The Importance of Cultural Proximity
in the Success of Turkish Dramas in Qatar

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This research examines the importance of cultural similarities in the appeal of Turkish drama serials in Qatar. The cultural proximity theory is used as an analytical tool to identify the factors that facilitate the attraction and appeal of Turkish television dramas given the cultural and historical relationship between Arabs and Turks. The study centers on university students from various Arab backgrounds who are being educated at elite American universities within Qatar's Education City Campus and applies a mixed-methods approach of focus group discussions and online surveys.

Keywords: audience, Qatar, Turkey, TV series

Dramas have been one of the most prevalent, and consequently most popular, forms of television programming in Turkey for the last few decades, and these serials have recently been heavily exported with great success. There are now about 70 different Turkish programs being broadcast in 40 countries around the globe—half of which are from the Arab League (Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013, p. 561). Arab channels started broadcasting Turkish content as early as 2006; however, viewership figures across the Arab world soared when the Saudi-owned and Dubai-based MBC satellite network started broadcasting *Noor* (*Gümüs*) in 2008. According to figures released by *The New York Times* and MBC's own marketing department, the show attracted more than 80 million viewers over age 15, of which 50 million were women (Kimmelman, 2010; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013. In light of this clear demand, many Arab channels were quick to follow suit; broadcasters across the Middle East and North Africa now schedule Turkish serials on a regular basis, with Turkish television programs accounting for about 60% of the Arab world's foreign programming (Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013, p. 561).

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the social and cultural factors leading to the success of Turkish television programs (dramas) among Arab audiences in Qatar—a rapidly developing nation that is trying to retain its cultural identity while being exposed to a growing influence of Western ideologies and booming wealth and prosperity. This research centers on university-level students from various Arab backgrounds who are receiving an American education in Qatar's Education City Campus—

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home to six elite U.S. universities (Virginia Commonwealth University, Weill Cornell Medical College, Texas A&M University, Carnegie Mellon University, Georgetown University, and Northwestern University).

Overview of Cultural Proximity Theory

Turks and Arabs have a shared history spanning more than half a century, incorporating a common culture, heritage, and religion—a history that cannot be overlooked when exploring audience behavior in Qatar. Since 2006, Turkish dramas have developed from being merely homegrown programs to being internationally exported products—in some markets even challenging local productions and U.S. imports in terms of viewership figures. Turkish programs have also expanded into countries over and beyond their own linguistic regions (e.g., Azerbaijan and other Turkic-speaking countries as well as Western Europe, where many expatriate Turk's reside). According to the concept of cultural proximity introduced by Joseph Straubhaar (1991, 2003, 2007), viewers are more likely to select products from their own culture or from countries similar to theirs. La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) state that audiences' "first preference would tend to be for material produced within their own language and local or national culture" (p. 273).

The cultural proximity theory has been used predominantly in an international context to explain the pulling power of foreign and domestic media. Straubhaar's (1991) article, "Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity," is the most cited work dealing with cultural proximity. Straubhaar imported the term—which had been previously used as a news component—and linked it with content analysis in the field of audience reception (Zaharopulos, 1990). According to the cultural proximity theory, audiences will prefer their own local or national productions because of elements such as the appeal of local stars, local knowledge, topics, issues, environment, and ethnicity of people in the media (Straubhaar, 2007).

Moreover, cultural proximity has been tied to the broader concept of cultural capital, which focuses on a person's education (knowledge and intellectual skills) (Bourdieu, 1984). Building on Bourdieu's notion, Straubhaar argues that the preference for local cultural products is not a given, because cultural proximity is limited by social class stratification; groups that might be united by language and/or culture can be fragmented by both economic and cultural capital. However, if countries do not produce specific genres of television, then viewers are likely to choose programs from close or similar countries, cultures, and languages rather than from more distant countries, such as the United States (Straubhaar, 2007, p. 91). According to La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005), cultural proximity, or the relevance of telenovelas in Latin American countries, was one of the primary reasons for the success and broad export of the cultural product across the region.

For La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005), cultural proximity is largely based on language, but they also highlight the significance of other aspects of similarity or proximity based on cultural elements: "dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humor, ideas about story pacing, music tradition, relation elements, etc." (p. 274). Therefore, cultural proximity exists on multiple levels and can be thought of as a complex interaction between cultural texts and audiences. Individuals have multidimensional and complex identities; some aspects of these are geographic, whereas others are cultural or linguistic.

