Cultural Proximity and Transnational Drama:

Popularity of Turkish TV Content in Pakistan

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Abstract

The research aims to examine the causes behind the rising popularity of Turkish TV dramas in Pakistan as well as looking at the influence of age and gender on the viewing patterns. The survey based study (N=369) also analyzes whether the popularity has led to an increased interest in the culture of Turkey especially in the desire to visit it. Findings of the study reveal that popularity of the play had not led to an increase in desire to visit Turkey and the shows were primarily being watched because of their shooting locales and interesting storylines. It was also revealed that although there is an interest in getting to know about the lives of fellow Muslims via these programs yet there is a realization that the norms and culture of Pakistan are very different from the norms and culture of Turkey. This suggests that the notion of cultural proximity as a reason for increase in popularity needs to be investigated further.

Key Words: *TV Drama; Transnational media; Cultural Proximity; Cultural-linguistic market*

Introduction

The objective of the present research was to examine the perceptions of Pakistani audiences about content emanating from Turkey, a country with which we have had centuries old religious and cultural ties (Ahmad, 1981). Interestingly, Turkish content has become very popular

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in Pakistan even though there is a significant difference in the languages spoken in both the countries. The Turkish phenomenon has become so pervasive in Pakistan that comments like *"Ottoman Turks never expanded their empire as far as today's Pakistan, but some here fear their descendants are now launching a cultural invasion — via popular soap operas"* (Dawn, 26 Nov 2013) are quite common. A similar craze about Turkish media goods has also been observed in other nations as well, and the phenomenon has been termed as the *"neo-Ottoman cool"* (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013). The research also looked at whether cultural proximity played any significant role in the newfound interest in Turkish content.

Background

Since the dawn of the new century, there has been a massive increase in the global appeal of Turkish dramas which are now being exported to more than 40 countries, especially in the Middle East (Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013).

In Pakistan, the trend of Turkish soap operas started as a result of the massive demand to provide content for the multitude of newly launched private channels. The first Turkish program to become really popular was *"Ishq-e-Mamnoo"* followed by *"Fatima Gul"* and *"Mera Sultan"*. Dawn (26 Nov 2013) in its news story quoted data from Media Logic which showed that more than fifty five million viewers tuned in to watch the last episode of *"Ishq-e- Mamnoo"* while other popular programs like *"Fatima Gul"* had an average of thirty million viewers, while *"Fariha"* had an average viewership of 28 million.

Cultural Proximity and Trans-national Media-scape

New media technologies such as the internet and satellite TV have made transnational images available to people from all over the world (Kraidy, 2002). In this context the notion is hybridity is more relevant that cultural imperialism because cultures have always been in the state of becoming hybrids as a result of war, trade migration or even slavery but the new age technologies have made the process a lot faster. Thus, Kraidy (2002) proposes that the transnational media content will increase hybridization and not homogenization across cultures from all over the world. Kraidy (2005) later coined the term critical transculturalism whereby media content that on the surface appears to oppose the sensibilities of the host nation. Still manages to attain a degree of social relevance and has a great deal of influence on the perspectives, identities as well as their lifestyles. Kraidy (2002) concludes that the infatuation with global media is actually embedded in one's strong connection with the local culture and the desire for its renewed emphasis.

In a similar vein, Straubhaar (1991) when negating the concept of media imperialism pointed out that one reason for the trans nationalization of media is the gradual integration of the world's economy. Straubhaar (1991) further predicted that decreasing costs of production and flourishing culture industries in developing countries would improve their local production resulting in a gradually better position in the flow of communication. However, one significant factor in this change was considered to be the role played by active audiences (Straubhaar, 1991; 2007). Foreign content is not the first preference of audiences; they resort to this content in the absence of cheaper local

content. Further, these audiences than utilize the messages taken from the foreign content and reinterpret their local culture thereby creating multiple layers of cultural identity (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005).

