



Graduate School of Social Sciences and Humanities

**“On-Demand Audiences”: Understanding The Streaming-era
Viewing Practices For Audiences In Turkey**

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**Supervisors: Assoc. Prof. Dr. İpek Azime Çelik Rappas
Prof. Dr. Philippe Meers**

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**Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Communication Studies
Visual and Digital Cultures Research Center**

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Viewing Practices For Audiences In Turkey**

**Thesis for the degree of doctor in Film Studies and
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defended by ASLI ILDIR**

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STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

This dissertation contains no material which has been accepted for any award or any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. It is affirmed by the candidate that, to the best of her knowledge, the dissertation contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

“ON-DEMAND AUDIENCES”: UNDERSTANDING THE STREAMING-ERA VIEWING PRACTICES FOR THE ON-DEMAND AUDIENCES IN TURKEY

Ash Ildır

June, 2023

This research examines the changing film and television viewing culture with the introduction and proliferation of streaming services such as Netflix from the perspective of the audiences in Turkey. By incorporating the experience of real audiences into the discussion of “on-demand culture” (Tryon, 2018), this research contributes to the theorization of the concept of “internet television” from an experiential point of view. It explores the changing viewing experience, behavior, and habits of audiences with the proliferation of subscription-based video-on-demand services. I focus on audiences in Turkey and gather empirical data from in-depth interviews with 30 participants. Television culture is robust in Turkey, one of the major TV series exporters, and the television industry greatly influences the general media ecosystem. Thereby, examining the emergence and development of the VOD market concerning this strong television culture is necessary to understand the audience's tastes/behavior and make sense of the changing content.

Shifting the discussion on choice and taste from the realm of the algorithms to the more direct experience of the audiences - or to the way the audiences talk about these experiences- this dissertation examines how audiences respond to this more direct relationship to the streaming services and diversified content they offer. It follows a multi-method approach that combines audience research with content/narrative analysis and rhetorical analysis. While the first three empirical chapters rely on qualitative audience research based on semi-structured interviews with 30 SVOD viewers in Turkey, the last chapter engages in a narrative analysis of a series commissioned by SVOD services operating in Turkey. Furthermore, all chapters use rhetorical analysis to illustrate the marketing discourse and brand identity of SVOD services such as Netflix and MUBI. This dissertation compares and contrasts the audience's perspective on these services with the ideological underpinnings of the industrial discourse around them.

This dissertation is designed as a 'stapler thesis' with separate articles. After the introductory chapter that establishes the theoretical framework and background, the first empirical chapter focuses on the experience of SVOD audiences from Turkey (Netflix in particular). It aims to understand the effect of SVOD technology on viewing habits/behaviors, cultural choices, and tastes. Distinct from more rationalized accounts of choice and taste for SVOD audiences, it mainly argues that contemporary audiences emotionally, intimately, and sensually relate to Netflix. The second chapter focuses on audience experiences with another global SVOD service, MUBI. It explores the ways the audience relates to the imagined audience that MUBI assumes, promotes, and celebrates as a cultural gatekeeper and artistic patron/expert; and how, in turn, being a MUBI user becomes a sign of cultural taste. The dissertation moves on to the taste and habits of the local SVOD audience in the third chapter. It is interested in how SVOD is adopted, negotiated, reformulated, and received in a non-Western context where global and local services

compete, substitute, and emulate each other. The fourth chapter asks how the stories told change with the emergence of SVOD norms by analyzing two comedy series commissioned by the Turkish SVOD service, BluTV, and explores their distinction from linear television comedies in Turkey. Following Bucaria and Barra's (2016) conceptualization of "taboo" or "controversial" humor for television, it finds evidence that SVOD services create space for storytellers to challenge culturally or politically taboo issues in Turkey through humor. Finally, the concluding section discusses the thesis's contributions to the field, limitations and suggestions, and possibilities for future research.

Keywords: Internet television, video-on-demand, Turkey, audience studies, media industry studies, Netflix

ABSTRACT

"ON-DEMAND PUBLIEKEN"

DE KIJKGEWOONTEN VAN ON-DEMAND PUBLIEKEN IN TURKIJE TIJDENS HET STREAMINGTIJDPERK BEGRIJPEN

Ash Ildır
Juni, 2023

Dit onderzoek onderzoekt de veranderende film- en televisiekijkcultuur met de introductie en verspreiding van streamingdiensten zoals Netflix vanuit het perspectief van het publiek. Door de ervaring van echte publieken te betrekken in de discussie over de "on-demand cultuur" (Tryon, 2018), draagt dit onderzoek bij aan de theorievorming over het concept "internettelevisie" vanuit een ervaringsperspectief. Het onderzoekt de veranderende kijkervaring, gedrag en gewoonten van het publiek met de proliferatie van video-on-demand diensten op abonnementsbasis. Ik richt me op kijkers in Turkije en verzamel empirische gegevens uit diepte-interviews met 30 deelnemers. De televisiecultuur is robuust in Turkije, een van de grootste exporteurs van televisieseries, en de televisie-industrie heeft grote invloed op het algemene media-ecosysteem. Daarom is het onderzoeken van de opkomst en de ontwikkeling van de VOD-markt met betrekking tot deze sterke televisiecultuur noodzakelijk om de smaak/het gedrag van het publiek te begrijpen en de veranderende inhoud te doorgronden.

Door de discussie over keuze en smaak te verleggen van het domein van de algoritmes naar de meer directe ervaring van publieken - of naar de manier waarop publieken over deze ervaringen praten - onderzoekt dit proefschrift hoe publieken reageren op deze meer directe relatie met de streamingdiensten en de gediversifieerde inhoud die ze aanbieden. Het volgt een multi-methodische benadering die publieksonderzoek combineert met inhoudelijke/narratieve analyse en retorische analyse. Terwijl de eerste drie hoofdstukken gebaseerd zijn op kwalitatief publieksonderzoek op basis van semi-gestructureerde interviews met 30 SVOD-kijkers in Turkije, wordt in het laatste hoofdstuk een narratieve analyse gemaakt van een serie besteld door SVOD-diensten die actief zijn in Turkije. Verder maken alle hoofdstukken gebruik van retorische analyse om het marketingdiscours en de merkidentiteit van SVOD-diensten zoals Netflix en MUBI te illustreren. Dit proefschrift vergelijkt en contrasteert het perspectief van het publiek op deze diensten met de ideologische onderbouwing van het industriële discours eromheen.

Het eerste hoofdstuk richt zich op de ervaring van SVOD-publieken in Turkije (Netflix in het bijzonder). Het probeert het effect van SVOD-technologie op kijkgewoonten/gedrag, culturele

keuzes en smaak te begrijpen. Verschillend van meer rationele verklaringen van keuze en smaak voor SVOD-publiek, wordt vooral betoogd dat het hedendaagse publiek zich emotioneel, intiem en zintuiglijk verhoudt tot Netflix. Het tweede hoofdstuk richt zich op de ervaringen van het publiek met een andere wereldwijde SVOD-dienst, MUBI. Het onderzoekt de manieren waarop het publiek zich verhoudt tot het ingebeelde publiek dat MUBI veronderstelt, promoot en viert als culturele poortwachter en artistieke mecenas/expert; en hoe een MUBI-gebruiker zijn op zijn beurt een teken van culturele smaak wordt. Het proefschrift gaat verder met de smaak en gewoonten van het lokale SVOD-publiek in het derde hoofdstuk. Het is geïnteresseerd in hoe SVOD wordt geadopteerd, onderhandeld, geherformuleerd en ontvangen in een niet-westerse context waar globale en lokale diensten elkaar beconcurreren, vervangen en imiteren. Het vierde hoofdstuk stelt de vraag hoe de verhalen veranderen met de opkomst van SVOD-normen door twee komedieseries te analyseren die in opdracht van de Turkse SVOD-dienst BluTV zijn gemaakt, en onderzoekt hun verschil met lineaire televisiekomedies in Turkije. In navolging van Bucaria en Barra's (2016) conceptualisering van "taboe" of "controversiële" humor voor televisie, wordt bewijs gevonden dat SVOD-diensten ruimte creëren voor verhalenvertellers om culturele of politieke taboeonderwerpen in Turkije uit te dagen door middel van humor.

TEZ ÖZETİ

“TALEP ÜZERİNE KÜLTÜR VE SEYİRCİ: DİJİTAL TELEVİZYON ÇAĞINDA TÜRKİYELİ SEYİRCİNİN DAVRANIŞ PRATİKLERİNİ ANLAMAK

Aslı İldır
June, 2023

Bu araştırma, Netflix gibi dijital platformların ortaya çıkışı ve yaygınlaşmasıyla birlikte değişen film ve televizyon izleme kültürünü, Türkiye'deki izleyicilerin bakış açısından incelemektedir. Bu çalışma, "talep üzerine kültür" tartışmasına (Tryon, 2018) izleyici deneyimini dahil ederek, "internet televizyonu" kavramının deneyimsel bir bakış açısıyla kuramsallaştırılmasına katkıda bulunur. Ayrıca aboneliğe ve isteğe bağlı video hizmetlerinin/dijital platformların yaygınlaşmasıyla izleyicilerin değişen izleme deneyimini, davranışlarını ve alışkanlıklarını araştırır. Türkiye'deki izleyicilere odaklanan araştırma sırasında 30 katılımcıyla derinlemesine görüşmelerden ampirik veriler toplanmıştır. En büyük dizi ihracatçılarından biri olan Türkiye'de televizyon kültürü oldukça güçlüdür ve televizyon endüstrisi genel medya ekosistemini büyük ölçüde etkilemektedir. Bu nedenle, dijital platform/internet televizyonu pazarının ortaya çıkışını ve gelişimini bu güçlü televizyon kültürü bağlamında incelemek, içeriğin gitgide küreselleştiği günümüz medya dünyasında izleyicilerin zevklerini/davranışlarını anlamak ve değişen içeriği anlamlandırmak adına önemlidir.

Seçim ve beğeni konusundaki tartışmayı algoritmalar alanından izleyicilerin daha doğrudan deneyimlerine - veya izleyicilerin bu deneyimler hakkında konuşma biçimlerine - kaydıran bu tez, izleyicilerin dijital platformlarla ilişkilene biçimlerini inceler. Çalışma, izleyici araştırmasını içerik/anlatı analizi ve retorik analizle birleştiren çok yöntemli bir yaklaşımı izler. İlk üç ampirik bölüm, Türkiye'deki 30 dijital platform izleyicisiyle yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelere dayanan niteliksel izleyici araştırmasına dayanırken; son bölüm, Türkiye'de faaliyet gösteren dijital platform tarafından üretilmiş bir dizinin anlatı analizine girer. Ayrıca tüm bölümler, Netflix ve MUBI gibi dijital platformların pazarlama söylemini ve marka kimliğini incelemek adına retorik analiz yöntemini benimser. Bu çalışma, izleyicinin bu platformlara bakış açısını, markaların etrafında kurulan endüstriyel söylemin ideolojik çağrışımlarıyla bir arada ve karşılaştırmalı olarak değerlendirir.

Bu tez, farklı mecralarda ve akademik dergi/kitaplarda basılan makalelerden oluşmaktadır. Teorik çerçeveyi ve arka planı sunan giriş bölümünden sonra, ilk ampirik bölüm Türkiye'deki dijital platform izleyicilerinin (özellikle Netflix izleyicilerinin) deneyimlerine odaklanır. Dijital platform teknolojisinin izleme alışkanlıkları/davranışları, kültürel tercihler ve zevkler üzerindeki etkisini anlamayı amaçlar. Dijital platform izleyicilerinin seçim ve zevklerini rasyonel seçimler olarak yorumlayan çalışmalardan farklı olarak, günümüz izleyicisinin Netflix ile duygusal ve

duyusal bir şekilde ilişkilendiğini savunur. İkinci bölüm, başka bir küresel dijital platform olan MUBI izleyicisinin deneyimlerine odaklanır. Bir tür kültürel bir bekçi ve sanat hamisi/uzmanı olarak varsayılan ve marka kimliğini de bu rollerin üzerine inşa eden MUBI'nin, hayal ettiği/varsaydığı izleyiciye bakar. Yine ampirik izleyici çalışmasından yararlanan bu bölüm, MUBI izleyicisinin platformun yarattığı bu imajla nasıl ilişkilendiğini ve karşılığında, bir MUBI kullanıcısı olmanın nasıl bir kültürel zevk işareti haline geldiğini araştırır. Tez, üçüncü bölümde ise yerel dijital platform izleyicisinin zevk ve alışkanlıklarına geçiş yapar. Küresel ve yerel hizmetlerin rekabet ettiği, birbirini ikame ettiği ve taklit ettiği Batılı olmayan bir bağlamda dijital platformların nasıl benimsendiği, müzakere edildiği ve yeniden formüle edildiği ile ilgilenmektedir. Dördüncü bölüm, Türkiye'de kurulmuş olan bir dijital platform (BluTV) tarafından üretilmiş olan iki komedi dizisini inceler. Böylece dijital platformlar etrafında oluşan normların ortaya çıkmasıyla anlatılan hikâyelerin de nasıl değiştiğini sorgular ve bunların Türkiye'deki lineer televizyon komedilerinden farkını araştırır. Bucaria ve Barra'nın (2016) televizyon için "tabu" veya "tartışmalı" mizah kavramsallaştırmasını kullanan dördüncü bölüm, Türkiye'deki dijital platformların, yerli hikâye anlatıcılarının kültürel veya politik olarak tabu meseleleri mizah yoluyla sorgulamaları adına nasıl bir alan yarattığını araştırır. Son olarak, sonuç bölümünde ise tezin alana katkıları, karşılaşılan zorluk ve engeller ile gelecekteki araştırmalar için öneri ve olasılıklar tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: İnternet televizyonu, talep üzerine video, izleyici çalışmaları, medya endüstrisi çalışmaları, Netflix

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Paper II. Ildır, Aslı (2023) "Challenging Cultural and Political Taboos: A Turkish SVOD's Experiments in Taboo Comedy" In *Streaming Video: Storytelling Across Borders*, edited by Amanda D. Lotz, Ramon Lobato.

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Ildır, Aslı. (2023) "Paranormal Activity" *Screening American Independent Film*. Edited by W.D. Phillips & Justin Wyatt. Routledge.