Furthermore, La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) underline the importance of religion and ethnicity or diasporic background in defining one's cultural identity. Finally, La Pastina and Straubhaar outline the relevance of gender, "as when women across culture identify with family drama or melodrama that points out commonalities of family struggles" (p. 274). Moreover, they note that to explore the levels of proximity between different television content and local viewers, it is important to look more to local than national culture. Local viewers in a country may, at times, not understand or identify with aspects of the national culture as portrayed on national television (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, pp. 274–275). The universal appeal of the melodrama genre is particularly important when examining the success of Turkish soap operas in Qatar. Straubhaar (2007) argues that melodramas are created on "underlying oral structures, formulas, and archetypes that can be shared by cultures. The underlying structure of melodrama has offshoots in almost all parts of the world, so melodrama can reach past cultural differences" (p. 199).

Complementary to the notion of cultural proximity, Hoskins and Mirus (1988) introduce the notion of cultural discount, which refers to the fact that entertainment programs are valued less in foreign markets than in the home market. Program appeal is reduced due to dubbing or subtitling because audiences find it difficult "to identify with the style values, beliefs, history, myths, institutions, physical environment, and behavioral patterns of the material in question" (p. 500). Yet, according to Iwabuchi (2002), another approach to explore the theory of cultural proximity is to think of it as a desire for modernity. Iwabuchi (1997, 2002) interviewed young people in Taiwan and found that they were more likely to select and identify with pop music and television programs from Japan than from China, because Japanese cultural products were considered to be more modern, but were still familiar within an Asian context. He suggests that Japanese cultural products do not always stand for actual cultural proximity or familiarity, but rather for the desire or aspiration for an ideal modernity.

At this point, it is important to briefly explore notion of cultural shareability, which, to a degree, opposes the notion of cultural proximity. The concept that has been advanced by Singhal and Udornpim (1997) highlights the importance of language in the success of exported television content, but it also addresses the significance of common values, images, archetypes, and themes across cultures that allow content to reach beyond cultural boundaries (p. 171).

Method

This study uses focus group research and an online survey to explore the cultural and social reasons behind the success of Turkish television dramas in Qatar. This research benefits from the diversity of Qatar's population, which enables the study to gain insight into a diverse audience rather than an audience consisting of a single ethnic group. Qatar's, and ultimately Education City's, diverse student population make the focus group approach a useful tool to generate discussion among the various nationalities of the student participants. A total of 10 focus groups were conducted; five groups were all men, and five groups were all women. Relatively small focus group sizes were used (five to eight participants) to facilitate a comfortable discussion environment. The online survey was designed to further probe and extend key questions addressed in the focus group research. Students at six Education City institutions (Carnegie Mellon University, Georgetown University, Northwestern University, Texas A&M,

Virginia Commonwealth University, and Weill Cornell Medical School) were invited to participate in the online survey either via e-mail or in person. The survey, which was administered to 202 students, followed a mixed structure consisting of 34 questions, including multiple-choice questions, open questions that allow participants to answer in their own words, and Likert-scale questions. Because this was part of a larger study of the social and cultural factors contributing to the success of Turkish television dramas, only five survey questions were tailored toward this specific portion of the research. The Qualtrics survey tool was used to administer the online questionnaire. A list-based sample was applied. The study participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 and were from various Arab backgrounds.

Findings

The Importance of Dubbing

This study reveals that the dubbing of Turkish drama serials into a colloquial Syrian dialect was a key aspect of their appeal for Arabic speakers. Many focus group participants have described the Syrian dialect as easy to understand. Viewers who might have otherwise opted for local content appear to have been drawn to Turkish dramas because the content was dubbed into a conversational form of Arabic that people from all walks of life could comprehend. As one Jordanian-Palestinian participant noted, "My grandmother, for instance, can't read, but this Turkish is dubbed so she can enjoy it too."

It is important to note that Turkish serials were the first television content to be dubbed into a colloquial Syrian dialect, whereas Arab media translations are generally subtitled. The Syrian dialect was chosen following negative feedback received during earlier attempts at dubbing Mexican telenovelas into Modern Standard Arabic—a form of Arabic that is considered throughout the Arab world to be a "high variety," typically used only in written language (i.e., in academic material, news, research, and government transactions). The "low variety" is the local colloquial dialects of Arabic that are spoken in everyday conversation. Most importantly, the dubbing of Turkish programs has enabled Arab audiences to rediscover the cultural proximity between Turks and Arabs; dubbing has not only translated a language and localized a television format, but brought an entire culture closer that many in the Arab world were unaware was so proximate. As a Qatari participant noted:

> I think the reason is my grandmother and my four-year-old cousin would sit and watch it together. It's interesting for every single age group. Why Turkish specifically? Because first, it's in Arabic, so if you are young, you don't have to read the translation. If you are old, you don't have to really focus to understand it. Yet you can relate it to your own culture.