The US has led the transnational exchange of media goods which had also created fears of cultural imperialism whereby local cultures were being eroded or homogenized in the receiving societies. But this notion has now been laid to rest due to the creation of alternate "*geo-linguistic and culturally proximate*" or "*geo-cultural*" media markets in which there are meaningful blocs in a globalized cultural economy (Thussu, 2007). Primary amongst these are the Spanish and Portugese, Chinese, Arabic, and Hindi language speaking markets (Zhu, 2008). The most significant work in this domain has been done by Appadurai (2006) who asserts that the transnational cultural flows are influenced by linguistic, political as well as historical "*situated-ness*" of not only the nation states and Diasporas but also multinational conglomerates and even neighborhoods and extended families. Thus, the five scapes, *ethnoscape, mediascape, technoscape, financescape* and *ideoscape* together create an environment for the exchange of media goods. However, what is clear is the emergence of a global media which though formed of blocs is not restricted by national boundaries.

The issue of cultural proximity is considered to be very relevant when analyzing the popularity of foreign content (Straubhaar, 1991; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005; Straubhaar, 2008; Zhu, 2008; Buccianti, 2010; Liou, 2010; Tan, 2011; Adriaens & Biltereyst, 2012; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013; Elaskary, 2018). Further, this perception of proximity is based on two phenomenon, firstly, their cultural relevance and secondly, cultural and linguistic historical commonality. Also, besides

language many other factors come into play such as religion, ethnicity, gender, music, humor, dress, body language or even physical gestures (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). Zhu (2008) suggests that a shared cultural heritage or language which is synonymous with the notion of greater China has resulted in the massive popularity of Chinese dynasty dramas, Taiwan's idol dramas and Hong Kong's martial arts sagas and social mobility dramas amongst all Chinese language audiences even those who speak different dialects. Tan (2011) calls this the "nation based sense of distinctiveness" (p. 347) whereby the language culture or even the humor influences the reception of the media texts. Elaskary (2018) found that the massive popularity of Korean dramas in the Middle East was in part due to the perceived modesty in the storyline as well as in the attire of the actors which were preferable to the audiences in comparison to Western dramas. However when it came to competing with Turkish dramas, Korean dramas were left far behind as the socio-religious proximity with Turkey compelled Middle Eastern audiences to prefer them (Elaskary, 2018). Similarly, Buccianti (2010) pointed out that dubbed Turkish TV dramas turned out to be more popular than dubbed Mexican Tele-novel as mainly due to their cultural proximity to the Arab region.

However, all is not rosy in this picture as it has been found that transnational drama has become such an iconic economic force that various attempts have been made to ban it (Zhu, 2008; Dawn, 26 Nov 2013). This is because even the geo-cultural markets have created fears in the minds of host nations (Hagiwara, Joshi, Karthigesu, Kenny, Lee, & Pernia, 1999), primary amongst which is the fear of modernization. This entails the belief that modernity will entail not just the adoption of

new technologies but new traditions also which will threaten the older traditions (Yamani, 2000). In this regard, however, research (Hagiwara et al., 1999; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013) has indicated that it is not modernization which is feared but the form or extents to which the foreign values and traditions are adopted and more importantly public perception is quite contrary to the belief that such transnational media products corrupt the cultural identity of the recipient nation. Hence all fears of a cultural invasion through global television have been found to be unfounded (Hagiwara et al. 1999).

Media and Transnational Popularity

Various reasons are quoted for the transnational popularity of media content such as good looking superstars (Riley, Baker & Van Doren, 1998; Yang, 2008; Liou, 2010; Lee 2017), beautiful music (Ma, 2007; Jha, 2007; Liou, 2010; Lee 2017) intimate and interesting storylines (Riley, Baker and Van Doren, 1998; Lee, 2017; Elaskary, 2018), the use of beautiful locales (Jha, 2007; Yang, 2008; Liou, 2010; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013) rich and glamorous lifestyles (Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013), to become familiar with foreign cultures (Lee, 2017), or even romance and happy endings (Kraidy, 2005; Jha, 2007; Lee, 2017). Another reason for preferring transnational media content according to Straubhaar (1991) is when it provides no contradiction of the host nations beliefs and ideologies. Lee (2017) asserts that viewer's perception of transnational Korean drama exhibits hybridity in the sense that it is a mix of realism as well as fantasy, they desire to know about the cosmopolitan Korean cultures to stay updated while at the same time they are enthralled by the romantic fantasies present in them.