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I

INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

“Netflix” is such a loaded term -or brand- that it is challenging to define and theorize it, let alone situate it in the current media ecosystem. For many, it is a shortcut or a symbol for a new and prevalent distribution channel, video-on-demand. It is neither the first nor the only VOD service, but obviously the most popular and culturally significant. It is a standalone VOD service, not a part or extension of a conglomerate such as Disney. Netflix is unrelated to any linear television channel and has an entirely different business model based on subscribers rather than ad revenue. Thanks to its personalized recommendation system and dynamic interface, it has a composite library that can adapt to each subscriber. Therefore, it is easier to define Netflix as a standalone service that licenses and commissions content and offers a particular value proposition to its subscribers on a personalized schedule (Lotz 2022). However, the discussion becomes tricky when we regard it as a typical and exceptional example of VOD.

The main objective of this dissertation is to inquire into how film and television viewing culture changes with the introduction and proliferation of streaming services such as Netflix from the perspective of the audiences in Turkey. However, this research is not only based on Netflix, and it includes research on global and local VOD services with distinct business models and content strategies (Here and throughout the dissertation, I use the term “local” to indicate the audiences in Turkey.) As one of the most culturally significant and emblematic examples of internet television, it is crucial to define Netflix in specific because it also functions as a vantage point within this research. I suggest that any discussion on VOD requires taking Netflix as a central reference point because, basically, it is more practical to do so. VOD is a highly recent and unstable category still in an early stage, and its boundaries are indefinite for now. It is also a very heterogeneous category that includes many different sub-categories, such as Subscription-VOD (SVOD), Advertising-based-VOD (AVOD), and Transaction-VOD (TVOD). Many VOD services are either an extension or a part of a media conglomerate (Disney), a technology company (Amazon Prime, Apple+), or a cable channel (HBO Max). They are all in a stage of formation and experimentation, and neither is a pure or standalone VOD service depending solely on subscriber revenue. Another reason they are not as emblematic or culturally significant as Netflix is because they are not as global in terms of content and audience. Even though there are endeavors to reach a global audience, as Disney+ and Amazon Prime do, we are

still in the early stage of deciding if these models will be as sustainable as Netflix in their globalization efforts.

This highly unpredictable and unstable current media ecosystem is mainly a consequence of the rupture created by VOD as a new internet distribution technology and the way Netflix utilized and popularized it. Therefore, it is understandable that a big part of academic research on the current media ecosystem mainly focuses on understanding and situating Netflix from several aspects. I have been following these discussions since I started to work on my dissertation in 2017, and what I've observed is as follows: The challenge of defining and situating Netflix has its implications in the academic field in the form of "a creative confusion" and its cultural influence on a global level has attracted scholars from many different fields. These fields include media industry studies, television and film studies, cultural and new media, and audience studies. It is impossible to capture all aspects and identities of Netflix in a single body of work - since it is undoubtedly a product of the "convergence era" (Jenkins 2006)- but the complexity of the task opens a rich space to re-conceptualize the current state of the internet distributed video.

A similar curiosity to understand the cultural and industrial significance of Netflix also determined the main structure of this dissertation. My initial starting point was Netflix's globalization move in 2016 and its entrance into the Turkish market. Two local VOD services (BluTV and Puhu TV) launched following Netflix's entrance, and there were three major players in the local market in 2017. The audience in Turkey was not familiar with VOD technology, and Netflix was the first significant example widely adopted throughout the country. Consequently, Netflix became almost synonymous with several related concepts such as VOD, digital streaming platforms, and internet-distributed TV. It was not only the industrial dominance of Netflix that determined the structure of this dissertation but also empirical research data obtained from in-depth audience research. The findings of this research demonstrated that VOD audiences situate Netflix as a point of reference when they talk about their changing viewing behavior and habits in the on-demand era. Therefore, this dissertation takes Netflix as a vantage point because it has a central place in the daily experiences of VOD audiences in addition to its industrial and cultural significance.

VOD audiences have some common characteristics with television or home video audiences, and even though these different audience segments generally overlap, they are also very distinct from each other in many ways. VOD content is generally consumed within the

household, mostly on television and personal computers. Now that smart TVs have become widespread, viewers can easily access Netflix and many other streaming services through the apps on these TVs. As a result of these many technological conveniences, VOD got closer to television spatially and experientially. On the other hand, the availability of time-shifting and the lack of a linear schedule got it closer to the home-video experience. Even though VOD audiences are versatile in using these technologies and their choices in content, there are still some observable patterns in their changing viewing behavior. This dissertation is interested in these patterns as newly acquired habits of the on-demand era and internet-distributed television and examines them in relation to older habits. Even though SVOD users are not necessarily television viewers, television culture is robust in Turkey, and it is especially relevant to conduct this research where streaming manages to develop significantly alongside a very strong television viewing culture. The television industry in Turkey, as one of the major TV series exporters, greatly influences the general media ecosystem. Thereby, examining the emergence and development of the streaming market concerning this strong television culture is necessary to understand the audience's tastes/behavior and make sense of the changing content in our current media environment, which is significantly affected by the global identity of the internet television.

VOD audiences, like many other types of audiences, are highly heterogeneous and versatile in their behavior. Distinct from an older and more traditional/conventional form of film and television, VOD audiences are constantly in flux due to the rapidly changing industry. New global and local players are entering the market on a regular basis, which means more and more content is available for the audiences. This profusion of content results from new productions and access to older series and films. However, the on-demand availability of more content is different from full and unconditional access. One of the problems in the current VOD landscape is the problem of “migration” of content. Distinct from the experience of public broadcasting or paying for a bundle of channels that broadcast ephemeral content, VOD audiences have to subscribe to each service to access the content (both the permanent and ephemeral/migrating content).

On the other hand, unlike buying a DVD, audiences do not own the content as a physical object, which makes their ownership temporary. Suppose a VOD service’s streaming rights for a specific content expire. In that case, it can no longer offer that title to its subscribers (this is

generally true for licensed content rather than commissioned, “original”). Therefore, that content *migrates*, and if subscribers do not have access to the other service that buys the current rights of that title, they lose the content. There is a different ownership or financial deal model between subscribers and VOD services, both as a business model and in terms of experience. Rather than a specific content or channel, audiences pay for a composite library that constantly changes and the technological/cultural experience the service offers.

Another notable consequence of the overabundance of content in the on-demand era is the so-called “choice fatigue.” VOD services do not need the audience to pay attention to specific content for a certain time, as in the case of ad-supported linear broadcasting television. Audiences are free to watch whatever they want, whenever they want - within the limits of the service’s library. However, even not in the same way as linear television did, many VOD services still compete for a different form of attention: Enough initial attention to subscribe to the service and enough attention and satisfaction to last long enough to keep the subscription. As the number of VOD services increases, there will eventually be a need to choose from among them, as the market has a saturation point. This necessity is not only a result of financial reasons but also the choice fatigue caused by the overabundance of content available on demand. There is a particular “burden” to choose and watch because audiences are subscribed to the service, therefore *constantly* paying for the content. At least, this is the case for Netflix and other SVODs on which this thesis mainly focuses. SVOD audiences do not only pay once for a particular type of content as in DVD; consequently, they do not physically own that content forever to watch it whenever they want¹. Their access to many different types of content and control over their spatial and temporal experience of these content undoubtedly increased - but at the expense of full ownership. SVOD audiences are in an endless *process* of paying, which puts an extra burden of choice on their shoulders. Because when they choose one thing, they will miss the thing they did not choose, which is inevitable because their time is limited. The content they could or did not choose and *still pay for* is a fundamental part of this burden. This dissertation is interested in this burden and the emotional stress it creates for VOD audiences in distinct ways.

Netflix and many other SVOD services target different and more niche segments of audiences; therefore, the range of their content is crucial for their business model. Especially in

¹ It is a different scenario for transaction-VOD because they have a different business model based on direct transaction.

the case of Netflix, there are certain “taste communities” that belong to specific “taste clusters” (Lotz 2022). The global identity of some of these services complicates the taste issue because global audiences are much more complex in their taste due to local dynamics. The clash and interaction of global and local tastes are one of the fundamental issues that this dissertation focuses on. VOD services must deal with “the stubborn locality of taste” (Lobato 2019) in understanding and producing content for their global audiences. However, distinct from earlier examples of the transnational flow of television and film, the current flow is two-sided. Therefore, as local taste becomes more global with these services, the sum of local tastes transforms “the global taste” in return. It is challenging to indicate and invest in local markets for many VOD services because of extreme audience fragmentation and the complexity of local and global tastes. Notably, the insight of the local audiences is significant in this equation because they are both a primary source of revenue and have a vital role in determining the global content of the services. Another crucial equation factor is the local VOD services, which can be competitors or complements of global ones. Local services refer to a different locality as they are not primarily aimed at global audiences. Understanding the complexity of taste and behavior of local audiences is crucial in understanding the current media ecosystem, which is becoming more global than ever.

This dissertation explores changing audience habits and viewing behaviors that emerged with the proliferation of VOD services. It consists of three parts; the introduction, empirical studies, and conclusions. The first part briefly introduces the study's theoretical framework and methodological approach. The second part consists of four chapters, structured as journal articles. These chapters can be read independently, as each chapter focuses on a different VOD service and uses different materials. As a whole, however, the chapters complement each other by presenting the transformation of audience behavior and habits with the introduction of VOD, the complexity of local taste, and how VOD stories challenge the norms of linear television in substantial ways.

The first part of the empirical research focuses on the experience of VOD audiences (Netflix in particular). It aims to understand the effect of VOD technology on viewing habits/behaviors, cultural choices, and tastes. Adopting an inductive approach based on in-depth interviews, this article challenges the industry's inferred, imagined, or assumed VOD audience/users and many scholarly discussions. Distinct from more rationalized accounts of

choice and taste for VOD audiences, it mainly argues that contemporary audiences emotionally, intimately, and sensually relate to Netflix. Shifting the discussion on choice and taste from the realm of the algorithms to the more direct experience of the audiences - or to the way the audiences talk about these experiences- this chapter examines how audiences respond to Netflix's proprietary attitude on their individual choice/taste and the discourse of "personalized choice."

While discussing how audiences relate to Netflix, this article examines the discourse of technological convenience and the practice of binge-watching through users' feelings of guilt, laziness, and addiction. By incorporating the user perspective into these discussions, it aims to complicate these immensely popular concepts circulated by the industry. This research also explores how users perceive Netflix concerning traditional/linear television through intimacy, nostalgia, and memory. While this chapter contributes to the discussions on VOD technology/industry and the phenomenon of Netflix by offering an in-depth overview of VOD audiences and their experiences with Netflix, the next chapter focuses on audience experiences with another global SVOD service, MUBI. Even though there are many differences between Netflix and other SVOD services, MUBI is one of the most distinct examples of SVOD with a slightly distinct revenue model, a specialized library, and a more niche subscriber base.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with subscribers of MUBI Turkey, the second article explores the ways the audience relates to the imagined audience that MUBI assumes, promotes, and celebrates as a cultural gatekeeper and artistic patron/expert; and how, in turn, being a MUBI user becomes a sign of cultural taste. Even though MUBI offers a different choice model with a specialized library, how users talk about their emotions concerning their experience is surprisingly similar to the case of Netflix discussed in the second chapter. This chapter argues that even though users appreciate MUBI's limited choice model compared to Netflix, they still experience feelings such as frustration, stress, and inadequacy. These feelings mainly result from MUBI's artistic authority over them, established through the discourse of expertise/artistic patronage and limited time model. On the other hand, users do not automatically accept the service's expertise. Some of them are more critical of it than other VOD services (such as Netflix) because they consider watching MUBI as a form of "intellectual labor."

The dissertation moves on to the taste and habits of the local VOD audience in the third article. One of the distinct features of Netflix from early examples of transnational television is

its global identity, which is more open to a reciprocal flow. On the one hand, “global content” is affected and shaped by the taste of local audiences from different regions. This article looks at the local VOD industry and the audience to delve deeper into this multi-centered global flow. Drawing on in-depth interviews with users of Netflix Turkey and the Turkish streaming service BluTV, it explores the emergence and impact of VOD in Turkey. It is interested in how VOD is adopted, negotiated, reformulated, and received in a non-Western context where global and local services compete, substitute, and emulate each other. The article is specifically interested in the complexity of local taste and argues that local content services offer a central juncture through which audiences articulate their larger expectations from VODs. This chapter's findings indicate that Netflix's localization attempts do not always correspond with the audience demand; it is heavily critiqued and, at times, rejected by the local audience.

The article is divided into sections according to the main themes that emerged from audience research. These sections explore the norms of linear television, media regulations/censorship, and the informal networks/piracy in the media ecosystem of Turkey. This chapter contributes to the abundant literature on the localization of Netflix by delivering the complexity of local taste. It also provides an introductory review of the VOD ecosystem in Turkey, which is still in a constant state of transition and transformation. Television culture is robust in Turkey, one of the major TV series exporters, and the television industry greatly influences the general media ecosystem. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the emergence and development of a strong VOD market alongside a robust television industry to understand how audiences navigate between streaming services and broadcast television and make sense of their changing viewing behavior and taste in the midst of a multicentered global content flow.

The fourth and last chapter asks how the stories told change with the emergence of SVOD norms by analyzing two comedy series commissioned by BluTV. The fourth article examines two series commissioned by BluTV—*Me, Bartu* (2017), and *Doğu* (2021)—and explores their distinction from linear television comedies in Turkey. Following Bucaria and Barra's (2016) conceptualization of “taboo” or “controversial” humor for television, finds evidence that SVOD services create space for storytellers to challenge culturally or politically taboo issues in Turkey through humor. This is particularly important within the Turkish context because SVOD content often uses humor to challenge the hegemonic ideological position of mainstream television, mainly through narratives that critique patriarchal and conservative

values in society. Two main factors enable the sociopolitical freedom and generic experimentation emerging in these comedies: the lack of strict, formal content regulation and the availability of limited series and shorter episodes without ad breaks. The second factor is mainly a consequence of the subscription-based model, which is not bound by the constraints of traditional broadcasting, such as the pressure to attract the largest possible audience for advertisers. This chapter differs from the rest of the dissertation in terms of methodology, and it uses narrative analysis to deepen the arguments in the previous chapters. It contributes to a better understanding of VOD content and its reception with examples that diverge from linear television norms.

This dissertation examines the currently under-studied VOD audience and their changing behavior and habits; hence, it deals with the audience both as a continuation of the television/film audience in the traditional sense and with its unique features. It evaluates the data obtained from audience research in combination with industrial and textual analysis. In doing so, it is positioned at the intersection of audience studies, media industry studies, and television studies. The following subsection on the dissertation's theoretical framework discusses this intersection's details.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

This subsection will discuss the theories from different areas related to this dissertation: Media industry studies, television studies, and audience studies. First, I will examine how the media industry and television studies deal with Netflix and other VOD services. Then, I will discuss relevant research in audience studies, which offers a theoretical and historical background in framing the VOD audience.