It is important to note that the dubbing of a television program does not guarantee its success, because studies have found that audiences increasingly prefer local and regional television productions over foreign ones (Straubhaar, 2007). According to the notion of cultural discount, entertainment programs are, for instance, valued less in foreign markets than in their home market because the content's appeal is reduced due to dubbing or subtitling. Ironically, in the case of Turkish drama serials, dubbing seems to have brought everything Turkish closer to Arab audiences and aided in making viewers

appreciate their many similarities (historic, ethnicity, cultural). This point was made by a Palestinian focus group participant: "They look like us just like Arab people. You feel that these people kind of speak Arabic. I mean I personally hate dubbing, but I know that people like my mother like it because it is dubbed."

According to Fadi Ismail (who is widely recognized in the Arab world for being the media executive who brought the enormously successful Turkish series *Noor* to MBC and is often therefore credited with the rise of Turkish television content on Arab networks), cultural and ethnic similarities between Turks and Arabs is one of the key factors that contributed to Turkish serials' overall success. During a personal interview in March 2015 in Doha, Qatar, he stated that if one would turn off the audio of a Turkish serial and only watch the action without any dialogue, it would be hard to tell the difference between Turks and Arabs. For him, ethnic and cultural similarities, as well as body language, are the vital aspects contributing to the serials' positive reception among Arab audiences. Therefore, one could argue that these ethnic and cultural similarities have contributed to the acceptance of the dubbed Syrian dialect among Arab viewers, because it feels believable that Turkish actors speak Arabic in a region that is typically accustomed to subtitling. The acceptance and believability of dubbing has enabled Turkish content to enter a cultural-linguistic market that would normally require the media content, along with intertwined histories and overlapping cultural characteristics, to have the same or similar language to be successful (McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996, p. 16). The response by this Lebanese participant underlines ethnic similiarities are imperative in the success of dubbed Turkish dramas as Korean productions appear to not have the same impact: "I have just recently seen Korean shows dubbed. I really thought that was a bit strange seeing Asian people speaking Arabic. I didn't think it was as believable."

A final key fact to emphasize is that listening to a dubbed program seems to be easier when television is being watched as secondary to a primary task. The dubbing might be particularly beneficial to Arab homemakers (who are the main audience), because they are able to multitask while watching television (Koolstra, Peeters, & Spinhof, 2002, p. 332). At the same time, the Arab world has one of the highest illiteracy rates, with illiteracy higher among women (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). Therefore, the dubbing of Turkish television serials enables diverse groups of viewers to gain access who would otherwise have difficulty with subtitling.

The Importance of Ethnic and Cultural Similarities

For most focus group and survey participants, ethnic and racial similarities play an important part in the appeal of Turkish television dramas in the Arab world. As a Syrian/Moroccan/Spanish participant explains:

> As a male, I can say they are better looking than Arab actors, but they still look very
> Arab, maybe more refined, but still similar. I think if Muhannad [lead male character in
> Noor series] would have been a White guy, Arab women wouldn't have been crazy about
> him.

It is important to note that, although audiences in this study all originate from an Arab background, because of their diverse nationalities and sociocultural backgrounds, they possess diverse

complex cultural identities. One way to think about cultural text and audiences is that cultural proximity has multiple levels (Straubhaar 2007, p. 197). Therefore, in the broader sense of the term, ethnicity is something that unites audiences and makes them proximate to Turks. One cannot overstate the importance of the Ottoman-Arab history, where many aspects of culture have intertwined and overlapped—whether in ethnicity and race, resulting in similar physical appearances, body language, customs, and traditions, or commonalities in the type of food consumed or music that one finds familiar (La Pastina & Staubhaar, p. 4; Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013, p. 568). Most of the study participants claimed that ethnic and cultural similarities were an important factor in the appeal of Turkish television dramas.

Another noteworthy aspect identified in this study, as articulated by a Jordanian-Palestinian student, is that Turkish television dramas appear to have contributed to the rediscovery of Turks by Arabs as people of the Middle East with a similar ethnic and cultural background: "When you look at these people here, they are no different to Arabs from Levant region. What is interesting to see for many is that Turks are so similar to us, where we thought of them before as totally different."

