifying excitement (O'sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, & Fiske, 1994). More recently, in response to the semiotic analysis and structuralism, the cultural studies have given precedence to "the social, ideological and discursive aspects of pleasure" and the various ways in which texts may be enjoyed by their readers (O'sullivan et al., 1994). In the case of soaps, however, Hobson (1982) and Ang (1985) are among the seminal feminist studies that have shifted attention from textual power in making meaning to the resistance and empowerment of the audience. With particular emphasis on diversity in the reception of soaps and their pleasures for women, these works have exemplified how viewers may take up various 'subject positions' to experience and understand such televisual texts. As Ang (1985) noted, the soaps are about pleasures of experiencing the narrative, identification with characters and plots, escapism, the approbation of both empowerments as well as the subordination of women.

Fiske (1987) categorised the efforts of media and cultural studies scholars in theorising pleasure under three significant headings, all of which can be utilised to understand the pleasures of the television texts. The first group of theories fall under the psychoanalytical heading, which follows the Freudian tradition and deals with pleasures gained by identification/voyeurism. These theories mainly stem from film studies and feminist researchers such as Mulvey (1975), who argued that visual pleasure was linked to the

dominant, patriarchal ideology. Nonetheless, while Mulvey and the like-minded scholars' approach gives some valuable insights into the pleasures of the television text when applied to specific ways in which women have been the object of a male gaze, it seems to be more directed towards the conditions of cinema spectators rather than those of the domestic television viewing where the audience is regarded "as more active, and certainly less voyeuristic" (Calvert et al., 2007).

The second heading under which pleasure has been conceptualised within media and cultural studies has been influenced by semiotics, especially those of Barthes (1974), who distinguished two types of pleasure regarding the media texts: *plaisir* and *jouissance*. The former term refers to the familiarity and ordinariness of the text, which is linked to the audience's hegemonic relations. The latter, however, refers to the audiences' euphoria, a sense of breakaway from the limits and constraints of the conventional forms, and experiencing a feeling of elation and climax from their viewing. Hence, the concept of *jouissance* can be more generally applied to popular television as it is linked to the circumvention of the social order. That is to say, the omnipresent tension between high and low culture or the disparagement on popular television by some moral guardians becomes a battleground for obtaining pleasure.

Through this last sense, pleasure becomes social (the third in Fiske's typology), where it can be seen as a multifaceted and socially constructed phenomenon. Pleasure, therefore, can be interpreted by individuals in different ways depending on their ideological positions (O'Connor & Klaus, 2000). Accordingly, the rejection of the preferred meanings of television texts becomes possible by the less powerful groups in a contestation process from which new meanings and pleasures emerge (Calvert et al., 2007). The understanding of pleasure in this way is also consistent with numerous works of feminist scholars who put forward the idea of audiences' active engagement and creative ways to derive pleasure from soaps (Brunsdon, 2005; Brown, 2009; Harrington, 2010; & Hayward, 2015). Furthermore, as Couldry and McCarthy (2004) pointed out, extra-textual experiences of online engagements may also become a source of gaining pleasure for fans of some popular televisions such as soaps. Although the struggle over the meaning as such provides a substantial amount of pleasure, as Calvert and colleagues (2007, p.197) noted, it may by no means imply undermining the cultural and economic system put forward by proponents of political economy.

*Political Economy and Global Media*

A political economy approach can undertake many problems in explaining the complex relationships between media and society. The political economy of media, particularly within the cultural industries doctrine, takes it as self-evident that media studies must be located concerning their place within the broader economic and social context (Winseck, 2011). Looking at media as an industry while discounting technological determinism can broaden our perspectives on the media contents and audiences (Hodkinson, 2016). Aligned to classical Marxism, the political economy of media brings into view the crucial role of those who own the forces and relations of media production, which inevitably determines consumption (Laughey, 2010). This view, while emphasising "the role of the state and capital in controlling labour and pleasing and ideologizing consumers and citizens", highlights the influence of market forces on media content and looks to production as a site of value and tool of power (Miller & Kraidy, 2016, p.39).

Nevertheless, the popularity of globalisation during the 1960s and 1970s, which generally refers to a wide range of social and economic developments, has extended the critical views on the political economy beyond the boundaries of nation-states. The increasing scale of human activities associated with globalisation includes media industries' serious inclination to reach out to as many people as possible around the globe to sell the text that they produce (Hollows, 2016). This contemporary form of media globalisation that followed the economic changes of post-Fordism, as Havens and Lotz (2016) pointed out, was driven by the affordability of digitisation and the efforts of global advertising companies to develop new markets around the world. Furthermore, as Calvert and colleagues observed, the globalisation of media production and distribution has also created concerns about *cultural imperialism* and "homogenization of television culture as programming is required to appeal to large, transnational audiences" (Calvert et al., 2007, p.207).

Although Schiller (1969) insisted that the West, mainly the US, is still a significant exporter of media texts, yet, as Hesmondhalgh (2013), demonstrated, the interrelationship between national media cultures and global media flows are complex and cannot be reduced to the single global culture. Sklair (2013) also points to the increasing complexity in 'power flow' through which social, economic and political processes operate internationally. Countries such as Brazil, India, Hong Kong and Turkey are now considered alternative media production centres, and their exports to various markets around the world, including the US, have a significant influence on the global flow of the media. Moreover, many audience studies such as the one conducted by Liebes and Katz (1993) have shown cultural resistance towards supposedly imperialist agendas.