Considerable research has shown that Movies or TV programs often provide intangible benefits in the form of image enhancement or an increase in the level of awareness when viewed by a foreign nation (Wang, 2009; Liou, 2010; Kim et al., 2012; Li, 2014). Further, viewing a destination in media favorably inclines the viewer towards that place and even goes so far as to increase the amount of tourism from the recipient country to the said destination (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Liou, 2010; Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013). Riley and Van Doren (1992) suggested that the images of tourist destinations in popular movies are an effective tool for promoting them. Also, even those people who cannot afford to visit these places can gain the satisfaction of viewing them closely onscreen without incurring any costs. Various destinations have received massive tourist interest as a result of being depicted in popular media such as New Zealand in the famous *Lord of the Rings trilogy* (Beeton, 2001), Northern Ireland in films like the *Chronicles of Narnia* (O'Connor & Bolan, 2008), Nami Island, Korea in the hit Korean TV drama *Winter Sonata* (Kim et al., 2007) and Odaiba Island as well as Rainbow bridge in Tokyo in the TV serial *Tokyo Love story* (Liou, 2010). According to Liou (2010) TV induced tourism can be used as a cultural phenomenon to increase understanding between nations.

Further, transnational media content has also been found to increase the knowledge and interest of the recipient country about the language and culture of the foreign nations (Hagiwara et al., 1999; Lio, 2010; Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011; Li, 2014), their fashion and lifestyle trends (Li, 2014; Wang, 2009) and even their

national cuisine (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Kim, Agrusa & Chon, 2014).

One factor which has stood out in the popularity of transnational drama format is its popularity amongst female viewers (Jha, 2007; Yang, 2008; Liou, 2010; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013; Lee, 2017) as well as female viewer's preference for stories revolving around love and romance (Liou, 2010; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013)

Lee (2017) pointed out that most of the literature available on transnational media flows is from the developed West to the developing East while the exchange between the many eastern countries is not given a great deal of consideration. The present study aims to rectify this and provide valuable additions on the influence of cultural proximity on transnational media content.

Research Method

Previous studies have indicated the preferred use of the survey format for the purpose of gauging audience perception about dramatic content (Li, 2014; Liou, 2010; Kim et al, 2007). In this regard an instrument comprising of 20 statements along with demographic details was created which was first administered to 10 respondents as a pilot test to check its validity. As a result two items were discarded as being extraneous. Ratings for the 18 items were collected using a three point Likert-scale with statements ranging from disagree to agree. The sampling method adopted for the survey was the purposive sampling technique. The instrument was administered to 400 respondents who were viewers of dubbed Turkish content on local channels. Out of these, 31 responses were discarded as they were either incomplete or contained errors. The final sample size for statistical analysis was 369.

Findings

Findings, show that a significant majority were females (75.6%).
Respondents were asked whether they preferred historical dramas or
dramas set in the present times. Findings show that 62.6% of the
respondents preferred historical plays while the remaining 37.4%
showed preference for contemporary plays. The respondents were also
asked the main reasons for viewing Turkish TV dramas.

**H1: Frequent viewers of Turkish Dramas are more likely to desire to
visit Turkey.**

To test this hypothesis, a Pearson correlation was conducted of
frequency of Turkish Drama viewing and the desire to visit Turkey.
The results (r=0.215, *p*= 0.000) show that there is a weak relationship
which shows that heavy viewers of Turkish dramas are not more likely
to express the desire to visit Turkey (Table 1) which goes on to negate
the hypothesis.

**Table 1: Pearson Correlation: Frequency of Viewing and Desire to visit
Turkey**

		I would like to visit Turkey
I often watch Turkish TV dramas	*r*	.215**
	p	0.000
	N	366

**RQ1: What are the most common reasons for viewing Turkish
Dramas?**

Findings of the study revealed that the most cited reasons for
viewing Turkish Dramas was to see the beautiful scenery and locations
(78.9%), interesting stories (64.2%), observing the loves of fellow
Muslims (59.3%), good looking cast (53.7%), beautiful clothes and
accessories (41.5%), love and romance (30.9%). The notions of learning
about new trends (26.8%), finding similarities between the norms and

culture of Turkey and Pakistan (25.2%), considering the depiction of an ideal lifestyle in these dramas (22.8%) (Table 2).