Furthermore, Turkish television dramas—and, ironically, productions such as *Magnificent Century*, which is based on Ottoman history—appear to have had a positive impact on Arab viewers.[1] They attract audiences while helping them comprehend the commonalities between Turks and Arabs rather than their differences. The negative Turkish image among Arabs that dates back to Ottoman rule—and that was, until recently, perceived as conventional wisdom in the Arab world (Al-Ghazzi & Kraidy 2013, p. 2343)— was not raised by any of the focus group participants. Instead, it was the rediscovery of similarities that was underlined as an important factor in the appeal of Turkish television serials.

During a personal interview with Dogan Media Group's chief executive officer, Irfan Sahin (who was the producer of the enormously successful Turkish series *Gümüs*—or *Noor*, as it is known in the Arab region) in December 2010, ethnic and cultural similarities were noted as an important factor in the success of Turkish productions in the Arab world. Sahin stated that one of the reasons why Fadi Ismail (general manager of the MBC network) contacted him to purchase serials from his media organization was because he felt that the ethnic and cultural similarities between Turks and Arabs would make Turkish shows highly successful in the Middle East (personal interview, December 20, 2010). During the interview, Sahin shared an anecdote about a scene of a father holding a *tesbih* in his hand (a string of beads often used by Muslims to keep track of counting during prayer) and drinking tea in a Kanal D serial, which made Fadi Ismail appreciate that Turks and Arabs are very similar and that Turkish dramas would potentially be well received by Arab audiences because of these ethnic and cultural similarities.

A similar opinion was voiced by Timur Savci, founder and owner of TIMS production, in October 2015 (at an open question-and-answer session following the screening of a behind-the-scenes documentary of the drama series *Magnificent Century* in Doha, Qatar). In response to my question about why he thought Turkish serials are particularly successful in the Middle East, Savci answered that they are

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[1] *Magnificent Century* (Mühtesem Yüzyil, 2011–2014) is a historical drama focusing on the lives of Sultan Süleyman and his wife, Hürrem. The series has been sold to 47 countries (Williams, 2013).

successful because of their ethnic and cultural similarities, and these similarities shine through in the shows that people might have otherwise not realized. The same question was also answered by Halit Ergenc, the Turkish actor who portrays Sultan Süleyman in the series *Magnificent Century*. Ergenc claimed that the serials' success was due to Turks and Arabs having a shared history and that Turkish shows represent the East and the West as well as a feeling of being cosmopolitan, which, according to him, resonates with Arab audiences.

Iwabuchi (2004) notes that a survey on the reception of Japanese dramas in Hong Kong found that audiences favored these dramas because they were perceived as more "believable, have similar hair color, fashion, and way of life" (p. 102). The viewers were able to relate to Japanese dramas in a realistic way and not simply as fantasy. In the same way, Arab students in this study described the importance of being able to relate to and understand the characters in Turkish dramas on a personal level. One participant stated: "As an Iraqi, I find it easy to relate to Turkish things at times more than with Arabs from the Gulf." Moreover, recognizing cultural similarities when watching Turkish television dramas appears to be one of the pleasures associated with the genre. As a Tunisian student stated:

> My mum, for instance, would never watch an American show. She doesn't understand or enjoy them. With Turkish, she always talks about how things in the show are like Tunisian. For her, pointing out the similarities is another aspect that she enjoys about them.

These findings complement Straubhaar's (2007) argument, which states that if audiences are able to recognize themselves or identify with "a familiar or desired ethnic type on screen" (p. 205), then that increases the cultural proximity of the program in question. As a Qatari student noted: "[Turkish serials] are Muslim and Arab looking, but at the same time they are very Western in comparison to Arabic shows. They offer something that others can't."

The Importance of Religion

The fact that Turkish dramas are set against the backdrop of a Muslim society was noted among study participants as one of the core factors in their appeal. One way to think about the complex attraction between cultural text and audiences is that cultural proximity has multiple levels. Viewers have multilayered, complex cultural identities, which are geographic or spatial, cultural, linguistic, or religious (Straubhaar 2007, pp. 197–198). Islamic messages and cultural products appeal across geographical and cultural boundaries. Therefore, religion, as cultural capital, has the ability to cut across social class lines (Straubhaar, 2003, p. 86). One could argue that the main similarity among Arab audiences is religion (even though there are religious minorities across the Arab world). Therefore, the portrayal of a Muslim, liberal, and cosmopolitan society, with elements of apparent gender equality, has a unique pulling power in the Middle East because it fills a niche in Arab television that Western and local productions are unable to do. A Qatari participant noted:

> In *Harem al-Sultan* [Magnificent Century], they showed the guy praying. I don't know if other shows emphasize religion, but they have very beautiful actors and actresses and

an emphasis on religion. You get a Western idea of a soap opera and beautiful people and all that, not the fancy-shmancy Egyptian stuff. At the same time, there is the whole cultural aspect to it, so it's more relatable.