*Political Economy of Turkish Soaps*
The landscape of television programming in Turkey was marked by an excess in the production of local innovative TV series during the 1990s right after the privatisation of television channels in this country, which resulted in an explosion of domestic production and nationwide consumption of Turkish popular culture (Aksoy & Robins, 1997). Television channels such as TRT, STAR, SHOW, Kanal D, Kanal 7, ATV, tv8, and FOX are among producers/distributors of locally-made popular cultural programmes. As a result of tough competition between these television channels, almost half of the produced TV series do not usually run beyond a dozen episodes as they cannot meet the market's expectations (Ros, 2013).

With the saturation of the local market and following the further developments in the production of Turkish TV series, television companies began to look for new frontiers beyond the constraints of their national market (Pekman & Tüzün, 2012). In the past few decades, Turkey's Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) which was initially established in 1994 with the sole aim of regulating broadcasts and allocating/distributing the airwaves within the national boundaries, has taken on a new role and a modified course of action. During this period, RTÜK has actively pursued a policy to form a transnational broadcasting sphere, decentralising and challenging the politics of the global media production/flow and positioning Turkey as a leading actor in the Middle East's broadcasting landscape (Kaptan & Karanfil, 2013).

Yörük and Vatikiotis (2013) point to the statistics reflected in the Turkish daily newspaper *Today's Zaman*, which showed Turkey supplied more than 35,675 hours of television programs to more than 76 countries worldwide in a period from 2005 until 2011. A

great percentage of these exports were soap operas grossing more than USD 60 million (Deniz, 2010). However, the spiked demand for these exported TV programmes was mainly from the Middle Eastern countries and the Balkans and Turkish-speaking West Asian nations. The year 2014 marked a new era for Turkey when it became the second-biggest television drama producer in the world, after the US, exceeding over USD 200 million of revenue from the exports. Turkish TV dramas' global export trend continued to rise even higher to USD 350 million, as announced by the chief of Istanbul's Chamber of Commerce in October 2015 in Cannes (Alankuş & Yanardağoğlu, 2016). It is also estimated that the yearly income of Turkey from television exports will exceed 1 billion USD in 2023, according to Bader Arslan, the Secretary-General of the Turkish Exporters Assembly (Tali, 2016).

The worldwide appeal of Turkish soaps and their undeniable contribution to Turkey's economy, however, has persuaded a great number of researchers to seek an explanation for this global phenomenon's success. In doing so, their works have primarily addressed the interrelationships between the institutional structures and forces of the global market, implying their theoretical reliance on a political economy framework that renders the audiences inept in the face of all-powerful media industries.

Hinged on principles of structuralist paradigm and Marxist theory of political economy, these studies often look at Turkey's imperialist agendas for political and cultural dominance on other nations in the region (Anaz & Ozcan, 2016; Constantinou & Tziarras, 2018). Whereas for followers of the 'culture industry' thesis, mass media is seen to reduce social life to just commodity consumption (Bettig, 2002; Holmes, 2005), political economy advocates have tended to focus on media content and dismiss the significance of their audiences (Mosco, 2008). Stevenson contested this view and argued that "mass communications research should articulate a political economy of the cultural industries", but it should reconnect it with concerns related to the "interpretive horizons of the audience" (2002, p.46). Silverstone (1990) also points to the plurality of audiences and argues that "the audience is not a discrete phenomenon," it is "both ephemeral and partial".

Hence, while the global rise of Turkish soaps and the ramifications of their influence on other nations are largely explainable within such structuralist frameworks, their analyses are limited to macro perspectives of political economy that essentially seek the link between television content production and their finances. Contesting such traditional views while supporting cultural studies theorists, the constructivist approach to political economy highlights social contexts and individual circumstances as the primary factor that influences media reception (Baran & Davis, 2011). From a constructivist perspective, the production and consumption of Turkish soaps and their pleasurability are not merely the consequences of institutional structures and practices or the driving forces of the global economy of media. Instead, individuals and groups who consume popular culture contents resist interpreting them in ways that would serve producers' interests and do not simply assent to the range of pleasures prescribed by such media industries (Livingstone, 1989).

## METHODOLOGY
The findings presented in this study are drawn from the analysis of the data gathered by conducting a series of focus group interviews with 25 to 35-year-old Iranians living in the northern part of Tehran (middle-class dominated districts) who regularly watched Turkish soaps. The intention for investigating this age group first and foremost was based on the perceived similarities of these individuals in terms of belonging to a more or less alike stage of life and condition of living: being born after Islamic Revolution, having a minimum college

degree, an early phase of their careers and so on. The individuals within this age group (considering the urban Iranian culture) are also likely to use the same vernacular and linguistic terminologies, as they are not too young or too old to have conversational variance in their talks and communication styles. The selection of the candidates from residents of northern Tehran was also in line with the idea of narrowing the focus of the study in terms of socioeconomic status and class distinction as such demographic divisions are assumed to play a crucial role in contemporary Iranian society.