1.1.1 Media Industry & Television Studies

As a technology that combines “the logics of television, film, home video, the internet” (Pradsmadji and Irwansyah 2020, 115), VOD is a product and form of media convergence. Combining the industrial and audience perspective, Jenkins defines convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and

the migratory behavior of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they wanted” (2006, 3). Jenkins hesitates to define media convergence solely as a technological process and argues that the spectators' performance and participation define the ongoing cultural shift. His views on the active role of the audiences and the democratization of media have been challenged in the last two decades, especially with the industry's efforts to control and monetize disruptive technologies such as VOD and audience labor. Jenkins also expresses his “growing concern that networked communications would not necessarily result in a more progressive, inclusive, or democratic culture” (2014: 270). Apart from discussing the liberatory aspects of the convergence culture in general and internet-distributed media technologies in specific, Jenkins' emphasis on the “participatory shift” where individualized media users/consumers/audiences are more visible than ever is significant for this dissertation. This participatory aspect of today's cultural environment indicates that media audiences are becoming more relevant than ever because “participation is now mediated and the subjects of everyday media (...) are also participants in whatever is, now, mediated: society, democracy, culture.” (Livingstone, 2013: 27). Livingstone argues that there is also a “participation paradigm” emerging within the audience studies, and she indicates a similar orientation towards a study of the flourishing culture of participation in different fields (2013). This dissertation deals with this discourse of participation through a combined theoretical approach and brings together media industry studies and audience studies to analyze different aspects of today's “participatory culture.” Media industry studies examine the structural and industrial dynamics of media institutions and services and analyze how they create, circulate, and reinforce a certain culture or discourse of participation. This dissertation combines this industrial point of view with empirical data obtained through qualitative audience research and opens diverse social and cultural meanings of “participation” into the discussion. This complicates the discussion on participatory shift and culture through the audiences' relationship and experience with on-demand internet television.

Taking the discussion to a much more specific area, Tryon discusses the participatory shift in terms of internet-distributed television and VOD services. He conceptualizes the participatory shift as the “on-demand culture” (2013) in an era where the digital distribution has become widespread in consuming film and television content. He discusses the liberatory aspects

of the on-demand era alongside its diverse effects on media consumption, including the emergence of a fragmentary and individualized experience for the audiences. He specifically examines the changing modes of access to films & series and explores different meanings and implications of the increasing mobility and availability of content in the on-demand era. Tryon also approaches digital distribution and VOD as “platforms” and draws attention to the ideological underpinnings of these services, reminding of Gillespie’s pivotal work on platform politics, which discusses platforms as “discursive resting points” (2010, 348-349). Tryon argues that the ongoing shift to on-demand culture is not solely technological but also ideological. He introduces the term “platform mobility,” which “includes the social, political, and economic changes that make mobile access more desirable (...) access to entertainment is promoted as mobile, persistent, and interactive, allowing the user far more control than in the past” (2013, 4). However, despite his emphasis on the increasing control of the audience, Tryon is more skeptical than Jenkins about the industry's promotion of this new "empowered" audience, which is assumed to control their time, money and media choices. Following Lotz, this dissertation does not discuss VOD and internet television as “platforms,” but as “services” (“streaming services” in specific), to avoid additional meanings that come along with the term “platform,” which is generally used for social media sites. However, Tryon’s and Gillespie’s emphasis on the ideological underpinnings of these services *as platforms* is a crucial discussion point for this dissertation. Through its combined approach, this research aims to explore how the ideological and cultural ideas and values that are circulated by these services through their marketing strategy and content policies are received, decoded, interpreted, accepted, and sometimes challenged by the audiences.

While Jenkins and Tryon engage in a more general description of the current media ecosystem through concepts such as convergence, participation, and on-demand, Hagener elaborates on three specific models of on-demand options that have emerged as a part of “a new cinephilian age of digital circulation” (2016, 186): Free VOD services that mainly offer “user-generated content” such as Youtube, subscription-based VOD services (SVOD) that provide more curated and professional content and lastly the free and illegal streaming and delivery options. He categorizes platforms such as Netflix, MUBI, and Amazon Prime under the second category, SVOD services, that offer specialized content. The first category (free VOD

services) is often considered one of the emblematic products of Web 2.0, referring to the second-generation of internet users, defined by the participatory culture that “contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship” (Jenkins, 2006: 9) and user-generated content. While these free VOD services and illegal streaming options are generally discussed within a discourse of “disruption,” the second category (SVOD services) is often seen as a more explicit continuation of the traditional media distribution and exhibition practices. These services are generally extensions of media conglomerates or television networks (except standalone examples such as Netflix), or they have strong industrial ties with traditional media institutions; their business model is not based on user-generated content, and they are subject to certain regulations. This research mainly focuses on the second category, which involves global and local SVOD services such as Netflix, MUBI, and BluTV. This particular focus on SVOD services provides a suitable framework to observe the continuities and differences between broadcast and internet television as two distinct forms of television that need to be examined in relation to one another for a more comprehensive analysis. Even though illegal streaming -which belongs to Hagener’s third category- is crucial in understanding the adoption of and experience with SVOD services in Turkey, piracy is only analyzed as a structuring factor that affects the local viewing culture in this study.

SVOD services are not discussed within a discourse of disruption as it is with Youtube or social media platforms; Netflix has been initially considered an “innovative disruptor” because of its pioneer status as a standalone service and subscriber-based business model. As an emblematic product of the on-demand era, Netflix and the standalone SVOD model it extended drastically affected the organization of the media industry and the way people watch films and series. Therefore, there have been many attempts to frame it as “new media,” which was an extension of the “death of the television” narrative. Lotz argues that Netflix should be considered a new distribution channel rather than a new medium because television as a medium continues to exist in different forms (2022). She mentions two industrial factors that define the structure of this new distribution model: “the lack of audience metrics” as opposed to the domination of rating system in linear television, and the fact that “streaming services (at least Netflix) can succeed without prioritizing the mass popularity of each text” (2022). The way Lotz theorizes internet-distribution television is especially noteworthy for this dissertation in its clear

differentiation between linear/broadcast television and VOD (SVOD in specific). For her, studying SVOD as a new business model requires adaptation of new theoretical frames, which pays more attention to the experience of the subscriber/user/viewer; because now, there is a more direct relationship between the user/viewer and the service, without the mediation or interruption of the ads and the desires/requests of advertiser companies (2022). In order to explore this more direct relation between SVOD services and the audiences, this dissertation offers a detailed insight into the viewers' experience. It incorporates users' participation in or interaction with these services in its examination of the industrial dynamics of SVOD.

In studying or theorizing SVOD, it is crucial to consider their certain continuities with earlier forms of television and home video technologies and identify their unique and distinctive features. A combination of the cultural, media industry, and television studies is necessary to understand and theorize SVOD's cultural effect and position in the current media ecosystem. Johnson's study on television in the internet era brings together different perspectives and fields to understand and situate the current narrative of "digital disruption." She focuses on the continuities and changes in her attempt to track the history of internet/online television and explores two crucial features of the on-demand era: Individualized access to content through individualized interfaces and the use of metadata, user data, and algorithms. However, Johnson does not discuss these features as necessarily empowering for the viewers. Rather, she points out that online television is also a "push service," similar to broadcast television, leading and manipulating the audience. This highly contradicts what services such as Netflix offer on the surface, "more choice and control":

In the broadcast era television content was organised into a linear schedule and 'pushed' to viewers who had little ability to control their viewing experience. Since the development of the VCR, new technologies have increased the ability for viewers to 'pull' the content that they want to watch. Online TV services appear on the surface to be the epitome of 'pull' television, offering highly personalised experiences in which viewers can choose what programming they want to watch. However (...) they do so in an environment in which the choices available are highly structured by algorithms (and interfaces) over which they have little or no control (2019, 152).

On the other hand, such discussions on algorithms and control often concern Netflix in specific because of its unique recommendation system and audience measurement methods based on advanced forms of algorithms. Also, as a standalone - mostly subscriber-based- service, it is clearly distinct from linear television and other forms of internet-distributed video in terms of its business model - including other examples of SVOD, such as Disney+ and Amazon Prime, as extensions of big conglomerates. Due to its global reach and remarkable cultural effect, Netflix has been the subject matter of many academic and theoretical works that attempt to theorize or make sense of the “on-demand era” or internet/online television. Netflix was also initially central to this dissertation because of the cultural impact it created globally and locally and its pioneer status as a standalone SVOD service. However, as the research progressed, empirical data obtained from audience research also confirmed this central position. As the findings of this research suggest, viewer insights also validate this central position of Netflix among other forms of internet television. Therefore, while discussing SVOD culture, a separate theoretical parenthesis needs to be opened to Netflix, and the audience experience with Netflix should be evaluated within this framework. This framework can also serve as an anchor for understanding today's highly complicated and unstable media ecosystem. The following section discusses different theoretical approaches to Netflix, trying to conceptualize the service itself or to understand internet/online television via Netflix.

Defining Netflix

The first approach explores the technological and industrial continuities between broadcast television and VOD and analyzes where the industrial and historical position of Netflix. One of the objectives of this approach is to challenge the discourse of “change, innovation, and novelty” circulated with Netflix and many other VOD technologies. It examines SVOD and Netflix from the perspective of the culture industry. Sim questions the ideological framing of Netflix as a “game-changing, disruptive, and transformational innovator” by the mainstream media (2016: 187), and Frey emphasizes the “myth-making” process behind this discourse, which many new technologies encountered in their early stages (2022). Dawson also states how the discourse of “technological progress” is used when a form of new technology is introduced to denigrate old media. As a culturally less legitimate form of media, television

becomes a “convenient shorthand for ‘old media’,” and it becomes newer and better by being “repaired” in every era through new technology (2008, 3). Following this discourse of repair and technological progress, Netflix also situates itself as the best and latest version of television, “liberated” from all the older connotations and norms. These include television being “a less culturally legitimate” medium than film, belonging to the domestic space and associated with women, the elderly, and children, and producing content that does not require the “intellectual engagement” that movies require (Newman & Levine 2012). The efforts of Netflix and other media companies/outlets to reinforce and circulate this innovator discourse also have consequences in terms of the reception and experience of the viewers, which has come up many times during the empirical part of this study. Audiences relate to new media and technologies within a particular historical and socio-cultural context and engage with, adapt to, or challenge the ways these technologies are introduced to them.

In her attempt to challenge this disruption narrative and draw a historical continuity, Jenner conceptualizes the on-demand era as the “TV IV”. This era is characterized by the proliferation of VOD services and the emergence of a “Netflix culture” associated with time-shifting, binge-watching, and a new type of quality TV (2018). Her definition is an update on Pearson’s periodization of TV history, TV I (1950-80) as the era of scarcity, TV II (1980-late 90s) as the era of network channels, and TV III (1990s to late 2000s) as the era digital culture (2011). Uricchio also questions the so-called “radical break” (another concept that is used to keep linear television and VOD strictly separate from each other) and suggests that “the history of television is a history of change” and “an ongoing process of transformation in technology, textual organization, regulatory frameworks, and viewing practices” (2013, 65). It is crucial to emphasize that none of these scholars that draw attention to the historical and industrial continuities deny the standalone status of Netflix or the scope of its cultural effect globally. Rather, these studies try to differentiate myth from reality and provide a framework to discuss the industrial dynamics of Netflix in a more discernible way, utilizing the tools of the media industry, television, and cultural studies.

The changing cultural status of television with internet distribution and streaming services is also problematized in studies on SVOD and Netflix. Newman and Levine explore

how cultural legitimization practices for television continue in the on-demand era. They emphasize the technological continuity between today's on-demand technologies and the older forms of time-shifting and binge-watching technologies (remote controls, VCR, and DVD players). They suggest that the discourse of novelty and innovation is highly related to technological developments which brings a certain "masculinization" of the TV set (getting larger and becoming high definition like "cinema," being "liberated" from its associations with the feminine and domestic space) (2012). McCormick also emphasizes how VOD borrows from earlier technologies such as on-demand cable services, VCR, PVRs, and DVRs that used "facilitate bingeing and play a major role in the growing ethos of viewing 'on your terms.'" In other words, the ethos of "on-demand culture" (2016, 102).

Even though there is a certain tendency to keep the historical continuity so as to undermine the radical break/change discourse, another approach aims to differentiate the on-demand era in technological and cultural terms from its past or linear television via the case of Netflix. Jenner emphasizes the technological & industrial continuity by referring to the on-demand era as TV IV, but she defines it as a separate category, different from the previous TV III era (the late 1990s to 2000s). She characterizes TV IV with digitalization and the emergence of "quality TV." For her, Netflix changed how we understand and perceive television: "Netflix concluded that television content and the television set are no longer understood to be inherently linked and the concept of television is permeable" (2018, 7). Television can now take many different forms due to the mobility of content, it is not necessarily defined by the television set. Since the on-demand era is defined by portable & digital data, the content is no longer dependent on broadcasting, cable, or satellite technologies and can travel from device to device (Tryon 2013). Lotz also analyzes SVOD as a separate business model from other forms of VOD and distinguishes between Netflix and other examples of SVOD:

Netflix and other SVODs do bring new choices to viewers long dissatisfied by the value proposition of cable and satellite services that were driven by the same economic dynamics as linear ad-supported broadcasting and not motivated to innovate or service viewers in other ways. (2022, 110).

While Lotz points out the underlying dissatisfaction and changing needs of the audiences behind the emergence of VOD, Jenner examines the outcome of the proliferation of internet television and analyzes how audience experience is transformed through the case of Netflix. For her, there are two main structuring characteristics of the viewing experience in the on-demand era: The first one is the availability of all the seasons at once, which brings the practice of binge-watching to another level. Even though this practice was already a part of the audience culture through DVDs, it was only a post-broadcast experience. It was considered only “an alternative” that addresses a niche audience. Due to Netflix’s promotional strategy, binge-watching is becoming the norm or a more conventional way to watch series. The second premise is the content being available (not “broadcasted” in a traditional sense) for a global audience at the same time (2018). The multinational reach and global content commissioning of SVOD services -mainly Netflix- are fundamental features that differentiate them from linear television and other forms of VOD (Lotz 2022, 4).