The representation of a moderate but also Muslim society is, for Arab audiences in this study, an important aspect of the cultural proximity they feel toward Turkish productions. The fact that the content is from a Muslim country gives the dramas a dimension and the viewer a level of affinity that legitimizes breaking boundaries that would otherwise be culturally unacceptable. Straubhaar (2007) argues that cultural affinities generate forms of cultural capital that create cultural proximity and influence audience choice for content. Straubhaar states that those affinities are:

Shared religious histories, gender roles, moral values, commonalities, common aspirations, common histories . . . similar forms of dress, character types and stereotypes, and ideas about genre, storytelling, and pacing. Perceived cultural similarities also might include ethnic types, gender types, dress style, gestures, body language and lifestyle. (p. 206)

As noted by a Syrian participant in the study:

Some Arab families are not that interested in watching Western series because maybe they are not conservative for different reasons, but for Turkish series, when they think that it's Turkish, again it's an Islamic culture so they tend to watch it more.

Nonetheless, religion in Turkish drama serials is not prominently displayed. For example, an imam or a visit to a mosque is shown only during funeral scenes, and head scarves are generally worn only by the elderly. Yet these subtle displays of the Islamic religion generate cultural closeness, which appears to influence the focus group participants' parents' generation, who determine their choice of program according to cultural proximity, of which religion remains a significant factor.

The Importance of Social Relations

The portrayal of a conservative family structure, where family ties and respect for the older generation are considered important, was described by many study participants as culturally proximate and therefore important for Arab audiences when selecting Turkish programs. This particular appeal of Turkish dramas relates to what Straubhaar (2007) describes as value proximity. It is similar to what he found with telenovelas, which focus on religion and other values that have come under contest from modern life. One of these values that remains core within Muslim societies, on which great significance is placed in Turkish programs and consequently resonates highly in the opinions of Arab audiences, is respect for and the importance of parents and families.

One could argue that residents of Qatar in particular (both citizens and expatriates) are fearful of the swift development and urbanization that the country has undergone in recent years. Qatar has experienced not only radical changes to its infrastructure but also a rapid expansion of its population that,

at times, has worried many about the decay of the country's traditional Islamic values and identity. For some people, modernity and advances in technology are associated with Westernization and a subsequent decay of core values. Therefore, Turkish dramas not only possess cultural proximity on multiple levels, including historical, religious, and ethnic, but they portray a society that is different, but similar enough to associate with and relate to. It seems, then, that the drama serials alleviate Arab audiences' fear of modernity by portraying a society that, despite being modern and Westernized, pays attention to values that are core within Muslim societies. Moreover, regardless of the genres or storylines, Turkey is a Muslim country, and these dramas are set against the backdrop of a Muslim society where family ties and social relations are similar to other parts of the Muslim world. As an Egyptian participant noted:

> My mum and grandmother, they watch them all day. They like the romance, but I think they like that they are Muslim. I think they also find the way they show these big families living together as something very similar to our culture.

These similarities, as highlighted by this Egyptian student, are recognized and appreciated by the study participants. The emphasis on a conservative sense of modernity, with a strong tendency for the protection of family, can be seen as rooted in the Turkish modernization process. Most of the storylines in Turkish serials deal with struggles between generations and various conflicts between the norms of modernity and tradition. Usually, these conflicts are eventually consolidated within a traditional and somewhat established structure. A Tunisian participant noted: "They are very similar to Arabic people but more free. They seem to respect and care for the older generation. That is at least the feeling you get when you watch these shows."

One could contend that cultural proximity occurs on both sides: Turkey has become more conservative/religious since the ruling AKP government came to power in 2002, while the Arab world is rediscovering a country it did not appreciate was so proximate—a nation that is advanced and modern yet one it can understand and relate to. Consequently, the representation of a Muslim Turkish society with an achievable degree of modernism that still cares for family values and the elderly seems to appeal to the social imaginary of the Arab world, making Turkish dramas much more culturally proximate. This notion goes hand in hand with Iwabuchi's (2002) argument about a desire for proximity with modernity. Audiences not only feel culturally proximate, but are close to a desired modernity that they are unable to experience because of sociocultural and political limitations.