Subsequently, through snowball sampling, individuals were nominated and then recruited, forming six groups of four participants. These groups are designed to be homogeneous in terms of gender (three male and three female groups) in order to have more complementary interactions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) while enabling the possibility of comparing/contrasting the perspectives between males and females. The discussions were held in home settings where the hosts were asked to invite their friends, relatives or colleagues as possible candidates for focus groups, provided they fit in the sampling categories that required them to have a minimum college education and be from Shia middle-class families. The interviews were tape-recorded, translated and then transcribed before they were manually coded and validated through intercoder agreement (a local graduate school student).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Betrayal, Infidelity and Their Consequences*

The identification with characters, the viewers' para-social interactions, their desire to imitate and consider them as role models contribute to building a relationship between the audience and the soap characters (Pitout, 2007). However, the recognition of various themes presented in soaps brings about similitudes of real-life situations that viewers are often familiar with and can relate to. In this way, as the identification with characters and themes becomes more intense, the audience involvement increases, leading to the attainment of joy, excitement and pleasure. The predominant themes in Turkish soaps, as almost all participants noted, are betrayal and infidelity. Male participants directly expressed their interest in watching such immoralities:

> Telling lies, betrayals, framing others are attractive themes for Iranians because we do them here (smiling) we like arguments and fights and intimate scenes (others nod and laugh) (Amir, Male Group 3).

Unlike male participants who bluntly regarded immoralities for pleasurability of Turkish soaps, their female counterparts unanimously denied deriving pleasure from such themes, but said that they liked to watch them because they had no better choice for television viewing:

> Turkish series have nothing to offer, but unfaithfulness and infidelity. Even though so, everyone watches them . . . we have no other choice, but to watch them (Maryam, Female Group 1).

Naturally, female participants were too inhibited to unswervingly admit their curiosities about betrayal or infidelity and their consequences. However, while they strongly deplored immoralities in Turkish soaps, they tactfully mentioned how these programmes provided an opportunity for 'other people' (rather than for 'themselves'), in order to fantasize about the thrill of betrayal and infidelity:

> People take up the roles in their imaginations to see how it feels about betraying or be betrayed in those situations and to know the unpredictable outcomes of these consequences if they did betray or be betrayed themselves. They want to see what will happen if they did such things. These behaviours then become normal after some time. They learn to react much like what they do when someone betrays them . . . it affects people's lives greatly (Elham, Female Group 2).

As part of their strategies in explaining why they liked Turkish soaps, female participants also pointed to the excitement of unpredictability and the erratic change in the plots of Turkish soaps as one of the main reasons for the appeal of the show:

> Unlike Iranian series, they (Turkish soaps) are not predictable at all . . . the only predictable thing about them is infidelity, but who betrays who is always unpredictable . . . this unpredictability makes people to watch them (Parisa, Female Group 1).

Furthermore, while they acknowledged the satellite TV as a godsend medium that liberated them from restrictions of mainstream television, they also impugned local drama series for being predictable, monotonous and uncompetitive:

> I cannot wait for the clock to hit 10 pm to watch them (Turkish soaps), to see what happens in a new episode . . . themes in the Iranian series are repetitive. Iranian TV series are restricted to certain themes and dialogues, and acts (Elmira, Female Group 2).

> Nowadays television is all about satellite and GEM TV. . . . they are not quality programmes, but our TV has nothing for us . . . we are left with no choice, but to watch them even though they all have bad teachings . . . we all follow these TV series . . . everyone knows it has bad teachings like infidelity and betrayals (Sepideh, Female Group 2).

As a common theme in Turkish soaps, betrayal and infidelity conjure up a sense of excitement for participants who imagine taking part in extreme emotional situations that, even though they are conceivable, yet unlikely to happen in real life. Therefore, knowingly they step into an imaginary realm filled with guilt and immoralities and test their judgements and conjectures to predict and evaluate the consequences of such licentious and wicked acts as if they happened to them in the real world. Hence, while the viewers secure a position in a particular story, sharing the joy and thrill of experiencing the emotional states that characters undergo, they remain clear that they are not the wrongdoers but just observers of others' wrongdoings.

*The Taste of Freedom*
Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the mainstream media in Iran has consistently operated within the Shia and revolutionary ideological framework based on a clear divide between the West and its culture. Therefore, the state's fundamentalist and anti-West stance towards the culture has significantly influenced the contents of all forms of the state-controlled media outputs (Moinipour, 2019). The emergence of free-to-air satellite TV since the 1990s, however, provided a plethora of different contents that were beyond the state regulations. The majority of the globally circulating programmes available via satellite TV originate from the West or are heavily influenced by western practices and media culture (including Turkish soaps). Consequently, the themes and contents of these programmes are often infused with the concept of 'freedom' that is regarded as one of the essential and highly venerated ideas in the West's system of ethics and values. Nonetheless, while the meaning of 'freedom' may differ depending on who uses the term and in what context, it appeared to be one of the key terms that participants mentioned as they tried to explain why they enjoyed Turkish soaps:

> The way they (actors and actresses in Turkish soaps) play their roles looks very natural . . . you can feel the freedom in their performances and also in their lives . . . the events are all actual life events, unlike our TV series which are overwhelmed with fakeness (Elmira, Female Group 2).