Lobato’s emphasis on “the stubborn locality of taste” in global media markets draws attention to the importance of non-Western markets and the multinational reach of Netflix. His study underlines how Netflix has felt the pressure to localize in the new territories that it expanded: “Localization matters in television markets, and the global will not simply displace the local” (2019, 109), an experience Netflix learned from previous examples such as MTV. Lobato explains that every local market offers particular challenges for Netflix. While in Japan, the company produced original anime series to attract users, in India, the multiplicity of languages, the strength of the local film industry, the relative lack of internet infrastructure, and high pricing make Netflix a premium service reserved for affluent classes. In countries with strong traditional TV cultures, such as the UK and Germany, where “cord-cutting” (Tryon, 2013) is uncommon, Netflix is a complementary service rather than a replacement due to the already established VOD culture. Ward explains that in the UK, “[Netflix’s] approach has been characterized more by assimilation and integration with the existing local television ecosystem, rather than on any claim to supersede it” (2016, 220). Stiegler similarly considers Netflix as a service that tries to situate itself in parallel with (rather than in opposition to) traditional television culture in Germany: “Netflix tries to stick to traditional consumer behaviors in Germany, for example, using the same German dubbing actors known already from previous

non-Netflix productions (2016, 242).” Hence, in both European and Asian markets, Netflix’s localization strategy prioritizes “strategic and selective investment in original local content as a way to onboard members and to introduce them to [the] global [i.e., U.S.] catalog” (Lobato, 136).

These studies on strategies and challenges that Netflix experience in its localization attempts are especially significant for this study because they point out that we need different lenses to analyze VOD in different countries. Differences in the industrial history of television and viewing cultures in different regions pose a challenge for media researchers, especially in today's multicast and global media landscape, where there is no centralized and stable media ownership structure. Furthermore, studies on localization also indicate that it is crucial to differentiate between the global flows of the current media ecosystem from earlier forms of transnational television (Lobato, 2019). The interaction between countries and the flow of content in the post-network streaming era is no longer unidirectional, and American content is no longer as dominant as it was in the pre-streaming era. Global audiences watch global content through streaming services, and they shape and affect each other’s viewing culture, taste, and stories. The global content strategy and multinational reach of internet-distributed television are crucial for this research, as one of the aims of this dissertation is to understand the interaction between global and local taste from the audience perspective and explore how global and local effect and determine each other. This study aims to contribute to the literature on the media industry and television studies by providing insights on a much more multisided and accelerated transnational/global flow of content in the on-demand era from a non-Western context.

Defining “Quality”

“Quality” (or “prestige”) TV is one of the prevailing concepts throughout the dissertation, which is one of the most controversial and problematic concepts in media and television studies, due to its highly subjective nature. While Baran describes “quality” as a narrative trait (“higher production values, a cinematic audiovisual style, complex and controversial storylines, genre hybridity, and reflexivity”) (2017), Jenner points out the significance of the audience perspective by emphasizing “binge-worthiness” as “viewers use the recognition of a series as ‘quality’ to justify or alleviate guilt over binge-watching” (2015: 11). Levine and Newman focus on how

quality is defined as the opposite of network TV associated with lower-class, women and seriality: “The new conception of TV as a good cultural object rejects every characteristic of the pre-convergence-era medium, and new technologies and textualities are seen as progressing beyond and improving upon this past” (2012: 7). Even though Netflix describes itself as “a global Internet TV network,” in its discourse and iconography television “is being simultaneously re-imagined, integrated, erased and remediated” (Lobato, 2019: 43).

Furthermore, the term “quality TV” is a concept discursively constructed via certain gender and class dynamics within a disparagement discourse on traditional TV/popular/mainstream, intensified by the scholarly discourse of selection and appraisal. Even though the disparagement strategies take different forms (the emphasis on technological infrastructure, authorial intent, the cinematic aura...) these tactics can be generally gathered under gender & class categories. This produces a certain cultural ‘taste’ discourse that is produced, proliferated and intensified by very different actors (programmers, producers, critics, scholars, fans, audiences...) through different means, intentionally or unintentionally. Due to its highly relative and controversial nature, this research does not adopt “quality” as a term with a stable definition, neither in terms of narrative traits, nor the criteria concerning production conditions and budget. Instead, it bases its definition on empirical data, and discusses quality for the audiences as they define and talk about the term.

1.1.2 Audience Studies

Much of the early academic work on the television audience that emerged after the 1950s is influenced by an industrial and institutional perspective, and it deems the audience a controlled and manipulated mass (Ang 1991). Some studies even examine the “social functions” of the media industry and institutions’ control over the audience, therefore, rationalizing their influence over the viewers (Gitlin 1978, 225). Lazarsfeld, who was among the founding figures of the American mass media studies in the 1930s, is among the names that promoted this mutual relationship and exchange between academia and industry. Lazarsfeld conducted research to measure the audience's reactions and popularized a marketing-oriented audience studies approach (Ang 1991). These early works called the “powerful media effects” period, approach the television audience as a measurable, predictable, and closed category with definite

boundaries. The “limited effects” period began following this period of powerful media effects. The first seeds of the theory of Uses and Gratifications were also planted in this limited effects period. Lazarfield’s studies on two-step communication were crucial at this stage in showing how the relationship between media and audiences was not as direct as it was imagined. The findings of his research on the reception of the mass media messages concerning elections indicated that opinion leaders were more effective than the media message itself. Messages are infiltrated through these leaders, and they had a highly social aspect (1944). In general, the approach that focuses on the media’s direct and indirect “effects” on audiences, which emphasizes the persuasion and manipulation power of the media on the audience and the user, has gradually been transformed by the influence of critical media studies after the 1970s and cultural studies from the 1990s (Brooker & Jermyn 2003). Even though the general methodological approach of this dissertation avoids the narrative of any direct and powerful “effects” of media institutions or online streaming services on audiences, the third article relies loosely on the theory of Users and Gratifications as a general framework in its approach to SVOD audiences in Turkey. This chapter mainly uses the theory in order to shift the discussion from “effects” to the uses, motivations, and, most importantly, to indicate the taste of the local audiences.

Another branch of media communication studies emerged as a response to the early audience studies defined by the effects approach. This branch also relied on the one-way relationship between the audiences and the media institutions and accepted that certain media (and the messages they transmit) have certain effects on the audiences. However, this branch was especially critical of television as a cultural and ideological institution. Influenced by the Frankfurt School and critical theory as well as Marxist and Neo-Marxist perspectives, these studies ideologically analyze and question the industrial and institutional perspectives. One of the first critical studies on television audiences is the work of Theodor W. Adorno, who was a part of the Frankfurt School and one of the founders of critical theory. Focusing on the concept of the culture industry and examining media, film, and television within this framework, the Frankfurt School drew attention to how these structures that reproduce capitalist ideology while envisioning a passive audience that accepts the messages conveyed to them without questioning it. On the other hand, Adorno's special parenthesis about television is significant. Examining the

television programs of the 1950s, Adorno argues that these texts and how the audience receives these texts cannot be analyzed purely from the ideological perspective, and psychological factors should also be considered (1954). Although he considers television as an ideological institution that reproduces the status quo in general, he claims that the complex meanings produced by the texts can create different effects on the audience and affect different layers of the audience's identity (Ang 1991, 136). Although the Frankfurt school did not systematically study television and the audience, its approach to these issues has influenced studies focusing on the television audience. These works, which approach the viewer, especially from the political economy perspective, portray the spectator as a product "constructed" by industry (Smythe, 2001). Smythe's critical views on audience empowerment are especially significant for this dissertation due to its focus on the decision-making/choosing process as labor and "leisure or free time" as another type of "work time" (2001). Distinct from the highly critical approach of the Frankfurt school (also from the powerful effects period), this dissertation does not approach the audience as a passive entity and does not consider their experience as a top-to-down, externally defined, and manipulated one. However, it argues that the political economy perspective is still crucial in understanding the experience and interaction of the viewers. There are many different dynamics and layers of the relationship between viewers/users and streaming services, and it is not independent of the capitalist and neoliberal market dynamics, where many industry players treat the audiences as primarily as consumers. Even though audiences do not conform and adapt to what is expected from them without questioning, as the critical theory implies, the ways they are imagined and constructed as conforming consumers can only be understood from a political economy perspective. This approach helps us to reconsider audiences also producers that engage in many types of work, including intellectual and emotional labor. The next section examines the literature on audience studies that are influenced especially by cultural studies, which analyzes diverse identities of audiences, and scrutinizes many different aspects of the relationship between media and audiences without being stuck in the one-way relationship of "media messages and its effects."

The views of the critical branch in audience studies on the audience's agency and ability to make free choices later began to be questioned by cultural studies. These studies; argue that Marxist, Neomaxist, and critical theories, which focus on broad structural issues, are

reductionist in their approach to the audiences. As a response, studies produced in the field of cultural studies on audiences try to examine and make visible the complex and multiple identities of the audience. Unlike the institutional perspective and critical studies, these studies make a distinction between the audience as a “fiction,” which is constructed by the media institutions, industry, and academia, and the “real” audiences and their socio-cultural practices (Ang 1991, 12). Thus, audience and reception research has shifted from quantitative studies to qualitative research. Instead of a perception of the audience as a passive and homogeneous being that accepts and imposed ideological messages without questioning, a more active and complex audience was now imagined, which is able to read critically and opposingly against dominant cultural forms, and selectively perceive ideological messages (Morley 1992, 17).

Many cultural studies scholars that specialize in audience studies establish their theories through their empirical work on audiences. These studies mostly consist of qualitative ethnographic research that combines in-depth interviews with participant observation. Morley and Brundson’s study on Nationwide audiences and Ang’s study on Dallas audiences are some of the early examples of these studies. Mainly following and based on Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, Morley, and Brundson study the ideological underpinnings of the TV program Nationwide and the way viewers interpret and respond. Morley specifically conducts qualitative in-depth audience research in order to examine “the dominant, oppositional or negotiating readings” (Hall 1973) of the viewers. In their article concerning the ethnographic perspectives on media audiences, Morley and Silverstone argue that television viewing practices have to be interpreted and studied “within the structure and dynamics of (...) the domestic environment. ” and “an anthropological perspective allows the researcher to focus on television viewing in the broader context of processes of both material and symbolic consumption.” (2002) One of the pioneers of ethnographic audience research for television audiences is Ang, who studied letters of 42 Dutch viewers of the popular television series Dallas in her first book. Her work especially emphasizes the particularities and specificities in viewing practices of the audiences rather than a single category of “viewing behavior” (1989). Dorothy Hobson’s work on soap opera audiences (2006), Elihu Katz, and Tamar Liebes’ research on cross-cultural readings of Dallas (1990) are crucial examples of audience ethnography that inquires into different cultural, ethnic, gender, and class identities of the audiences. These studies also

examine television viewership within the context of daily life and search for the role of different media within the sociology of daily life. As a prominent example, Morley's work, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, examines television viewership within the context of domestic space and inquires into gender-based power dynamics and practices around television viewership (1986).

In this research, the audience is mainly discussed from the perspective of cultural studies as a heterogeneous and complex being. This is mainly because this research deals with audiences in a non-Western context, which requires a more complex approach to the audiences that deal with their different identities. One of the main elements of cultural studies' complex approach to the audiences has developed in order to challenge the Western-centered and universalizing approach toward the audience. However, especially in the case of Netflix and other global SVOD services, different national and cultural identities of the audiences now matter even more than before because it is no longer a one-way flow of content as it was in the older forms of transnational television and global content and American content do not supersede or overpower each other. The prevailing experience of watching "global TV" via these services increases the conflicts and interaction of local and global identities of the audiences.

VOD Audiences

The scholarship concerning VOD services and their relationship to audiences mainly focuses on Netflix due to its cultural significance and multinational reach. While some scholars examine this relationship from a more critical perspective, others are interested in how the Netflix audience differs from linear television and what possibilities the SVOD model holds for both content and creators.

Arnold, Smith-Rowsey, and Alexander focus on the infrastructure that Netflix uses from a critical perspective and examine how its interface interacts with the users and how they are affected by it. They also examine the discrepancies between the public brand image of Netflix and the practical consequences/effects. Arnold argues that Netflix is part of a new governing process based on datafication and defines the service's measuring methods as a form of "depersonalization" that equates data with the individual and mathematizes the taste. She

compares the audience metrics of linear television and Netflix. Through this comparison, she argues that the older rating system was not fully controlling, measuring, and governing the audience but only predicting their behavior through a sample. On the other hand, Netflix measures every single action of an individual on the internet, which provides complete information about its audience and opens no space for spontaneous, random individual choices. Every move of the users is recorded, processed, and becomes recommendations in return, which direct the users in a specific direction (Alexander, 2016). Alexander approaches the infrastructure that Netflix uses cautiously and argues that it creates a specific “mathematization of taste” instead of a personalization/individualization. She specifically focuses on Netflix’s recommendation system called “Cinematch” and how this system redefines the concept of “taste” based on data. She questions the concept of taste as a cultural product, reshaped in the neoliberal era and reduced into something measurable/predictable, therefore governable. The illusion of the endless choice created within the Cinematch, with a sense of individuality, is a product of the “neoliberal desire to make life a predictive, automatic process” (Alexander, 2016). This critical stance against Netflix and its recommendation system emerged in the early years of the service, and therefore it fails to consider the cultural significance and influence of Netflix on a global scale, which can only be observed in a relatively long-term period in relation to popular culture. They can be considered as an initial response to Netflix’s self-promotion efforts defined by a rhetoric of innovation and increased user control/agency. These discussions on the mathematization of taste and algorithmic culture currently persist as an extension or form of the critical approaches to the media industry and its efforts to engulf, tame and utilize the revolutionary or disruptive tendencies of new technologies such as VOD.

Evaluated from the perspective of different tendencies discussed within the audience studies above, the initial scholarly response to Netflix and video-on-demand was historically akin to the critical theory approach in its approach to the agency of the audiences, though not in the form of “media and messages.” This critical stance is mainly hesitant to define the new position of the users or audiences necessarily as a political agency. However, there are also recent studies that examine the long-term cultural influence of Netflix and other SVOD services in terms of production dynamics, the creative opportunities they provide, and the diverse stories they offer. These studies combine approaches from media industry studies and cultural studies

and approach the audiences from many different perspectives. While acknowledging the transformation of the change in the cultural gatekeeping and audience choice mechanisms in the on-demand era, they discuss the audience agency or position from a more neutral perspective that does not necessarily translate neither into passive receivers nor active agents with more control than older forms of film and television audiences.

Lotz argues that Netflix opens up a creative space for new stories and niche audiences/tastes due to its subscriber-based revenue model, and the structural characteristics and business models of VOD services affect the content they produce and distribute (2022). This subscriber-funded on-demand model of SVOD (and Netflix) requires a different approach to the audiences. In linear television, the producers address a mass audience with a specific economic power because they sell time slots to the advertisers. They need the audiences' attention for a certain period on specific content because they must watch the ad. Therefore, the priority is the needs and desires of the advertisers rather than the audience. The more content is watched by the audiences, the more profitable it is. On the other hand, Lotz argues that SVOD services directly address the needs and desires of the users. There is no mediator between the content/service and the audiences; these services have to offer a value proposition to keep them subscribed to a whole library of content (2022).