Turkish Television Dramas Represent a Cultural Blend

Turkish television dramas, despite breaking Arab gender roles and dealing with taboo subjects such as alcohol consumption, nudity, premarital sex, and adultery (and despite Western productions being rejected for the same reason), are still seen as culturally proximate and relatable, particularly by the parents' generation of the study participants. A Moroccan French participant noted:

> I asked my mom, for instance, why don't you watch an American show—it's similar to your Turkish stuff. She is like, I know, but they are not Muslim. I'm like, okay, so if it was an Arab production that actually did this, for instance, Morocco or Egypt, would you

> watch it? She is like, no. Why? Because you would get offended because they are
> actually Arabs, but the Turks are kind of allowed to show all that stuff.

As this student describes, there is a clear paradox at play whereby Turkish shows are afforded a certain level of tolerance when it comes to displaying taboo topics such as sex, consumption of alcohol, and attire that would be considered un-Islamic (haram), all of which are heavily frowned upon in Western productions. One could, therefore, argue that Turkish serials enable Arab audiences to satisfy their curiosity about living a more modern and Western lifestyle. The fact that this more modern lifestyle is displayed by Turks who are not Arab, but who are close enough ethnically and culturally, takes away their own anxiety about transitioning into a too-open society, but at the same time satisfies their curiosity. Yet again, cultural proximity between Arabs and Turks makes this possible, whereas Western productions fail to have the same impact, mainly because of the lack of cultural closeness. A Qatari student articulated this idea as follows:

> A weird thing is that these shows are so open—I mean they kiss and stuff which some of
> it gets edited out I think, but they are no different to American shows—but Arabs find
> them acceptable because they find them more similar to us.

Two contradicting aspects are present here that contribute to the appeal of Turkish dramas: cultural proximity and cultural distance. Turkish drama serials appear to successfully combine both global and local elements. Cultural and ethnic similarities, social relations, and family ties in Turkish programs (as highlighted earlier) combine with a modern way of life that is still recognizable in an Arab and Muslim cultural context. A Sudanese woman participant stated, "Especially women feel more connected to Turkish shows because they have a balance between Western and Eastern values. They feel like they have the best of both worlds and are dubbed into Arabic."

Because Turkish dramas "have the best of both worlds," what makes Turkish television dramas an ideal blend is the existence of various historical, cultural, and ethnic factors that, when combined, enable them to attract and be proximate to Arab audiences; at the same time, they represent the unfamiliar—an alternative modernity that is exciting and new to explore. Or, as this Tunisian participant summarizes, the existence of cultural proximity and cultural distance—the known and unknown—is an important factor: "This whole merger of the Islamic culture, the Arab culture, and the Western culture, there's praying, and there's people covered, and there's kissing. It's like it's very mixed. People think it's very interesting to watch."

Turkey has successfully localized dominant global television formats and developed them into a more relatable form, and Turkish cultural products have constructed their own cultural spaces and are now successful not only nationally, but regionally and beyond. At the same time, Turkish drama serials offer Arab audiences a feeling of living in a shared time and common experience that cannot be presented sufficiently by American popular culture due to the lack of cultural proximity. To describe Turkish cultural products as only a translation of popular Western culture into a Middle Eastern cultural context is not sufficient to understand their appeal. Similar to what Iwabuchi (2002) notes about the success of Japanese cultural products in Asian countries, the popularity of Turkish television dramas could be seen as

Turkishness resonating with Arab audiences' idea of modernity that is not simply a response to Western modernity. Rather, the textual appeal of Turkish dramas is closely associated with the lifestyle and social relationships of present-day Turkey as embodied in the storylines portrayed. Interestingly, the majority of survey participants, when asked whether Turkish television dramas were watched in Qatar because they offered an alternative sociocultural model (i.e., democracy and freedom of speech), agreed with this statement. Particularly in the wake of the Arab Spring, Turkey was increasingly referred to as an exemplary model of universally defined modernization, with its devotion to secularism validating the belief that modernity as a project could be possible even in Muslim countries.

Penalties enforced by the government-controlled broadcasting watchdog RTÜK (Supreme Board of Radio and Television in Turkey) in recent years demonstrate the Turkish government's increased efforts to impose its conservative worldview on the drama industry (Hurtas, 2015). Yet this study found that one of the key elements that makes Turkish drama serials appealing to Arab audiences is their ability to touch on subjects that are considered taboo in the Arab world. By doing so, they fill a void that Arab media is failing to satisfy. By censoring television dramas, Turkey is doing precisely the same as Arab media, which could potentially result in Turkish drama serials losing their appeal in key foreign markets.