The above quote by Elmira demonstrates an aspect of freedom that refers to the existing disparity between domestic and international television productions in terms of censorship and control over the media content. Therefore, freedom at this level seems to be one of the primary sources of pleasure for general users of satellite TV in Iran. Such pleasures, however, are more readily available in Turkish soaps where scores of unrestricted open scenes and exposing performances dominate the overall representational aspects of these television dramas. This view was standard among most participants who blamed the tight regulations and heavy censorship in domestic media production that resulted in the excessive 'fakeness' and lack of quality in Iranian television programmes. However, male participants began to show signs of moral panic as they spoke critically about propagating intemperate freedom in Turkish soaps and their immoral consequences for Iranian viewers:

> Turkish soaps have opened people's eyes and ears . . . Turkish people trying to show they are tolerant towards their wives' infidelity, just like what Westerners do . . . this is, of course, appealing for many of us who are deprived from basic forms of freedom, as we want to see how it looks like and how it feels to live their lives (Ashkan, Male Group 1).

> Iranian girls were much more faithful, docile and amenable in the past . . . now only 30 per cent are like that . . . certainly because of the rise in women's expectations (Peyman, Male Group 2).

Freedom, especially in terms of social liberty and individual autonomy, is one of the main pillars of the value system of the West (Blokland, 2019) and is frequently reflected in various forms of Western popular culture that particularly dominates the world's entertainment television. In this sense, freedom is more than ever looked up by the nations

who consider themselves stripped from this inherent civic right by their presumably autocratic and repressive states (Huntington, 1996). In Iran, however, while the state relentlessly disapproves of freedom and other Western values, transnational broadcasts are forbidden for being the means for disseminating such seemingly pro-western and anti-Islamic values. Unlike the state-run national television and its second-rate and heavily controlled contents, satellite TV has copiously offered Iranian audiences a wide range of entertainment programmes through a distinctive television viewing experience independent from the state's ideological influence (Azeri Matin, 2020). Turkish soaps, in particular, have provided a unique sense of contentment for the viewers as they observe characters that are ethnically not very different from them yet living a utopian life in a land not far away. Although watching Turkish soaps was considered by participants to be a guilt-ridden and self-reproachful ritual, these televisions were also seen to be blissful enough to bestow a pleasant taste of freedom upon them.

*Modernity, Fashionability and Appeal of the Western Culture*
Soap operas are traditionally produced parallel to the modernist practices of the Western capitalist societies with the intention of economic gain through mass production and promoting consumerism (Allen, 1995). Hence, as in many other television genres, soap operas deploy a specific narrative and various audial/visual construction techniques to promulgate and normalise consumerism's dominant ideologies and discourses. The continuity of the soaps and their popularity in many contexts worldwide has long-established the idea of a close relationship between these pleasurable texts' appeal to the mass audience and consumerist culture. In this way, while Turkish soaps predominantly are regarded to project the Western capitalist culture (Çevik, 2014), the participants in this research reflected on specific aspects of the Western culture that seemed to provide enjoyment for them. In this regard, the participants in female Group 2, just like other groups, pointed to high fashion, upper-class lifestyles and other extravagant features shown in these programs:

> They are vulgar, but they are also very modern and up-to-date, stylish, the best lifestyles which are very interesting for us (Elham).

> They show the latest fashions, home decors, furniture, and all those things that make us [Iranians] watch them (Aylar).

Similar to this, all groups, in one way or another, regarded the inclusion of components such as fashionable and good-looking people and their glamorous lives to be part of the reasons for Turkish soaps' allure. However, unlike their female peers, male participants did not directly consider these features as a source of pleasure for themselves; instead, they regarded such aesthetic appeals to be attractive for other Iranians (especially women), not for themselves. In doing so, once again they remained sceptical of the ubiquity of such profligate aspects of modernity in Turkish soaps, considering them as a menace to family life and social relationships:

> Turkish series lack quality . . . they are much more popular among women . . . (women) are crazy about them (Turkish soaps) . . . clothes, dress, home designs and decor, furniture, hairstyles and hair colours, jewelry, and bodies .

> . . men enjoy watching women bodies too . . . the last thing that viewers care about is their stories of betrayals (Peyman, Male Group 2).

> Turkish soaps make people envy the Turks' lifestyles . . . Iranian women emulate what they do . . . these images change the audience's worldviews . . . families who were formerly satisfied now hate their own lives (Nima, Male Group 2).

As elucidated by participants, a significant amount of pleasure of Turkish soaps emanates from their aesthetic appeals. Such features, however, are profoundly inspired and influenced by the mores and cultural praxis of the West. Although representations of modernity and extravagance are seen to have depriving effects on society, as particularly noted by male participants, such aspects continue to be the main reasons for Turkish soaps attractiveness both for men and female audiences in Iran.