Table 2: Reason for Viewing Turkish Content

Statement	Frequency (%)
I watch Turkish TV dramas to see the beautiful scenery and locations.	291 (78.9%)
I watch Turkish TV dramas because they have interesting stories.	237 (64.2%)
I watch them to find out about the lives of our Muslim brothers living in the developed world.	219 (59.3%)
I watch Turkish TV dramas because the cast is very good looking.	198(53.7%)
I watch them as the clothing and accessories of stars are very attractive.	153 (41.5%)
I like the way they show love and romance in Turkish dramas.	114 (30.9%)
I watch them to learn about new trends.	99(26.8%)
I prefer these dramas as their norms and culture are similar to those of Pakistan.	93 (25.2%)
I watch them because they depict an ideal lifestyle.	84 (22.8%)

Note: The numbers in the frequency column do not add up to 100% as each row contains a separate questionnaire item.

RQ2: Does age influence the viewing pattern of Turkish Dramas?

Findings of the study revealed that age of the respondents significantly influences their perceptions of Turkish media content. Results of the ANOVA tests (Table 3) revealed that there are significant differences in the opinions about frequency of viewing, preference for dramas set in the present, watching the plays for their good-looking cast, clothing and accessories of stars, beautiful scenery and locations or learning about new trends etc. The opinions of the younger viewers tended to differ drastically from the older viewers whereby the younger viewers considered all these visual elements such as appearance and styling of the cast, new fashion trends, sceneries etc. as a major factor for their interest in Turkish content.

Table 3: Result of ANOVA on differences in audience's perception by Age groups

Dependent Variables		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F value	P value
How often do you watch dubbed Turkish TV dramas?	Between Groups	5.829	5	1.166	7.556	0.00
	Within Groups	55.548	360	154		
I prefer Turkish dramas set in the present time.	Between Groups	9.108	5	1.822	3.473	0.004
	Within Groups	185.667	354	.524		
I watch Turkish TV dramas because the cast is very good looking.	Between Groups	20.332	5	4.0666	6.881	0.000
	Within Groups	210.990	357	.591		
I watch them as the clothing and accessories of stars are very attractive.	Between Groups	18.343	5	3.669	5.089	0.000
	Within Groups	262.084	360	.728		
I watch to learn about new trends.	Between Groups	8.834	5	1.767	2.704	0.020
	Within Groups	235.199	360	.653		
I watch Turkish TV dramas to see the beautiful scenery and locations.	Between Groups	7.697	5	1.539	4.623	0.000
	Within Group	119.877	360	.333		

RQ3: Does gender influence the viewing pattern of Turkish Dramas?

Findings of the study revealed that there are significant gender differences in the perceptions of males and female viewers regarding the Turkish Dramas. Results of the Independent sample t-test revealed that that there were significant differences in the audience's perception regarding good-looking cast (t (94.03)=-3.73, p=0.00), the clothing and accessories of stars(t (346)=-4.22, p=0.00), learning about new trends(t (346)=-3.365, p=0.001), and depiction of an ideal lifestyle(t (337)=-2.425, p=0.016).

Table 4: Independent Sample T-Test on Gender differences in Audience perception

Statement	Gender	N	Mean	St D	T	df	Sig
I watch Turkish TV dramas because the cast is very good looking.	Male	69	2.0	0.891	-3.730	94.03	0.000
	Female	276	2.43	0.758			
I watch them as the clothing & accessories of stars are attractive.	Male	69	1.70	0.810	-4.22	346	0.000
	Female	279	2.18	0.868			
I watch to learn about new trends.	Male	69	1.57	0.776	-3.365	346	0.001
	Female	276	1.94	0.829			
I watch them because they depict an ideal lifestyle.	Male	69	1.61	0.712	-2.425	337	0.016
	Female	270	1.87	0.807			