Traditional or linear television, even though it has changed over the years, is still a mass medium compared to Netflix and SVOD. On the other hand, Netflix targets different niche segments of audiences, namely “taste communities” and “taste clusters” they belong to (Lotz, 2022). Therefore, the diversity of content and the experience the service offers is more valuable than a particular content that many people watch. While the traditional rating system could only predict audience behavior by looking at a sample, Netflix’s algorithmic system measures all users in a certain way. Lotz argues that the audience behavior is no longer “assumed” by rather simplistic demographic categories such as gender, class, and race - but they are seen as separate individuals. This means there is space for stories targeting more complicated audiences with more complicated tastes, and the taste no longer has to appeal to a mass audience. Compared to the critical stance discussed above, Lotz’s approach is highly distinct and positive in its approach to the algorithmic culture proliferated by streaming services. Therefore, the observations on the

long-term cultural significance of Netflix, streaming services, and internet television on the production dynamics, stories, and audiences are less alarming and critical than it was in the initial stage. This is also partly due to the demystification of the marketing discourse around Netflix as a disruptive innovator, which revolves around the myth of big data and algorithmic culture.

Frey also approaches the myth surrounding Netflix and its recommendation system in a critical way and examines the preferences of the viewers through extensive audience research combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. He adopts a historical approach to understand how “the Netflix story is a narrative of monetizing, automating, and personalizing legacy forms of cultural suggestion” (2022). He analyzes how Netflix intentionally keeps the details of the system secret, creating a mystified aura around its main asset: Knowing people’s tastes better than the audience themselves through data. This mystified conversation around “big data” and novelty creates a techno-deterministic discourse from both industrial and critical perspectives, conceptualized concepts such as “algorithmic culture” or “mathematization of taste.” Based on audience research, Frey complicates this discourse by showing contradicting and complex views and experiences of “real” audiences (not inferred or imagined). His research shows that recommendation systems still constitute a small part of users’ choice mechanisms, and the audience has a complicated relationship with the algorithm and the service interface (2022). Similar to Lotz, Frey also challenges the technologically deterministic approach to streaming services and the view that audiences are manipulated by the algorithm without any agency. The initial panic about algorithmic culture and Netflix’s recommendation system is similar to critical theory’s first approach to television and its direct effects on audiences. However, this view is smoothened as it is observed that algorithms are not such a dominant part of the audiences’ choice mechanisms, and factors such as social media, word of mouth, and the effect of cultural gatekeepers and opinion leaders are still very effective. This dissertation adopts a similar approach to Frey in its examination of the diverse factors effective in audiences’ choice mechanisms. However, it also aims to complicate the picture by considering the factors specific to the local media ecosystem and television culture. Frey’s complex and experiential approach to the choice mechanisms is also crucial in indicating the complex view on audience power and agency, which is discussed in the next section.

Audience Power and Agency

The audiences' control over the content they watch has increased with the proliferation of home technologies such as remote control, VCR, and VCD/DVD, which changed the television experience and made it more interactive. Especially the digital age and on-demand streaming services increased this interaction and the viewer's control over time/space/content. On the other hand, Klinger explores the dynamics of home viewing and points out the "implicit activeness" of all audiences without translating the activity necessarily as "a progressive political position." Her critical distance towards the increased control and choice of the audience is necessary to challenge the media talk on "the empowered audiences" as imagined, inferred, and circulated by the industry, especially by Netflix. For her, the audience activity (or interactivity) "involves the juggling of various meaning-making agendas," and the audience's "modes of viewing occur concerning existing frames of reference, from industry practices to their own socialized experiences" (2006:11). Her emphasis on the meaning-making capacity of the audiences does not initially assume or attribute an unconditional agency to the audience that is defined by a certain amount of "power" or "control." Rather, she opens a space to discuss how different audiences may accept, reproduce or reject, challenge, or even reverse the "messages" or the meaning conveyed to them through stories. This approach is similar to the aforementioned audience research coming from the field of cultural studies, which is mostly interested in observing how different identities of the audiences affect their choice mechanisms, taste, and meaning-making agendas. These studies' emphasis on the social, political, and economic *context* in interpreting and positioning the audiences is crucial for this research because this study aims to challenge the universalizing, homogenous, or Western-centered views and definitions of the audiences. Klinger's specification of this multi-layered context for television audiences is also significant for in understanding the current viewing practices and behaviors of the VOD audiences. Klinger mentions the influence of industry practices, socialized experiences, and technological conditions on television audiences in general, which are all fundamental factors that also affect, transform and shape the experience, taste, and choice mechanisms of today's VOD audiences.

Researchers studying VOD audiences need to be extra cautious when it comes to the issue of agency, power, and control; because the industry often uses these concepts as a part of its

marketing discourse. Therefore, it is crucial to differentiate between audience control/empowerment as a politically progressive position and a more diversified, fragmented, and individualized audience that has access to -or control over a more personalized catalog with more options that appeal to their niche taste. Tryon remarks on this discourse of audience empowerment as a promotional technique: “The media industries have sought to promote (...) new viewing practices, often through promotional techniques that equate platform mobility with empowerment.” Similarly, Gillespie, in his pivotal work on platform politics, argues that platforms are “discursive resting points” that “institute a way of being” and “they politically and discursively work to frame their services and technologies” (2010: 348-349). Van Dijck adopts this “discursive framing” aspect in her analysis of social media platforms and their users. She argues that the concept we call “the user agency” is a “techno-cultural product” just like the platforms themselves (2013: 33). For her, user agency “is a complex and multifaceted concept, not least because it encompasses both conscious human activity and the ‘technological unconscious’” and users “are not ‘dupes’ of technology or uncritical adopters” (2013: 32). The qualitative audience studies in the 1980s and 1990s also argued for “a more complex view of influence and cultural domination, seen ‘from below’ (audience, community, agency) rather than ‘from above’ (industry state, structure)” (Biltereyst & Meers, 2011: 418). Merging the user agency with industrial components and following the political economy approach, which considers the audience as a plural, ephemeral and unstable entity (Biltereyst & Meers 2011; Silverstone 1990, 175). As discussed in the following section, this research adopts a “from below” approach and combines audience research with insights and observations from industrial reports, press releases, social media campaigns, and other forms of media and material that construct the discourse around streaming services (Netflix in specific) and VOD audiences. Any form of audience adoption and appreciation or criticism and disapproval towards the streaming services are presented, analyzed, and discussed within the empirical limits of the audience research. Therefore, this research avoids any kind of apriori assumption on audience agency - positive or negative.

1.2 Historical Background

The streaming era in Turkey started with Netflix’s entrance to the Turkish market in 2016, followed by subscriber-funded BluTV and ad-supported Puhu TV. The launch of these

three services resulted in a notable increase in the use and adoption of streaming services by 2023. Thus, streaming services arrived in Turkey relatively late, and their adoption by a mainstream audience segment is comparatively recent. There are two main factors behind this late adoption. Foremost, the existing television industry has been very influential both domestically and globally, and the industry players did not need additional revenue from streaming services. Until Netflix introduced audiences with “a legal option” for accessing content and stories, only a limited number of Turkish television channels offered on-demand access. The industry assumed the mainstream audience was satisfied with the content on television channels and maintained industrial norms that ensured their centrality.

The second factor slowing adoption in Turkey is the underdeveloped digital infrastructure required for streaming. While internet usage is very common in Turkey (reaching 45 percent of the whole population in 2012 and growing to 74 percent (62.7 million people) in 2020²), high-speed internet was only available in certain regions, generally big cities such as İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir until the early 2010s. The average internet speeds (28.89 Mbps for fixed broadband and 34.79 Mbps for mobile download) are still substantially lower than the global average (96.43 Mbps for fixed broadband and 47.20 Mbps for mobile download) according to the latest Speedtest Global Index data. Low-speed internet posed a problem in the audience’s adoption of digital streaming services until technologies such as high-quality video encoding technology were introduced by services such as Netflix.

Despite these factors slowing adoption, Turkey has a well-established television culture that mostly depends on exporting low-budget television series. These series became a defining characteristic of the Turkish market after bringing high revenue levels for years. They are mostly melodramatic stories filled with convoluted intrigue and nationalist period pieces glorifying the history of Turkey. They have a serial structure, and each episode typically takes almost 3 hours. Most of these series are regulated by the Radio and Television Supreme Council, which is an ideological apparatus of the conservative government. The stories are consequently mostly

² "Digital 2020 Turkey". Datareportal.com
<https://web.archive.org/web/20200403190929/https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-turkey>

constrained by conservative values, which has made them attractive in more conservative markets.

Scarcity is the defining characteristic of television's history in Turkey due to the late arrival of a multichannel structure. Broadcasting was mainly dominated by the state-owned TRT until the 1990s, which changed with the introduction of private channels. However, television in Turkey witnessed a radical standardization in format and aesthetics, and content grew increasingly conservative in the last decade due to pressure from the increasingly authoritarian government and its extensions in the mainstream media and television industries. The arrival of streaming services in 2016-2017 was initially disruptive of the strictly regulated market due to the lack of necessary laws for regulating online streaming. Streaming continues to be a significant alternative for both the producers/creators and audiences in Turkey even though the quick adoption and popularization of streaming services, especially Netflix, has caught the attention of the authorities (Yorenc, 2020) and encouraged services to lean toward more mainstream content recently.

1.2.1 Turkish Television Before the Digital Era

Understanding the emerging streaming dynamics in Turkey requires appreciating the industrial, sociocultural, economic, and political conditions that support Turkey's television culture. The timeline of television development is significantly delayed by many Western countries' experience as a result of insufficient technological infrastructure that was exacerbated by the weak post-WWII economy. Television viewership especially increased after the 'domestic retreat' that resulted from the military coup of 1980. Television became a significant part of the daily lives of audiences in Turkey due to the increase of home-based cultural events, the arrival of color television, and the crisis of the domestic film industry. Since 1980, however, television has been central to Turkish culture, and the country has featured high levels of viewing despite quite limited choice until very recently. The average time spent watching television per day has been decreasing since 2006, but it still averaged over 3.5 hours (214 minutes) per day in 2018.³ The substantial viewing levels encouraged the advertising industry to rely on television and has

³ Television Viewing Trends Research, Radio and Television Supreme Council. 2018. <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/Media/FM/Birimler/Kamuoyu/televizyonizlemeegilimleriarastirmasi2018.pdf>

made the television industry one of the most important economic resources of Turkey. The spending on television advertising in Turkey increased constantly from 2010 to 2021 despite decreased viewing, with television ranking second behind digital media in advertising spending in 2021.⁴ As in many markets globally, television ad spending remained strong into the early 2020s even though significant sums once spent on print advertising mostly shifted to digital media. Television continues to gather large audiences and has a strong influence on public opinion in Turkey (Kurban & Sözeri, 2011: 14), which leads to its continued value in the eyes of advertisers. In addition, ad revenue in the broadcast sector is highly significant for the Turkish economy.

Another defining feature shaping the experience of television in Turkey is the extensive involvement of the government and the high level of social control over broadcasting. The broadcast sector and state institutions have always been significantly intertwined in Turkey. This relationship was consolidated under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, and mainstream television transformed into a strong ideological and cultural apparatus. The government's political support and reliance on the broadcast sector for ideological support increased as exportable Turkish series became an apparatus of soft power - especially in the Middle Eastern and Turkic regions.

For many years government control was aided by allowing very limited choice of channels or providers. Until 1986, there was a state monopoly and only one channel, TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) is mainly a publicly funded channel also supported by ad revenue.⁵ TRT launched new free-to-air broadcast channels such as TRT 2, TRT 3, and TRT GAP in the late 1980s, but this multiplicity did not bring diversity because the content was still produced from the government point of view (Algan and Kaptan 2020). These channels offered additional educational or entertainment programs and content in Kurdish or Arabic but

⁴ Approximately 7 billion Turkish lira.-

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/432303/turkey-television-advertising-expenditure/> :
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1304212/turkey-advertising-spending-by-media-type/>

⁵ “TRT is funded by a combination of public and commercial revenues. The major sources of funding are: a broadcasting (licence) fee generated from the sale of television and radio receivers, music sets and VTRs; two per cent of electricity bills paid by each consumer; and a share allocated from the national budget (...) TRT maintained a distinctly paternalistic and elitist approach and observed strict codes that sometimes amounted to censorship. As a result, TRT's financing system and revenues have been questioned (...)” (Kurban and Sözeri 2012, 33-34)

were very limited in perspective, and the state-sponsored TRT tightly controlled their content. Furthermore, TRT 1 broadcast for 17 hours per day, but other channels only operated from five to nine hours (Ogan 1992). This significant lack of choice led to patterns of adoption and priorities quite distinctive from other markets, especially Western countries that dominate our understanding of streaming adoption.

The new neoliberal economic policies implemented after the end of military rule in 1980 had drastic effects on television and resulted in changes to broadcasting policies and implications for television content (Algan and Kaptan 2020, 5). The new government under the rule of Motherland Party (ANAP) supported private entrepreneurship and the entrance of big corporations (such as Doğan Holding) into the media sector (Kurban and Sözeri 2011). Even though private broadcasting was deemed unconstitutional in Turkey, the industry strategically (and illegally) used satellite technology to challenge the state monopoly and started to provide diverse content in the 1990s. Magic Box Inc launched its first channel, Star TV, which was available on satellite dishes or cable systems in 1990. TRT started to be concerned about Star TV as an illegal channel only after the Magic Box purchased the exclusive distribution rights for 1990-91 soccer games. After the launch of other illegal domestic channels such as Teleon, HBB TV, and Kanal 6, the government gave broadcasting permission to private radio and television stations in July 1993 (Algan and Kaptan 2020), which marks the transition to multichannel broadcasting.

The second stage of pre-digital television in Turkey begins in 1994 with the establishment of the Radio and Television Council. This adjustment is defined by the end of state monopoly over broadcasting, limited privatization through domestic conglomerates, and the deregulation of media. These adjustments enabled the development of what quickly became a lucrative production sector in Turkey. Although the changes are quite significant from the perspective of the industry, the second stage does not bring significant change for viewers. There were indeed more private television channels, and the increase in the production gave viewers more options than before. However, Radio and Television Council's control over the content was still very effective, limiting the range and diversity of the stories. What was crucial for this second stage is that viewers got the experience a multichannel model for the first time, which

includes not only the state-owned TRT's sub-channels as it was in the 1980s but also channels owned by conglomerates and companies that were relatively independent of the state ideology.