*Cultural Proximity*
One of the factors that facilitate the readings of a media text is the readers' familiarity with the cultural meanings embedded in such texts. These are associative meanings that function at the connotation level and are considered "less fixed and therefore more conventionalized and changeable" (Hall, 2006). In this way, audiences' understanding of a television programme and its pleasurability is enhanced or decreased depending on the similarity/difference between the dominant meanings of that television programme and those within the cultural framework of their viewers (Castelló, 2010). In this way, it is sensible to think of the centrality of cultural proximity for Iranian audiences' fascination with Turkish soaps, just like some Arab nations who enjoy watching these imported television dramas because of the similarity of their culture to Turkey's (Berg, 2017). Watching Turkish soaps for Iranian viewers, therefore, are seen to offer a different experience from watching both local drama series which lack quality as well as non-Turkish imported soaps, which are remote in terms of the likeness of culture:

> Farsi 1 (satellite TV channel) tried to show telenovelas to Iranians, but people could not connect with South American culture . . . but we can somehow connect with Turkish culture because they are Muslim too and Turkey is our neighbour. . . stories are the same as what telenovelas are about, things like exaggerations. Unlike Indians who like unbelievable acts shown in Bollywood, Iranians cannot accept unreal acts (Negin, Female Group 3).

The above quote from Negin exemplified the majority of the participants' conception that to enjoy a TV drama series, and perhaps other television genres for that matter, one should be able to connect with the culture of the characters in those programmes. In doing so, both male and female groups specifically pointed to the geographical and cultural proximity, including the likeness in religion and language (same as Turkish, Azeri (Azerbaijani) is the second widely spoken language in Iran which belong to the Turkic language):

> We like them because of their cultural similarity to ours combined with freedoms enjoyed by people in these TV series . . . it creates something that Iranians fantasize about . . . cultural proximity while experiencing freedom (Yashar, Male Group 1).

> We watch Turkish programmes of all kinds a lot . . . anything Turkish we watch (laugh). I watch in the original language because I know some Turkish…they (Turkish soaps) are very popular (Sepideh, Female Group 2).

Surprisingly, however, some of the participants opposed the idea of any cultural similarity between Iranians and Turks, expressing their disbelief in any likeness between life in Iran and the lives of characters in Turkish soaps:

> What is seen in Turkish soaps is against our culture . . . in Iran we are not doing what they do so openly . . . what is happening in Turkey is irrelevant to our lives here (Mehdi, male Group 3).

> I always thought we share a common history, religion and culture, but I have been shocked to see such differences in the way of life between us (Saideh, female Group 3).

Although at large the focus group members subscribed to cultural proximity between Turkish and Iranian, some of them, such as the participants in the above example, made contradictory statements, seemingly on impulse. However, such opposing views cannot be taken at face value since in earlier discussions they seemed to be quite agreeable with others who regarded Iranians to have a great deal in common with Turks in terms of culture. Nonetheless, by looking closer, it became clear that such discrepancies often arise from individuals' strategic positioning of themselves against certain concepts or subjects, which was Turkish culture. Such inconsistencies are likely to occur whenever individuals find any threat to their interests; one usually tends to do whatever it takes to project a positive image of him-/herself, even though it means a radical change in one's views.

While Turkey's modernisation process has been accelerated in the past few decades, partly for the country's diplomacy towards accession to the European Union (Börzel, 2016), Iran has remained isolated especially from the western world due to the state's unyielding foreign policy as well as tight international sanctions (Habibi, 2010; Katzman, 2010). However, Iranians' prevailing attitude holds a shared history and culture with Turks, which goes beyond the geographical division (Barfield, 2002). This has led to a common sentiment among Iranians who often compare themselves with Turkish people and have a strong belief that they deserve to live the way people in their quasi-westernised neighbour country do (Mohebi, 2015).

In this sense, participants regarded cultural proximity as an essential feature for deriving pleasure from Turkish soaps as they could easily relate to Turkish culture and effortlessly imagine themselves living the lives of the fictional characters. Conversely, Iranian soaps were considered not to be on a par with Turkish soaps, as they were conceived to be sterile and substandard in terms of quality and too restricted to be a perceptible representation of real life. Consequently, Turkish soaps seemed to have leapfrogged over

their locally produced counterparts and even those more prominent soaps from other countries worldwide.

## CONCLUSION

This study began with an ambition to explore the reason(s) for the popularity of the Turkish soaps in Iran. As its theoretical basis, this research took a path against the grain; instead of addressing the success of Turkish soaps within the structuralist political economy framework, it examined this global phenomenon through a cultural studies perspective. This meant giving more attention to audiences' activities and their consumption context, rather than economics, industries and markets as the sole determinant for what is produced and consumed. Hence, with an emphasis on the audience's readership, this study drew its data from a series of focus groups, after which their analysis revealed four principal pleasures of Turkish soaps for the research participants: the excitement of seeing possibilities of betrayal and their consequences, imagining life in freedom, feasting their eyes on utopian lives of the others, as well as the joy of being immersed in a different and yet, familiar culture. The analysis also suggested minor inconsistencies in participants' views, with subtle variations between male and female participants that were assumed to be symptomatic of the individuals' readings and cultural relativism and the peculiarity of social and political conditions in Iran.