Genre Proximity

The vast majority of focus group participants highlighted the importance of genre as a key factor in the appeal of Turkish programs. The fact that Turkish productions are dramas, which often encroach on the subgenre of melodrama, which emphasizes romance and family relations, were key in their appeal, particularly among women. Melodramas are best understood "as a combination of archetypal, mythic beliefs and time-specific responses to particular cultural and historical conditions" (Vicinus, 1981, p. 10.) The following statement by an Iraqi participant demonstrates the appeal and resonance of Turkish dramas, which seem to successfully intertwine a genre that has a universal appeal with cultural elements that are familiar across the Middle East:

> I agree that people love Turkish shows because they are dramas, but then again, can you really dub Turkish humor into Arabic? I don't think so. I think it is much easier to focus on relations and emotions, but we can't forget that the Turkish have also many cultural similarities. You know when you watch these shows that they are Muslim. You wouldn't have a granny with a hijab in an American or Mexican show, right?

Gender Representation

An important aspect that study participants addressed throughout this research was the portrayal of strong and independent women characters in Turkish dramas. Most students highlighted the importance of leading women in the success of these shows, as women in Turkish drama serials typically pursue power and challenge sociocultural norms set for their gender while at the same time searching for "Mr. Right."

One of the Turkish dramas named by the study participants as widely known (other than the serial *Noor*) was *Fatma* (*Fatmagül'ün sucu*—or, in English, "What is Fatmagül's crime?").[2] The story focuses on a young woman's fight for justice after being gang-raped by three young, wealthy men and witnessed by a fourth man. The struggle and pain this young and helpless woman experiences in a society that appears perfect on the surface, but is corrupt underneath and fails to protect the weak and vulnerable is a storyline that holds universal appeal to women in male-dominated societies such as the Middle East. Sexual violence against women in the Arab world is a reality that many fail to acknowledge. As this Sudanese female student states, the character, Fatma, offers Arab viewers a female role model to aspire to in a similar cultural context that touches on a matter that affects many, but that most are afraid to address: "I don't think much of soap operas, they are boring, but that show could be a role model for other people in similar situations where women don't have a voice."

This study reveals that shows such as *Fatma*, which has been criticized and penalized by RTÜK for breaching morality and Turkish family values, are the most known and most liked serials among study participants ("'Fatmagül'ün suçu ne?'" 2010). Further, gender is an important part of people's multilayered complex cultural identities. Dramas like *Fatma*, which deal with gender-related issues, are able to span cultures because gender struggles and family dramas are topics that everyone can relate to regardless of one's country of origin (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). Also, the issue of rape and the stigma associated with it is a universal problem. What makes *Fatma* even more relevant to women in the Arab world is the fact that Fatmagül had to marry one of her tormentors to restore her family's honor and gain acceptance in the small conservative coastal village where she was raised. The empathy and ability to relate to forced marriages might not require cultural proximity, but because the topic occurs more frequently in the Muslim world makes the subject that much more relevant. An Egyptian woman participant stated:

> Fatma was so nice. She was a strong, smart, and beautiful woman who was fighting against the odds. I think Arab women love to see women that are strong and leaders, which is something we don't see a lot, especially in the Gulf.

Another way to look at the appeal of Turkish dramas is the notion of cultural shareability (Singhal & Udornpim, 1997, p. 171). Turkish drama serials often employ archetypes that portray "self-seeking disobedient females in a heroic struggle" (Singhal & Udornpim, 1997, p. 171)—a theme with universal appeal. The importance of a woman protagonist was emphasized among not only women study participants; several men voiced throughout the focus group discussions the significance of having a woman protagonist who portrays a more modern and independent image of women as both positive and relatable. An Egyptian man noted:

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[2] *Fatma* (Fatmagül'ün Sucu Ne?, 2010–2012) is the story of a village girl who is gang-raped by a group of rich young men. Kerim, who, unlike his friends, is not the son of a powerful businessman, agrees to marry Fatmagül to prevent the group from going to prison; however, she is unaware that he is not one of the perpetrators of the crime (Williams, 2013).

The way they show the role of women in Arab shows doesn't really reflect how our generation feels. I mean I wouldn't want my sister or daughter to have a lot of boyfriends, but I want them to be their own women and respect our religion and culture.

One further way to explore gender representation in Turkish dramas and their appeal to Arab audiences is to think about it as a desired proximity for modernity (Iwabuchi, 2002). Television programs that challenge dominant perceptions of gender identities might not influence people in a drastic way, but they potentially illustrate the developments of modernization. Consequently, one could argue that the positive reception of gender roles in Turkish programs is a reflection of this process.