Two main actors were active in Turkish television in this era: channels/production companies owned by big conglomerates and channels/production companies owned by Islamist business people (Algan and Kaptan, 2020). Neoliberal policies and efforts, such as the commercialization of broadcasting, challenged the state monopoly, and TRT lost much of its viewing share to private channels. By 2000, there were approximately 15 private channels, and the most popular among them, such as Show TV, ATV, and Kanal D, are still operating today. These channels mostly offer local content such as news and series, and they have relatively increased the diversity of content in the broadcast. They also featured a limited amount of foreign content, particularly popular American series such as *Dallas*, *The Young and the Restless*, and *The Cosby Show*. However, such titles were not exclusive to private channels; TRT had long offered a few popular American series in the one-channel era, including *Mission Impossible*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Bewitched*.

In this period from 1994 until the wide availability and adoption of streaming in 2016, three factors shaped the Turkish television sector: transnationalization tied to prioritizing exporting drama, the transition from the Nielsen rating system to Transaction Network Services (TNS) in the domestic market, and intensified state control/regulation and political pressure. These three factors - which are discussed in the third article in detail- have significant implications for what content/stories were created and in setting the conditions and norms of viewing and reception into which streaming services arrived.

1.2.3 Turkey's Adoption of Video Streaming

By the late 2010s, expanded infrastructure and bandwidth supported the technological conditions for a more convenient viewing experience through internet-distributed video than linear television. Early adopters viewed series, films, and many other types of content through YouTube, illegal streaming/torrenting, and peer-to-peer sharing. The attraction of the streaming services was both access to content otherwise unavailable and to an on-demand experience. Viewers used websites such as YouTube and Dailymotion to watch many different types of

content: linear television content made available by Turkish broadcasters as well as foreign content, especially American series, mostly available through unauthorized sharing. YouTube and piracy allowed Turkish viewers their first taste of on-demand access with its time and space-shifting opportunities and introduced them to individualized consumption of television content before the streamers formally arrived. Pirated content was generally consumed via computers and increased access to diverse content from different regions and cultures. YouTube, on the other hand, made the audience more familiar with the mobile nature of the content and was experienced on different devices.

Netflix arrived in Turkey much later than YouTube and mainly functions as a distribution channel for foreign content including films, series, and stand-up shows. It makes available scripted content from different geographies that is not available even from pirated sources. Since there is a well-embedded television culture in Turkey, and many viewers are interested in local content, broadcast television channels have not invested in licensing foreign content, and cable television channels were limited to certain popular American series instead of a larger catalog of foreign content. Except for minor examples and niche television channels, the average/typical Turkish viewer did not have direct access to foreign content before Netflix's launch in Turkey. Even today, users that follow foreign content from other OTT services or on broadcast television have to wait for the shows to arrive due to geographic restrictions and the windowed distribution system, while Netflix offers viewers the opportunity to experience new content simultaneously with the rest of the world. This affordance, combined with Netflix's heavy and ambitious localization campaigns in Turkey, encouraged quick adoption of the service (The estimated number of subscribers increased from 117k in 2017 to 606k in 2020⁶, approximately 10% of the country's broadband households.⁷)

Political and cultural diversity in local stories increased in the streaming era, and diverse genres and formats with different aesthetic tendencies emerged. The dissatisfaction during the pre-streaming era among the audiences in Turkey started to intensify by the early 2010s because

⁶ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/607812/netflix-subscribers-in-turkey/>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-netflix-turkey-idUSKCN1VO14R>

of the formulaic and similar stories with no diversity, strict regulation and censorship, and the tediousness of long, slowly paced series and extended ad breaks. Internet technologies, robustly available from the late 2010s, countered dissatisfaction and frustration among viewers and have provided access to a much greater array of content. Streaming technologies also offered a more convenient experience of broadcast content, as seen in the use of YouTube as a broadcast re-distributor.

1.3 Methodological Approach

This dissertation follows a multi-method approach that combines audience research with content/narrative analysis and rhetorical analysis. While the first three empirical chapters mainly rely on qualitative audience research based on semi-structured interviews with VOD audiences, the last chapter mainly engages in a narrative analysis of a series commissioned by VOD services. Furthermore, all chapters use rhetorical analysis to illustrate the marketing discourse and brand identity of VOD services such as Netflix and MUBI. Through rhetorical analysis, this dissertation compares and contrasts the audience's perspective on these services with the ideological underpinnings of the industrial discourse around them.

1.3.1 Audience Research

Morley argues that audience studies have traditionally been dominated by quantitative empirical investigations in order to offer more “generalizable” and, therefore, “scientific” patterns and representative results (1992). However, this tendency resulted in avoiding the diversity among audiences and different factors affecting their experience, taste, and behavior. For Morley, “the subjective element is minimized and ‘watching television’ (whatever its meaning to the audience) is (...) assumed to be a simple act, having, in principle, the same meaning and salience for everybody” (1992, 167). On the other hand, the interview method, as an alternative way to focus on these “subjective elements,” itself is a discursive process according to Ang (1991). As a qualitative research method, it includes both the participant’s and researcher’s expression and interpretation of a certain behavior or experience.

The dominance of the quantitative tradition has changed in the last decades due to the significant increase in qualitative studies, including in-depth interviews and ethnography. Many scholars have discovered and developed the potential of qualitative methods in studying television audiences and the significance of contextual understanding in television/media viewership that depends on many different identities of the audiences (Ang 1991, Fiske 1994, Gillespie 1995, Gray 2003, Hill 2004, Lull 1980, Seiter 1999). Following the qualitative tradition and adapting it to the internet television audiences, this research is in an attempt to capture these “subjective elements” in the experiences of contemporary audiences.

The first three empirical chapters draw on semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between 2020 and 2021, during the first years of the Covid-19 pandemic, - which is a period of increased VOD consumption, as most participants confirm. The participants were selected using snowball sampling. During the research, 30 participants were interviewed, 14 men and 16 women whose ages range from 18 to 60. Among these 30 people, 25 were Netflix users, 22 were MUBI, and 20 were BluTV users. Users subscribed to multiple streaming services were included in multiple articles that focus on different streaming services. Even though the research initially started with an audience research based on social media (Twitter and Instagram) comments about Netflix Turkey originals, it evolved into a more in-depth study since the qualitative data obtained from social media comments were limited and not systematic enough to create codes and patterns. Therefore, I got in contact with participants that were actively commenting on social media about different series and films they follow on different streaming services. After interviewing these participants, I found my other participants which were also users of multiple services through snowball sampling. One of the limitations of the snowball method was that the age range is not very high. Since many participants I got into contact with through social media were young and urbanite internet users, I had limited access to older people (50+). This was also a consequence of the timing of the research. When I started recruiting participants, Netflix and other streaming services were being adopted very recently and there were not many old people following them.

The participants are highly educated, middle-class, and urbanite internet users and have the economic power to afford the necessary technological infrastructure to watch VOD and subscription fees to streaming services. This audience segment no longer prefers

“regular/traditional/cable TV” and adopts SVOD as a part of their daily life. Participants share a similar class background in terms of economic capital. However, they are varied in terms of gender, age, cultural capital, educational level, and heavy and light usage of the streaming services. The interview questionnaire (See Annex 2) includes questions regarding their social, psychological, emotional, and technological needs, desires, and experience with the services, specifically on their content preferences, the viewing environment they prefer, the specifics of their on-demand watching process (regarding practices such as binge-watching, time-shifting, and cord-cutting), their opinion on content produced and acquired by these services, their experience with the interface, recommendation system, special curations and algorithmic infrastructure of the service and lastly the change in their content/services preferences in the presence of family and friends.

Due to the pandemic conditions, the interviews were conducted online through Zoom, and each interview’s duration was approximately 45 minutes. Some participants preferred to remain anonymous, so pseudonyms are used throughout the article. Interviews were video-recorded by Zoom, transcribed, read, coded manually, and periodically reread according to Miles and Huberman's approach (1994). Further details about the interviewee’s demographic information and interview questions can be found in the Annex 4. The interviews were initially planned with standardized questions, and the flow was highly flexible and semi-standardized to avoid “any a priori categorizations which might limit the field of inquiry” (Punch 1998, 178). Semi-structured interviews with the users of the VOD services opened a space for them to express the social-psychological factors in their selection process, describe their viewing experience, and express their emotions explicitly. The interviews were coded and analyzed according to the Miles and Huberman (1994) approach. Starting with basic category labels, which are mainly “descriptive codes with little interpretation” before interviews, I added inferential/pattern codes in the later phase of my analysis (See Annex 3). These pattern codes were composed of both recurring themes in the interviews and some leitmotifs, sometimes occurring through the participants' use of a particular word. As the patterns became more apparent, a “periodic rereading” process was applied to earlier interviews (Miles and Huberman 1994, 57) to find causal links between the precoded categories and secondary pattern codes.

One of the limitations of this research is that Zoom interviews are less sensory than face-to-face interviews by nature due to their two-dimensional frame with definite visual boundaries. Participant observation was also not possible as a method, and practices such as watching content on streaming services together with the participants or observing them in their home environment. These were not possible due to the pandemic restrictions. On the other hand, the video recordings provided the means to not only reread or re-listen but also rewatch the interviews, focusing on the emotional/sensory details, tones, expressions, and gestures of users while describing their experiences with the services. Following Sarah Pink's discussion on the multi-sensoriality of interviews, this research approached the interviews as a creative space where research participants place "verbal definitions on sensory embodied experiences" and allocate "these experiences to culturally specific sensory categories" (2015, 79).

1.3.2 Rhetorical Analysis

Gunter argues that the main question of rhetorical analysis is "how the message is presented visually or textually," and it focuses on "distinctive features such as composition, form, use of metaphors and structure of argumentation or reasoning" (2000, 89). This dissertation uses rhetorical analysis to portray a general overview of the VOD services discussed (Netflix, MUBI, and BluTV). It examines the services' websites, press releases, ads, and other media presence and draws on interviews with executives, showrunners, and media representatives. Studying VOD audiences requires a comparison of their self-expression and image with their identity imagined by the industrial discourse. Therefore, the first three empirical chapters open the discussion on the audiences by presenting an analysis of the services, their content strategies, and media discourse.

1.2.3 Narrative Analysis

The last chapter uses narrative analysis to examine two comedy series commissioned by BluTV: *Bartu*, *Me*, and *Doğu*. According to Gunter, in narrative analysis, "the characters themselves that are crucial as well as their acts, their difficulties, their choices, and the general developments" (2000, 90). Therefore, in its analysis of taboo humor in two series, this chapter closely reads the characters' position and function within the story and examines how different marginalized groups are represented through these characters. In addition to analyzing narrative

structure in terms of its differences from the norms of linear television, it also focuses on how the sensibilities of different audience segments find their reflection within the stories and characters.

As discussed above, a multimethod approach that combines relevant approaches for each chapter is used in the research, such as qualitative audience research, rhetorical analysis, and narrative analysis. Using these methods, this research aims to explore the changing viewing behaviors, habits, and tastes of the sVOD audiences in Turkey by discussing their experience in relation to the marketing discourse that assumes a certain audience and reflects an industrial point of view. The research also brings the texts and changing stories into the picture in order to identify boundary-pushing stories enabled by niche audience targets & less regulated sectors.

In this first part of the thesis up to this point, the general literature on streaming services and audience studies were discussed. I mapped the place of this study within media industry studies and audience studies, showing which theories it is related to and what their contribution to literature will be. The historical background of the research and the methods that will be used in the study were also presented. The following next section includes four empirical chapters, the theoretical & historical background of which I have presented in the introduction.

II

PAPERS

CHAPTER 2

Resisting the Lure: Netflix Audience, Cultural Choice, and Emotions

The first part of the empirical research focuses on the experience of VOD audiences (Netflix in particular). It aims to understand the effect of VOD technology on viewing habits/behaviors, cultural choices, and tastes. Adopting an inductive approach based on in-depth interviews, this article challenges the industry's inferred, imagined, or assumed VOD audience/users and many scholarly discussions.

This article is in the submission process to the Communication, Culture & Critique journal.

Resisting the Lure: Netflix Audience, Cultural Choice, and Emotions

Netflix is not television because I can quit whenever I want (Sezen).

Netflix is too easy to reach. Just a click away (...) Every time, I ask myself, 'Why the hell did I watch this?' and I regret it (Defne).

Two quotes by the participants of this research illustrate how Netflix, as one of the most indefinable study objects of the current media ecosystem, evokes distinct, intense, and contradictory feelings and ideas in the audiences. This article contributes to “a definition of Netflix,” starting from its audience, and explores the discussion on on-demand culture, Netflix, and control & choice from the perspective of real users. It adopts an inductive approach based on in-depth interviews with Netflix users to challenge the inferred, imagined, or assumed Video-on-Demand audience/users through industrial and scholarly discussions. The interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2021, mainly during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, with 25 Netflix Turkey users ranging in age from 18 to late 60s (see Annex 4 for detailed demographic information on users). The initial descriptive and pre-coded questions used during interviews constitute the general themes of this research: The audience’s interaction with Netflix’s interface and recommendation system, VOD’s effect on film/series viewing habits and behaviors, and cultural choice and taste.

Even though participants use multiple services (VOD and non-VOD) to watch films and series, the main focus of the interviews is on their experience with Netflix. The main reasons behind this chapter’s choice of Netflix as an object of inquiry are twofold. The first reason is the great scope of Netflix’s cultural, economic, and social influence on viewing behaviors and cultural choices & tastes as a more established SVOD (subscription-based VOD service). The second reason is the vague and mixed cultural status of Netflix as an SVOD service, content provider, producer, distributor, exhibitor, tech company, and television network. This “all-in-one” identity of the service provides a rich space to inquire into different aspects of the audience. The users’ varied perspectives of Netflix reveal their vibrant identities as audiences, consumers, users, or even critics & reviewers.

This chapter dwells on the following research questions:

- 1) How do users perceive and interact with the personalized recommendation system of Netflix?
- 2) In what ways do users define their experience of viewing films and series on Netflix?
- 3) In what ways do users differentiate or relate their experience of Netflix with other media/cultural forms, such as linear television and film?