Nevertheless, in line with the cultural studies premise, the findings of this research consider the pleasures above to be the consequences of the participants' particular socio-cultural backgrounds and personal experiences and their unique circumstances of living in Iran. This is, however, by no means a claim for the exclusiveness of these pleasures only to the participants in this research or an assertion about exhaustiveness of such pleasure categories. Instead, it was an attempt to highlight the idea that pleasure is socially constructed and that more attention should be paid to the key roles of the audiences and their unique experiences if one seeks to find out about the pleasurability of a given popular text. Ultimately, the study's findings contested the structuralist view of Turkish soap's political economy regarding the production of such contents merely the outcomes of the international market forces and the assumption that their global viewers share the same palette of pleasure. In this way, the focus group results were more consistent with the constructivist perspective of cultural studies that acknowledge the role of individuals in making meanings and that the kinds of soaps' pleasures can only be known at the consumption level and through recognition of the distinctiveness of their local receptions.

## BIODATA

*Alireza Azeri Matin* completed his PhD in International University of Malay-Wales (IUMW), Faculty of Arts & Science. His research interest encompasses Media and Communication studies. Email: azeri_matin@yahoo.com

## REFERENCES

Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1997). *Dialectic of enlightenment*. Verso.

Aksoy, A., & Robins, K. (1997). Peripheral vision: Cultural industries and cultural identities in Turkey. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 29*(11), 1937-1952.

Alankuş, S., & Yanardağoğlu, E. (2016). Vacillation in Turkey's popular global TV exports: Toward a more complex understanding of distribution. *International Journal of Communication, 10*, 3615-3631.

Alikhah, F. (2007). The politics of satellite television in Iran. In M. Semati (Ed.), *Media, culture and society in Iran* (pp. 110-126). Routledge.

Alikhah, F. (2018). A brief history of the development of satellite channels in Iran. *Global Media and Communication*, *14*(1), 3-29. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766517734251

Aljammazi, A., & Asil, H. (2017). The influence of Turkısh TV dramas on Saudi consumers' perceptıons, attıtudes and purchase intentions toward Turkish products. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 7*(1), 206-224.

Allen, R. C. (Ed.). (1995) *To be continued…: Soap operas around the world*. London: Routledge.

Anatolia News Agency. (2011, October 13). Iranian officials failing to stop of Turkish TV series. *Hürriyet Daily News*. https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iranian-officials-failing-to-stop-of-turkish-tv-series-6171

Anaz, N., & Ozcan, C. C. (2016). Geography of Turkish soap operas: Tourism, soft power, and alternative narratives. In I. Egresi (Ed.), *Alternative tourism in Turkey* (pp. 247-258). Springer, Cham.

Ang, I. (1985). *Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. Routledge.

Atashi, E. (2018). Iranian diaspora, reality television and connecting to homeland. *Media and Communication*, *6*(2), 179-187.

Azeri Matin, A. (2020). Constructing Iranianness: A discourse analysis of the diasporic reality show Befarmaeed Sham. *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Communication, Language, Literature, and Culture, ICCoLLiC 2020*. Surakarta, Indonesia: EAI. http://dx.doi.org/10.4108/eai.8-9-2020.2301330

Baran, S., & Davis, D. (2011). *Mass communication theory: Foundations, ferment, and future*. Nelson Education.

Barfield, T. (2002). Turk, Persian and Arab: Changing relationships between tribes and state in Iran and along its frontiers. *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, *62*, 38-46.

Barthes, R. (1974). *S/Z: An essay* (Trans. by Richard Miller). New York: Hill and Wang.

Başar, N. (2015, February 17). Iranians learning Turkish to better enjoy TV series. *Daily Sabah*. https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2015/02/17/iranians-learning-turkish-to-better-enjoy-tv-series

Berg, M. (2017). The importance of cultural proximity in the success of Turkish dramas in Qatar. *International Journal of Communication*, *11*, 3415-3430.

Bettig, R. V. (2002). The Frankfurt School and the political economy of communications. In J. T. Nealon & C. Irr (Eds.), *Rethinking the Frankfurt School: Alternative legacies of cultural critique* (pp. 81-93).

Bhowmick, B. Ch., & Sharief, N. (2020). The Popularity of Indian Soap Operas in Bangladesh. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, *36*(3), 14-31. https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2020-3603-02

Biltereyst, D., & Meers, P. (2011). The political economy of audiences. In J. Wasko, G. Murdock & H. Sousa (Eds.), *The handbook of political economy of communications* (pp. 415-435). MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Blokland, H. (2019). *Freedom and culture in western society*. Routledge.

Börzel, T. A. (2016). Europeanisation meets Turkey. A case sui generis?. In A. Carkoglu & B. Rubin (Eds.), *Turkey and the European Union* (pp. 9-21). Routledge.

Brown, L. (2009). Pleasuring body parts: Women and soap operas in Brazil. *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, *23*(1), 6-25.

Brunsdon, C. (2005). *Screen tastes: Soap opera to satellite dishes*. Routledge.

Burton, G. (2010). *Media and society: Critical perspectives*. UK: McGraw-Hill Education.

Calvert, B., Casey, N., Casey, B., French, L., & Lewis, J. (2007). *Television studies: The key concepts*. Routledge.