The Importance of Cultural Capital

It is important to note that, despite the fact that all study participants had been exposed to Turkish dramas, many claimed that it was their mother, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers who were the actual viewers. Given the amount of knowledge these students possess of Turkish shows, it is likely that they are viewers themselves; however, admitting that they watch the shows might be deemed "uncool" among their peers. Another explanation could be the difference of cultural capital between the two generations (parents and children). The majority of Education City students who participated in this study were educated in English-language secondary schools and were receiving an American higher education. Typically, they are more fluent in English than in Arabic and thus associate more with Western popular culture.

According to the notion of cultural capital, education is one of its principal social assets. Basic education can accentuate an audience's focus on cultural proximity, leading viewers to prefer local and national productions over those that are globalized and/or American. Additionally, higher education can open interest to a more global view. Because the students are Western-educated and fluent in English—in stark contrast to their parent's generation—they could quite naturally opt for Western productions over Arabic and Turkish content.

Conclusion

This study finds that cultural proximity is a significant factor in the appeal of Turkish drama serials among Arab audiences. In particular, the dubbing of Turkish programs into a colloquial Syrian dialect is identified as a key factor in this appeal, with the decision to dub providing accessibility to a far broader audience. Furthermore, it seems to have not only translated a language and localized a television format but also brought a culture closer that many in the Arab world were unaware was so proximate.

This study discovered that ethnic and racial similarities play an important part in the appeal of Turkish television dramas. The fact that they are set against the backdrop of a Muslim society is a core contributor to making them proximate and therefore appealing. At the same time, the representation of a modern and Muslim society is an important aspect of cultural proximity that Arab students feel toward Turkish productions. The fact that the content is from a Muslim country provides these dramas with a highly relatable element and thus fosters affinity in the viewer, which legitimizes breaking boundaries that would be otherwise culturally unacceptable.

This study also determined that audiences enjoy watching a more liberal take on social and cultural issues, but they do not necessarily feel comfortable seeing the same level of openness in their own society. One could conclude that the pleasure Arab audiences receive from watching Turkish television dramas is gained by seeing an alternative sociocultural model, but without physically being confronted with the reality of modernity and Westernization that appear to go hand in hand in Turkish drama serials.

The portrayal of a conservative family structure, where family ties and respect for the older generation are considered important, was noted by most study participants as another aspect of cultural proximity and therefore important for Arab audiences when selecting Turkish programs. Moreover, this study identified that Turkish drama serials successfully combine global and local elements in their productions. Turkish dramas are seen as having successfully merged cultural and ethnic similarities, social relations, and family ties with a modern way of life that is still recognizable in the Arab and Muslim cultural context.

The importance of genre was also a significant factor in the appeal of Turkish programs. The fact that Turkish productions are dramas and often border on the subgenre of melodrama, which predominantly emphasizes romance and family relations, was key in their appeal, particularly among women. Finally, the portrayal of strong and independent women characters as protagonists in Turkish dramas is identified as another key factor contributing to the programs' appeal.

This research concludes that Straubhaar's (2003) claim that cultural proximity is limited by social class stratification—as groups that might be united by language and/or culture can be fragmented by both economic and cultural capital—is a useful argument to understand why Turkish drama serials attract the parents' generation, but not the study participants. Furthermore, this study finds the notion of cultural proximity (De Sola Pool, 1977; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005; Straubhaar, 1991, 2007) to be a valuable tool to examine the importance of cultural similarities in the popularity of Turkish television dramas. The research findings demonstrate the idea of audiences choosing to watch "television programs that are closest, most proximate or most directly relevant to them in culture" (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, p. 273). Nonetheless, the argument that the viewer's first preference will be for material produced in his or her own language and local or national culture has been found not to be the case. Arab viewers opt for Turkish serials regardless of the fact that Arabic content is widely available. Cultural and linguistic elements appear to come second if national and regional media fail to gratify the audience's needs. However, the acceptance of dubbed media by Arab viewers has enabled Turkish content to enter a cultural-linguistic market that would normally require the same, or similar, language. Furthermore, dubbing has enabled audiences to discover various ethnic and cultural similarities.

Last, the overall success of Turkish drama serials might be due to their proximity as well as their distance. Local and national productions can work to improve their production values, but as long as they fail to reflect what their populations want to see rather than what they believe they should see, audiences will continue to opt for Turkish content.

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