In search of answers to these questions, this article follows a user-centric approach that considers audiences' perspectives without essentializing or positing them as factual arguments. It is specifically interested in how audiences *experience* Netflix and how they *feel* about it. These two concepts, the audience's experience, and feelings/emotions, are at the core of this research, which aims to diverge from the more rationalized accounts of the choice and taste of SVOD audiences. We need to ask at this point: Which theoretical frameworks can we use while working with the SVOD audience? Television audiences are experiencing a distinct form of television with Netflix, which is internet-distributed, subscriber-funded, and on-demand. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink how television studies conceptualize audiences from within the industrial norms of SVOD. Lotz argues that “experience matters now” more than before because SVOD allows for very distinct types of audience experience, unlike linear broadcast television with a pre-determined schedule:

New viewing practices are enabled by the *availability* (on-demand libraries with many choices) and *reliability* (you don't have to watch it now or it's gone) of SVODs (...) In facing the scale of choice offered by an SVOD library, viewers are better able to make selections aimed at producing a desired state of being (...) The abundance and diversity of content increasingly available in SVOD libraries enables viewers to engage in a broader range of mood.” (2022, 41)

Therefore, the choice offered by SVOD allowed for a greater variety of audience experiences and emotions/moods than broadcast television. Moreover, the recommendation system that curates personalized content for each user and the “friendly language” of Netflix in its interface, marketing, and social media, create a sense of *intimacy*. Jamieson argues that

intimacy in the digital era is part of producing “a sense of self with agency and autonomy.” She suggests that intimacy requires *disclosing* and “a dialectic of mutual self-disclosure, a sharing of inner thoughts and feelings.” (2013, 9) Intimacy is generally theorized and discussed through social media platforms, where users are experiencing a certain kind of “mediated intimacy.” This article illustrates how a similar intimacy emerges between Netflix and its audiences. Users share their tastes and preferences in content as “clicks” with the service, sometimes in a very intimate way, by touching an iPhone or iPad screen - devices that serve as mediators. Seeing into, analyzing, and interpreting each user’s choices, the algorithm responds back by curating and recommending content specially designed for them. On the other hand, it is crucial to point out that the intimacy between users and Netflix is not always fully reciprocal, and it is not based on total equality between two parties. Therefore, this research approaches the term intimacy critically and does not neglect the structural inequalities between Netflix as “platform” with a certain control over the users and the audiences themselves. Concordantly, this study adopts the term intimacy more as a certain form of “confidentiality”.

As a consequence of this intimacy (or confidentiality), this article argues that contemporary audiences relate to Netflix in a very emotional, intimate, and sensual way and often anthropomorphize the service in various ways because intimacy requires an embodied *other*. Participants also use metaphors that relate the content to food and describe their experience with the service with strong emotional language. In doing so, they reveal the complexity and incommensurability of their taste in a more embodied form, which is a way to respond to Netflix’s proprietary attitude toward their individual choice/taste.

Literature Review

Rethinking the Audience in the Netflix Era

One of the most significant challenges in studying the audiences in the on-demand era is the proprietary attitude of companies such as Netflix toward user data. Unlike the network era, where researchers had access to public data provided by companies such as Nielsen, today’s big datasets are owned by private media companies and are mainly inaccessible for analysis. Even though Netflix occasionally provides minimal information on the viewing numbers of specific shows or rankings, such as “global/regional Top 10”, these are far from reliable since they are

provided without context (Gray, 2016). Lotz defines the contemporary media ecosystem by two main industrial aspects regarding the audiences: “The absence of data about audience scale” and “a business model that does not prioritize mass audience construction” (2021:3). Due to this shift in the business model that prioritizes niche media, it is no longer viable to discuss television audiences through their engagement with a specific text, genre, or format (Ang, 1985) that appeals to mass audiences.

Gray calls for an inevitable revival of audience studies in its understanding of contemporary audiences (2016), while Lotz warns us about the inadequacy of current frames of cultural power in the study of television and its audiences (2021). Even though there is substantial work on television audiences from an ethnographic perspective (Ang, 1991; Silverstone, 1994, Livingstone, 2013; Morley, 1986), the current disruption to the earlier understandings of television requires an updated approach to contemporary audiences - who are significantly transformed by “digitization, globalization, neo-liberalization, and personalization” (Gray, 2016: 81). Initial studies on Netflix and VOD audiences mainly focus on the issues of datafication of taste (McDonald and Smith-Rowsey, 2016), and practices such as binge-watching (Jenner, 2015; Horeck et al., 2018; Matrix, 2014), yet they lack any empirical evidence or in-depth understanding of audiences.

The limited qualitative studies on the Netflix audience explore how contemporary audiences consume television on different platforms and devices (Turner, 2019), how they relate to the algorithms and manage their cultural choices/taste (Frey, 2021), and how they domesticate the service by integrating it into their daily lives (Siles et al., 2019). One of the most detailed studies on the cultural choice mechanisms of the Netflix audience, Frey’s study combines quantitative and qualitative data and discusses the way audiences relate to the service’s recommender system. His findings show that recommendation systems still constitute a small part of users’ choice mechanisms, and the audience has a complicated relationship with the algorithm and the interface. It is not only the audience that utilizes earlier forms of cultural recommendation (such as ads, reviews, or word of mouth) but also Netflix’s recommendation system.

On the other hand, the qualitative studies on VOD or Netflix audiences are still very rationalized and lack audiences’ complex feelings, senses, and embodied experiences. Because “we have rarely talked about broadcast television programming in terms of how it makes us feel”

(Lotz 2022, 41), we also lack the necessary theoretical framework to discuss the feelings and desires of contemporary audiences - which are diversified and considered by the services more than before. The scarcity no longer limits audiences as it was in broadcast television, and they have many options to match their “mood.” Gorton adapts Greg M. Smith’s study on “mood cues” and “emotional markers” in the film to television and argues that “our mood (...) orientates us towards certain films that we believe will match our internal feelings. This idea works particularly well in terms of thinking about how we orientate ourselves to an ‘anchoring point’ such as the television” (Gorton, 2009: 80) Coming from film/screen studies theory, Smith’s theorization on audience emotions is mainly related to the content. However, the way audiences experience the technology is not separate from their understanding of the content because “television watching is a complex and variable mode of behavior, characteristically interwoven with other, simultaneous activities” (Ang, 1991: 75). Lotz considers the users and gratifications approach as a more sociological one, which developed an understanding of “the use of television out of habit, companionship, and passing the time (...) reasons separate from the attitude towards the content being watched” (2022, 42). In its understanding of SVOD audiences, this study suggests that audience experience and emotions on content and technology are highly interwoven; therefore, it needs a combined approach.

Gray reminds us how fan studies, as a crucial subfield of audience studies, focus on a specific type of audience who “love” a show and those who dislike or resent what they watch. Consequently, this “leaves us with many questions about viewing through coercion, requirement, pressure, or simply stasis or boredom” (2016, 81). Audience studies have the analytical tools to explore the audience through a text, format, or genre, yet mostly in their feelings of love/fandom. However, contemporary audiences experience television in a more private, personalized, and intimate way than before, which warrants a closer look at their complex emotional/sensual relationship with the medium and the technology. Matthew’s work on the constraints of data-driven personalization for the Netflix audience is one of the rare studies that adopt a user-centric approach with a focus on emotions such as “frustration, confusion, and misdirection” that Netflix’s recommender system evokes (2020: 68). This chapter follows a similar approach. It examines how the diverse and conflicting feelings of the audience reflect the complexity of cultural choice/taste.

The findings of this chapter confirm Matthew's and Frey's findings on the audience's complicated relationship with Netflix's recommendation system. They argue that they exist on a scale of their control over cultural choice/taste rather than in a binary of active or passive users. Furthermore, this study also discusses how audiences critically engage with the commissioned content ("Netflix originals") in addition to the acquired films and series in the catalog. While many users are more indecisive about the recommendation system, most express their opinions on original content critically and confidently. The audience perceives the "quality" of the original content as a significant part of Netflix as a brand & cultural form, in addition to its technology and personalized recommendation system. Netflix is a more "culturally legitimate" version of traditional television for the users, mainly in terms of technology and personalization rather than content.

Methodology

The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the participants were selected using snowball sampling. Due to the pandemic conditions, the interviews were conducted online through Zoom. While participants belong to the urban middle class with an income level enough to afford the necessary technological infrastructure to watch VOD and subscription fees to Netflix, they are varied in terms of gender, age, cultural capital, educational level, and heavy and light usage of Netflix. Interviews were video-recorded by Zoom, transcribed, read, coded manually, and periodically reread according to Miles & Huberman's approach (1994). Further details about the interviewee's demographic information and interview questions can be found in Annex 2 & 4.

Morley mentions his concerns about the interview method in audience research, particularly television audiences, and differentiates between respondents' accounts of behavior and the researcher's observations of actual behavior during the interviews. He does not oppose them to each other to find an ideal method but suggests that we have to consider the stories respondents tell as "indexical of, the cultural and linguistic frames of reference which respondents have available to them through which to articulate their responses," and "these are limited to the level of conscious responses." Audience emotions and experience can serve as a middle ground between actual behaviors observed and interpreted by the researcher and respondents' accounts of their experience with Netflix - and explore the intimacy between them.

The chapter is organized around some sub-themes based on the pattern codes inferred later in the analysis, such as the emotional/sensual reactions to Netflix and the references to senses of taste as the central reference point in audience experience. After the first five interviews, participants' use of emotional language in describing their experience with Netflix became apparent, and it was the point I inclined towards a more sensual ethnography as a methodology. Following Sarah Pink's discussion on the multisensorial interviews, I approached the interviews as a creative space where research participants place "verbal definitions on sensory embodied experiences" and allocate "these experiences to culturally specific sensory categories" (2015: 79).

One of the limitations of this research is that Zoom interviews are less sensual and intimate than face-to-face interviews by nature due to their two-dimensional frame with definite visual boundaries. Since Pink's methodology involves "experiencing" with people, she walks and tastes with her participants. This was not possible due to the pandemic restrictions. On the other hand, the video recordings provided the means to not only reread or re-listen but also *rewatch* the interviews, focusing on the emotional/sensual details, tonings, expressions, and gestures of users while describing their experiences with Netflix. Consequently, the following discussion on users' relationship with the service is not only based on their verbalized sensual metaphors or expressions but also on their bodily expressions.

Findings and Discussion

"We Are Not Couch Potatoes": Guilt, Laziness, and Addiction

Netflix's technological convenience and user-friendly interface are the primary factors in users' preference for the service. On the other hand, they differ in their views on the validity or usefulness of the recommendation system as a specific but fundamental part of this convenience. Users define Netflix as a form of software or as "a downloadable application" that migrates between different hardware. This "intangibility" of the service is also a result of Netflix's self-promotion as a versatile cultural/technological form. Therefore, users express the technological convenience by referring to many different features of the service; some are also publicly circulated by Netflix itself (such as the time-shifting feature popularized by the tagline "whenever you want, wherever you want"). This section explores the following question: To

what extent do users' views on Netflix's technology overlap with or differ from the service's self-promoted image?

Technological convenience is naturally a fundamental part of Netflix's "Company Profile":

"Members can watch as much as they want, anytime, anywhere, on any internet-connected screen. Members can play, pause and resume watching, all without commercials or commitments."¹

Users also mention the specific components referred to in this self-defined profile during the interviews within different contexts, mainly when we ask them why they prefer Netflix. The most common answers are the time and space shifting opportunity ("anytime, anywhere") and the availability of the app/service on different screens and technological devices. Although users mostly agree with this answer, the way they talk and feel about the functionality of the technology is very versatile. Arda explains why he prefers Netflix to TV or illegal streaming in a very confident way: "The only reason is the technological convenience. That's it. Only reason. Anywhere, anytime." Later in the interview, he describes his experience with Netflix originals as sometimes unbearable and boring. When we ask why he continues to use the service, he replies:

Because it's too comfortable, I got used to it. I cannot turn back to what I used to, search it on Google, find illegal sites, deal with stupid ads and virus links, or download it from Torrent. I would be bored by that. Netflix got me lazy, but it's just too comfortable.

Arda's initial response is almost identical to Netflix's self-definition, "anywhere, anytime," which is circulated as the most distinctive feature of the company as an SVOD service. On the other hand, he starts to diverge from the company discourse in his second response to the same question. He repeats the phrase "too comfortable" twice, a feature of Netflix that makes him "lazier" (reminding the derogatory phrase used for television in the past, "couch potato"). Furthermore, he positions Netflix as a "lesser evil" by comparing it to other options. He is not comfortable about getting used to Netflix and its technological convenience, and he expresses it in emotional and behavioral terms ("I got used to it," "it got me lazy," "I get bored") rather than rationalized arguments. Observing a particular irritation while talking about this laziness, I ask

¹ "Company Profile", Netflix Investors. Available at: <https://ir.netflix.net/ir-overview/profile/default.aspx>

Arda to elaborate on his negative feelings about Netflix. He pauses for a moment and replies, “I don’t know, I just don’t know; there is too much stupid stuff in it, I can’t always choose, so I often end up watching garbage.” The word “garbage” corresponds to the disposable content Arda would not watch if it were not in the Netflix library. But it also corresponds to a kind of “less objectionable” and less risky content that does not demand much of the audience’s attention or interaction. Furthermore, the feelings of boredom and restlessness in Arda’s reply are not only towards the service but also the interview process itself. Since the participant relates to the service mainly emotionally, as he states, when asked to verbalize his feelings towards the service and elaborate on them, he experiences a similar kind of restlessness, inconvenience, and irritation.

Many participants used the word “laziness” during the interviews. The emotional or behavioral state of laziness also brings a certain feeling of guilt for some of them, which is also related to feelings of addiction. Hayal expresses how the comfort Netflix provides changed her viewing habits drastically and led her to a more “lazy” state of being:

Netflix is straightforward to use and comfortable. We got lazy about it; that’s why I always watch Netflix, other than illegal streaming. My viewing habits changed with it. I just watch things because it’s easy to reach, things that I would never watch otherwise. I continue to watch them even though I know I won’t like them.

Hayal generally uses the first person singular in the interview, and this is one of the rare occasions she uses the plural first-person “we.” Like many users, she also feels uncomfortable about her viewing habits changing due to VOD technology's comfort. She positions herself as an object of criticism alongside Netflix, a service that makes her watch content she does not like much. On the other hand, she shares the burden of this self-criticism by using the phrase “we,” attributing “laziness” to a more general audience rather than herself. She also mentions an inevitable loss of control (“I continue to watch them even though I know I won’t like it”). She thinks that technological convenience or comfort takes her control away, just like a form of addiction.

While some users talk about this technological convenience as a positive and unproblematic experience, some users associate it with a specific type of “addiction”. For example, when we asked Zeynep why she subscribed to Netflix in the first place and continued

for three years, she stated that she was “lured” by Netflix (“*büyü gibi bir şey yapıyor*” in Turkish) . She explains this “lure” as a convenience of the service: The user-friendly interface, lack of interruption/ads, and the availability of binge-watching. In a similar but more negative manner, Defne states her “regret” about not being able to resist Netflix:

It’s too easy to reach. Just a click away. You don’t have to search for anything. No need to download stuff and no waiting. I find myself watching it out of a sudden. I watched things I would never watch otherwise, and I ask myself every time, ‘Why the hell did I watch this?’ and I regret it a lot.