Castelló, E. (2010). Dramatizing proximity: Cultural and social discourses in soap operas from production to reception. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *13*(2), 207-223.

Cavusoglu, N., Horn, R., Jerome, R., & Cavazos, D. (2018). The Turkish soap opera industry: A case study of the Porter model of national advantage. *Journal of International Management Studies*, *18*(1), 45-54.

Cetingulec, M. (2019, April 12). Turkey's 'morally clean' TV series under fire. *Al-Monitor*. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/04/turkey-morally-clean-tv-series-under-fire.html

Çevik, B. S. (2014). Turkish soap opera diplomacy: A western projection by a Muslim source. *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy*, *5*(1), Art 6, 78-103.

Chera Serialhaye Torkie Dar Iran Tarafdar Darand? [Why Turkish series have so many fans in Iran?] (2012, September 4), *Mashregh News*. Retrieved from https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/149195

Constantinou, C., & Tziarras, Z. (2018). TV series in Turkish foreign policy: Aspects of hegemony and resistance. *New Middle Eastern Studies*, *8*(1).

Couldry, N., & McCarthy, A. (2004). Media pilgrims: On the set of Coronation Street. In R. C. Allen & A. Hill (Eds.), *The television studies reader* (pp. 332-342). Routledge.

Deniz, A. Ç. (2010). Gümüş Dizisinin Arap Kamuoyuna Etkileri Bir Sosyal Medya İncelemesi *Uşak Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler* Dergisi. *Uşak Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, *3*(1), 50-67.

Doyle, G. (2013). *Understanding media economics*. SAGE.

Fiske, J. (1987). *Television culture*. New York: Routledge.

GEM TV's $200 Million Income from Turkish Series [translated]. (2015, October 6). *Mashregh News*. https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/477823/

Geraghty, C. (1996). The aesthetic experience: Soap opera. In J. Corner & S. Harvey (Eds.), *Television times: A reader* (pp. 88-97)*.* Hodder Arnold Publication.

Gholamian, R., Farashbandi, R., & Zangeneh, M. (2017). Investigating the impact of satellite networks (GEM TV and Farsi 1) on the religious beliefs of youth in Farashband City. *Journal of Sociological Studies of Youth*, *8*(27), 23-46.

Gümüş, N., Zhaxyglova, G., & Mirzabekova, M. (2017). Using Turkish soap operas (TV Series) As a marketing communication tool: A Research On Turkish soap operas in Kazakhstan. *International Journal of Eurasia Social Sciences*, *8*(27), 390-407.

Habibi, N. (2010). The impact of sanctions on Iran-GCC economic relations. *Middle East Brief*, *45*(1).

Hall, S. (2006). Encoding/decoding. In G. D. Meenakshi & D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keyworks* (2nd ed., pp. 163-173). Blackwell Publishing.

Harrington, C. (2010). *Soap fans: Pursuing pleasure and making meaning in everyday life*. Temple University Press.

Havens, T., & Lotz, A. (2016). *Understanding media industries*. Oxford University Press.

Hayward, J. (2015). *Consuming pleasures: Active audiences and serial fictions from Dickens to soap opera*. University Press of Kentucky.

Hesmondhalgh, D. (2013). *The cultural industries* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.

Hobson, D. (1982). *Crossroads: The drama of a soap opera*. Methuen, Limited.

Hodkinson, P. (2016). *Media, culture and society: An introduction*. Sage.

Hollows, J. (2016). *Media studies: A complete introduction.* Teach Yourself.

Holmes, D. (2005). *Communication theory: Media, technology, society*. SAGE.

Huntington, S. P. (1996). The West: Unique, not universal. *Foreign Affairs*, 28-46.

Jabbour, J. (2017). Winning hearts and minds through soft power: The case of Turkish soap operas in the Middle East. In N. Lenze, C. Schriwer & Z. Abdul Jalil (Eds.), *Media in the Middle East* (pp. 145-163). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Kaptan, Y., & Karanfil, G. (2013). RTÜK, Broadcasting, and the Middle East: Regulating the transnational. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2232-2340.

Karimi, A. (2017, May 1). Who killed exiled Iranian TV executive in Istanbul?. *Al-Monitor*. https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/iran-saeed-karimian-gem-tv-executive-killed-istanbul.html#ixzz5z8CqfyHV

Katzman, K. (2010). *Iran sanctions*. DIANE Publishing.

Khiabani, K. N. (2019). Satellite TV in Iran and the western cultural assault: From prohibition to conditional freedom. *Journal of Media Studies*, *30*(1).

Kuhn, A. (2007). Women's genres: Melodrama, soap opera, and theory. In C. Brunsdon & L. Spigel (Eds.), *Feminist television criticism: A reader* (2nd ed., pp.225-234). McGraw-Hill Education.

Kursun, M. (2019, December 14). Turkish TV dramas allure Iranian viewers: Turkish TV serials have encouraged many Iranians to connect and learn Turkish language. *Anadolu Agency*. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/culture/turkish-tv-dramas/1645112

Laughey, D. (2007). *Key themes in media theory*. UK: McGraw-Hill Education.

Laughey, D. (2010). *Media studies: Theories and approaches*. Kamera Books.