Discussion and Analysis

Although previous researches have focused on the importance of cultural proximity as playing a role in generating interest in the transnational drama (Straubhaar, 1991; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005; Straubhaar, 2008; Zhu, 2008; Buccianti, 2010; Liou, 2010; Tan, 2011; Adriaens & Biltereyst, 2012; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013; Elaskary, 2018) but the findings of the present study show otherwise. It is found that 59.3% of the respondents showed interest in getting to know about the lives of Turks as fellow Muslims living in the developed world but only 25.2% believed that the norms and culture in Turkey can be considered to be similar to the norms and culture of Pakistan, thus it is not cultural proximity which inclines the viewer's towards these programs but rather the interest in getting to know about life in developed nations.

In line with previous findings (Jha, 2007; Yang, 2008; Liou, 2010; Yanardagoglu and Karam, 2013), the present study also showed 78.9% respondents viewed Turkish drama because of the depiction of beautiful locales. Researchers (Riley, Baker and Van Doren, 1998; Lee,

2017; Elaskary, 2018) had contended that interesting storylines play a strong role in encouraging viewership which was also believed by 64.2% of the respondents. Some researchers have also shown that a good-looking cast can enhance the popularity of media content (Riley, Baker & Van Doren, 1998; Yang, 2008; Liou, 2010), 53.7% of the respondents of the present study were also inclined towards this mindset. The depiction of lavish lifestyles as a reason was selected by only 22.8% of the respondents which is contrary to the findings of Yanardagoglu & Karam (2013) while the portrayal of romance as found by previous researchers (Kraidy, 2005; Jha, 2007; Lee, 2017) was only selected by 30.9% of the respondents. The notion that most of the transnational drama is viewed by females (Jha, 2007; Yang, 2008; Liou, 2010; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013; Lee, 2017) also found support in the present study as a significantly greater number of respondents who claimed to view Turkish drama were females.

Findings of the present study indicate consistency with many previous researches on the significant influence of TV drama in stimulating a positive image of the host country as well as creating its image as an ideal tourist destination (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Lin & Huang, 2006; Jha, 2007; Kim et al., 2007; Yang, 2008; Wang, 2009; Liou, 2010; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013) whereby 78% of the respondents showed an interest in visiting Turkey but interestingly a significant majority (82.9%) were interested in visiting to see the beautiful locations. Also, 62.6% of the respondents stated that watching Turkish TV plays has created a desire in them to know more about Turkey while another 38.2% showed an inclination towards learning the Turkish Language, a phenomenon also observed by previous

researches (Hagiwara et al., 1999; Lio, 2010; Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011; Li, 2014). As many of the Turkish plays being aired in Pakistan are historical and biographical in nature reflecting the lives of famous Ottoman kings the term *"neo-Ottoman cool"* (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013) truly reflects the responses of 62.6% respondents who stated their preference for historical plays.

Literature (Jha, 2007; Yang, 2008; Liou, 2010; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013; Lee, 2017) has suggested significant gender differences in the perceptions of male and female viewers, a phenomenon which was also supported by the findings of the present study. The study also analyzed the influence of age on viewer perceptions whereby it was found that younger viewers tended to prefer visual elements such as appearance and styling of cast as major causes for their interest. Future researches can delve further into this phenomenon and explore the influence of age on viewer preferences for transnational drama.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that it is not cultural proximity due to a shared historical/religious heritage which has created the demand for Turkish drama in Pakistan but the beautiful locales and interesting storylines are considered to be the driving force. Although significant amount of research (Straubhaar, 2008; Zhu, 2008; Buccianti, 2010; Liou, 2010; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013; Elaskary, 2018) has shown that cultural proximity plays a significant role, the findings were not supported by the present study which indicates a dire need to delve into the issue further. Findings suggest that it is the excellent production quality which is compelling the audiences to prefer Transnational Turkish content. Hence, indicating that similar quality

content from other non-Muslim and non-Asian nations would also find acceptance. Future research can thus delve into this further and take the line of providing a more detailed analysis of the similarities and dissimilarities between the recipient and foreign nations.

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