Liebes, T., & Katz, E. (1993). *The export of meaning: Cross-cultural readings of 'Dallas'*. Oxford University Press.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2017). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Sage publications.

Livingstone, S. M. (1989). Interpretive viewers and structured programs: The implicit representation of soap opera characters. *Communication Research*, *16*(1), 25-57.

Miller, T., & Kraidy, M. M. (2016). *Global media studies*. John Wiley & Sons.

Modleski, T. (1982). *Loving with a vengeance: Mass-produced fantasies for women*. Archon Books.

Mohebi, M. (2015). Dominance in the neighbourhood: Turkey and Iran. In B. S. Çevik & P. Seib (Eds.), Turkey's *public diplomacy* (pp. 85-97). Palgrave Macmillan.

Moinipour, S. (2019). *Human rights, Iranian migrants, and state media: From media portrayal to civil reality*. Routledge.

Mosco, V. (2008). Current trends in the political economy of communication. *Global Media Journal*, *1*(Inaugural Issue), 45-63.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen, 16*(3), 6-19. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6

Mumford, R. E. (1995). *Love and ideology in the afternoon: Soap opera, women and television genre*. Indiana University Press.

Nochimson, M. (1992). *No end to her: Soap opera and the female subject*. University of California Press.

O'Connor, B., & Klaus, E. (2000). Pleasure and meaningful discourse: An overview of research issues. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *3*(3), 369-387. https://doi.org/c4sbcx

O'sullivan, T., Hartley, J., Saunders, D., Montgomery, M., & Fiske, J. (1994). *Key concepts in communication and cultural studies*. London: Routledge.

Partovi, P. (2018). Televisual experiences of Iran's isolation: Turkish melodrama and homegrown comedy in the sanctions era. *Review of Middle East Studies*, *52*(1), 115-134.

Pekman, C., & Tüzün, S. (2012). Turkish television dramas: The economy and beyond. *Cinéma & Cie*, *XII*(19), 93-104.

Pitout, M. (2007). Media audience theory. In P. J. Fourie (Ed.), *Media studies: Media content and media audiences* (pp. 387-421). Juta and Company Ltd.

Pothou, E. (2020). Why so successful? An audience research on the Turkish TV series in Greece. *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, *9*(17), 62–78. http://doi.org/10.18146/view.211

Ros, R. (2013, February 16). The heyday of Turkish content. *TTV News*. https://archive.is/20130216224655/http://www.ttvmedianews.com/scripts/templates/estilo_nota.asp?nota=eng/Distribuci%F3n/Mercados/2012/10_Octubre/15_turquia_mipcom

Rymbayeva, A. (2019). TV soaps influence on the attitudes of Kazakhstani women towards the represented Turkish way of life. In O. Ozgen (Ed.), *Handbook of research on consumption, media, and popular culture in the global age* (pp. 105-122). IGI Global.

Schiller, H. I. (1969). *Mass communications and American empire*. Boston, MA. Beacon Press.

Silverstone, R. (1990). Television and everyday life: Towards an anthropology of the television audience. In M. Ferguson (Ed.), *Public communication: The new imperatives* - Future directions for media research (pp. 173-189). SAGE.

Sklair, L. (2013). Global sociology and global environmental change. In T. Benton & M. Redclift (Eds.), *Social theory and the global environment* (pp. 213-235). Routledge.

Spence, L. (2005). *Watching daytime soap operas: The power of pleasure*. Wesleyan University Press.

Staff, T. (2013, March 31). Iran blames Turkish soaps for divorce rise. *The Times of Israel*. https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-blames-turkish-soaps-for-divorce-rise/

Stevenson, N. (2002). *Understanding media cultures: Social theory and mass communication*. SAGE.

Tabrizi, K. (2018, December 18). 80 per cent of Iranians watch Turkish TV series. *Daily Sabah*. https://www.dailysabah.com/arts-culture/2018/12/18/80-percent-of-iranians-watch-turkish-tv-series-director

Tali, D. (2016, September 8). An unlikely story: Why do South Americans love Turkish TV?. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/business-37284938

Tarzaminejad, V., & Sefidgar, R. (2016). Study the relationship between the type and amount of Turkish soap operas and lifestyle (Between unmarried female students 20 to 25 years of Islamic Azad University of Urmia). *Media Studies, 10*(31), 71-86. https://www.sid.ir/en/Journal/ViewPaper.aspx?ID=537209

Watson, J., & Hill, A. (2015). *Dictionary of media and communication studies*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Winseck, D. (Ed.). (2011). *The political economies of media: The transformation of the global media industries*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Yesil, B. (2015). Transnationalization of Turkish dramas: Exploring the convergence of local and global market imperatives. *Global Media and Communication*, *11*(1), 43-60.

Yiğit, A. (2013). Turkish drama in the Middle East: Secularism and cultural influence. In IEMed (Ed.), *Panorama: The Mediterranean yearbook 2013* (pp. 291-294). European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed).

Yörük, Z., & Vatikiotis, P. (2013). Soft power or illusion of hegemony: The case of the Turkish soap opera "colonialism". *International Journal of Communication (Turkey, the Middle East & The Media)*, *7*, 2361-2385.