Defne is one of the heaviest daily users of Netflix among the participants (at least 3-4 hours on weekdays, 5-6 hours on weekends), and ironically, she is also the most uncomfortable one. In these last two examples (Zeynep and Defne), the feeling of laziness, a phrase that participants use to criticize themselves, turns into an addiction and a total loss of control (“lure,” “regret,” and “guilt”).

The theme of addiction has also been a fundamental part of Netflix’s brand identity since its early years, which has become widespread with the popular term “binge-watching” (Jenner 2018). Binge-watching is derived initially from binge-eating, but Netflix redeemed the term from its negative connotations with the tagline, “Netflix & chill.” This strategy differentiated the service’s audience from “couch potatoes” by emphasizing personalized “quality” content. As discussed in the following sections, users use many metaphors to relate their experience with Netflix to consuming food. The participants express their taste in audiovisual content by referring to their taste in food, using food as a culturally specific sensory category to embody their experience (Pink, 2015). For example, Akin, a 24-year-old college student, states that Netflix has become a must to get involved in any kind of conversation with his friends. He describes this peer pressure through the Turkish idiom “*ekmek, su gibi*” which translates to “like bread, like water.”

Despite Netflix’s efforts to euphemize negative connotations of binge-watching, users still experience primarily negative feelings (such as regret and guilt). However, the way the participants talk about these feelings differs from one to another, depending on how responsible they feel about this addiction. For example, some participants mention a feeling of nostalgia, a “pre-Netflix era” where people were “less lazy” and “more active.”

Space Still Matters: Netflix as Television

Despite Netflix's strong emphasis on quality content and personal choice, binge-watching reminds users of their experience with broadcast television. Therefore, during the interviews, participants tend to compare and contrast their experience with Netflix (both the technology and the content) with broadcast television. When they talk about Netflix as a form of television, users become more critical of it and confident about their cultural tastes and choices. Because they associate Netflix with a more culturally lower form, television, they openly criticize the content quality and how the service fails to know and understand their taste. On the other hand, some users view television as a cultural other to broadcast television to explain why they "still watch" Netflix despite its low content quality. They emphasize many other factors, such as the lack of interruption, high production quality, and the "possibility of encountering something good and different" because now there are "at least" other options. Therefore, the diversity of content, which is one of the consequences of the industrial characteristics of SVOD, "allows them to serve various desires" and "not just those perceived to be the most common" as in linear broadcast television (Lotz, 2022: 43).

It is not only the "anti-television" qualities that make users prefer Netflix, but also its television-like qualities. The most common is Netflix as an enjoyable leisure activity that helps users "kill time" or "ease their minds" in their own words. However, participants have many reservations about expressing these positive qualities due to the possible fear of being labeled as a regular television viewer. What is also significant in participants' experience with Netflix as television (or anti-television) is how they talk about the physical space and conditions they experience the service. This is mainly because television is not only a software application to be downloaded like Netflix but has a strong physical existence that traditionally creates a social space. Consequently, private/personal space, intimacy, and the situatedness of participants' experiences (Pink, 2015) are significant themes in how they talk about Netflix as television. It is not only the content or interface that defines this experience but also the space it takes place.

While many users watch Netflix on their computers or smart TV, they share their house with other family members (children, partners, or parents) regarding the space they watch the service in. Sezen, a 64-year-old retired woman, lives with her husband and is a regular user of broadcast television. She was introduced to Netflix by her children and began to use the service during the pandemic to deal with her loneliness and isolation at home. Sezen is one of the least

critical users of Netflix. When I asked her how the service differs from broadcast television, she said she does not watch television *that much* several times. In her response, once again, Netflix is described as a potential addiction:

I never watch too much television. I don't watch it constantly. There is a television in the living room, but my husband watches sports and the news. So I watch Netflix in the back room, giving me freedom. But I do not see it as television. I never watch television during the day, only evenings. Original Netflix content is good. But it is not television because I can quit whenever I want.

In the rest of the interview, Sezen clearly states that she watches “linear television content,” mostly Turkish series on Netflix. However, as the quote illustrates, she does not want to be labeled as someone who “constantly” watches television. The gendered perspective here is also significant. Netflix is something that belongs to the “backroom,” private and intimate space of Sezen, where she can be free from not only broadcasted and non-personalized television but also from what her husband watches. Broadcast television is now associated with “news and sports,” and it belongs to the living room, a less private space than the “backroom” where she watches her personalized television, Netflix.

Similarly, the only couple in our sample, Olcay, and Murat, state that when they watch Netflix with their two 13-year-old children, they can never decide what to choose, so they just turn on “normal television” and watch whatever is on. On the other hand, when they are alone in the living room where the television is, they prefer to watch Netflix because they all have different tastes. The space is definitive in participants’ experience of Netflix for both cases. Sezen watches the service in a particular place on a second device, while Olcay and Murat have to use the same room and device to watch it. While the television is personalized through space for the former, it is personalized through time for the latter.

Lastly, users experience Netflix’s recommender system more intimately than broadcast television because they have separate, individualized accounts. They watch the service mainly in a private space and device, and they generally experience it alone if they want to watch what they *really* want. In this intimate space where users watch Netflix, taste becomes something calculated by not only Netflix but also a kind of “secret” between the service and its audience. Furthermore, Netflix *performs* like a friend that recommends content in its interface and social media rather than a passive, inanimate technology. This friendly language, combined with spatial

intimacy, makes users interact with the service by personifying it. For example, Defne compares Netflix to a close friend when she talks about her interaction with the recommender system:

I solved how to search for stuff on Netflix. For example, I search a movie, and it recommends to me other movies that people who like that movie like. It's like understanding a close friend.

This personification or humanization of technology is also a result of the interactive nature of SVOD and the recommender algorithm. An algorithm is not only a cryptic code undecipherable to users but also learning *from* the users. Defne's quote illustrates how dynamic and reciprocal the relationship between users and Netflix is. It is not the recommender system that solves or calculates her taste, but she is the one that manipulates the system to find related content. On the other hand, participants do not always relate with Netflix as a friend but also as someone that knows them "too well" and therefore has the potential to manipulate them. Berk, a 30-year-old computer engineer, tells Netflix to "calm down" in recommending content: "It's too aggressive in recommending content. I'm going to watch you anyways... Dude, just calm down; you irritate me." He shifts to the second person singular when he starts to talk about emotions such as irritation or anger. Once again, the conversation does involve not only the participants but also Netflix's "feelings" as a personified technology.

We need to ask why users keep watching series they do not like on Netflix instead of just "cutting the cord" as they did with television. What makes the guilt, laziness, or addiction associated with Netflix different from traditional derogatory feelings about broadcast television as a mass medium? The answers to these questions center around two common themes inferred from the interviews: The recommendation system and the quality of content.

No Fish on the Menu: Netflix's Recommender System

Netflix has a long history of marketing its expertise on personalized taste and choice, mainly through its recommender system or with its more popular name, the recommender "algorithm." The company intentionally keeps the details of the system secret, creating a mystified aura around its main asset: Knowing people's tastes better than themselves through data. This mystified conversation around this big dataset and novelty creates a techno-deterministic discourse from both industrial and critical perspectives, conceptualized by

expressions such as “algorithmic culture” or “mathematization of taste” (Frey 2021). Despite this heavily rationalized media talk, real users’ experiences with the recommendation algorithm are far more complicated and sensual/emotional than imagined by the industry.

This section argues that the audience’s relationship with the recommender system or Netflix is not stable, rational, or predictable. Netflix’s recommender system is not only a technological tool or convenience, but it is something that *talks to* them through their cultural taste and choice. There is a particular sensory attachment to technology here, where users imagine, perceive, and interact with Netflix by usually personifying it. As discussed below with examples, participants use sensory metaphors such as food and romantic relationships to embody their very intimate relationship with Netflix. This tendency is partly due to the “friendly language” of Netflix in its interface, marketing, and social media, which addresses the audience in the second-person singular. On the other hand, the intimacy in this relationship is the epitome of the on-demand era in its highly individualized and private character. The SVOD industry, Netflix specifically, promises the users a unique treatment with machine-calculated precision, hoping they would feel special in their taste. Lastly, this section discusses how users respond to this discourse of individualization through their experiences with the recommender system.

All participants mentioned the recommender system, genre categories, and the user-friendly interface as some of the features in their preference for Netflix. On the other hand, the recommender system is far from being the primary reason for their use of the service. They have complicated and contradictory views on Netflix’s role in cultural suggestion. Mehmet, a 59-year-old man and a heavy user of Netflix, is among the most satisfied users of the service. He positions Netflix as a savior from the “dictates” of Turkish television:

Netflix is very successful in recommending. I watch a series it recommends a similar one, I watch it too. Also, having many options in terms of content makes me feel free. To be honest, I’d be pleased to see other people subscribe to Netflix. Because on TV, they are constantly exposed to something they are dictated to, which leads them to particular content. There is no such thing in services such as Netflix. There are many types of content on Netflix, according to each person’s taste, ideas, and worldview. Choose whatever you want.

Mehmet follows Netflix’s marketing discourse surrounding its recommender system by referring to individual tastes. He describes his Netflix experience as a form of freedom compared

to his experience with Turkish broadcast television. His comparison is significant because he does not consider the recommender system as a manipulating or dictating force but as a barrier before ideological manipulation. On the other hand, the way he talks about his experience with the recommender system changes in a later phase of the interview:

Sometimes it just keeps recommending and recommending even before I can finish something; I'm getting confused. It irritates and overwhelms me (...), and there are too many drugs and alcohol in Netflix content. For example, when watching *Peaky Blinders*, I always want to smoke cigarettes and drink whisky, but I can't stop.

Back to the first quote, Mehmet's perception of the recommender system and Netflix is mostly positive only in comparison to television. However, the second quote illustrates his contradicting feelings and thoughts on Netflix, expressed sensually. He also brings back the theme of addiction to the conversation again, but this time without the context of binge-watching. He uses strong emotional language, such as being "irritated" or "overwhelmed," which is followed by a conversation on drugs/alcohol content. He links these two separate issues with a feeling of "losing control" - similar to the guilt associated with binge-watching. The recommender system interferes with his schedule and confuses and overwhelms him by recommending too much content, taking his control away. While he is confident in his more rationalized comparison of Netflix and television in the first quote, he prefers to express his inconvenience through a more emotionally embodied language and by a sense such as taste. Emotions and body become a "source of knowledge, and subsequently of agency" (Pink, 26) in Mehmet's experience of Netflix as a cultural choice mechanism.

On the other hand, Canan is openly critical of Netflix and makes an extra effort not to be directed or manipulated by its recommender system:

I never binge-watch; it's like a loop. It means that you don't know what you want, you haven't made research, and you just watch whatever Netflix recommends. Netflix is like going to a restaurant and requesting a menu. You want fish, but because it is not on the menu, you just say okay to meat. You're becoming more and more okay about desiring less. As long as the restaurant gives you something... It's a loss of time, with low quality and taste. So I constantly research before logging into Netflix and just watch what I already have in mind.

Through another metaphor related to food, “the restaurant menu,” Canan defines the recommender system as a “corporate curator” that leads people to its content and frames it as a *menu* they can choose from. Ayşe, a 63-year-old housewife, also uses a similar metaphor:

If I want to watch a war movie, I search for it like that. Because if I just turn on the service and dive into it, I would be lost. I’m very programmed. For example, if I go to Kadıköy and I don’t have the stuff to do there, I always tell myself: ‘I’m going to Kadıköy to have a cup of coffee.’ Think of it like that. I write what I want on Netflix, and they make - sorry- they serve films according to my taste.

Since Canan is more critical and picky about Netflix content, she states explicitly that she wants “fish,” but only “meat” is on the menu. On the other hand, Ayşe states that she knows what to choose *from* a menu, but she just needs to select it beforehand, not be lost - or maybe consume more than she intended to. While the former criticizes the menu for not being inclusive enough for her taste, the latter is more concerned about the menu’s scope, which is too broad for her taste.

Participants tend to express or embody Netflix’s recommender system’s understanding of their taste through food and food consumption metaphors. As Bourdieu’s theory of distinction argues, food is one of the most symbolic consumption items in individuals’ expression of social status and cultural capital. However, this research argues that how users use emotional/sensual language to talk about their experience with Netflix is beyond symbolic value. In this case, food is not only a consumer good with symbolic value in terms of class/cultural capital but also a tool in users’ articulation of a highly sensual, direct, and immediate relationship with Netflix. Furthermore, participants specifically refer to food because it is both a sensual and cultural good, prepared with various ingredients and a recipe. One participant criticizes the formulaic narratives of the Netflix series by stating that they taste like “the egg in a dish,” which means that you can taste the formula, just like you taste the egg as an ingredient in a poorly cooked pastry. In this expression, she directly uses food as a metaphor for content and a recipe for narrative formula.

Making a Fool of the Audience: Netflix Originals

A slip of the tongue in Ayşe’s quote above warrants consideration. She initially states that Netflix “makes” content according to her taste instead of “serving” content. This is a significant shift from Netflix as a cultural curator and recommender (“a menu”) to a producer and a creator

(“a cook”). Netflix executives publicly boast about trusting their algorithm in producing shows, hiring showrunners and actors, and even designing stories. It is not only the preferred genre categories or themes that influence these creative decisions but also the specifics of users’ interaction with the interface - such as when they pause, stop, fast forward, or skip the content. This section does not aim to comment on how valid, credible, or widely used these claims of “data-driven” content are but to observe the users’ understanding of it.

Among many other factors, participants discuss in the interviews, the quality of Netflix’s commissioned content (“Netflix originals”) is the one they are the most critical of. When we asked them what they thought about content on Netflix, many users automatically assumed that we asked about the originals rather than the acquired content. Their assumption is based on two main factors: The first is Netflix’s ambitious investment in producing original content rather than acquiring or licensing due to financial reasons. The second one is the recommender system’s bias towards original content, in addition to heavy marketing outside the service, which increases the visibility of the originals.

For many participants, Netflix originals are a fundamental part of the recommender system. Some users state that as the service recommends more, they consume more and realize that the content “loses quality.” We asked users what they mean by “losing quality” in their interpretation of content. Two main themes became prominent in their responses: Formulaic stories and trivial/light content.

Participants express their inconvenience with the formulaic or data-driven, genre-based stories in many different terms: “After a while, all series feel same to me.” (Hayal), “I watched so many bad series with the same formulas on Netflix that I can’t even watch any series anymore.” (Zeynep), “That Adam Sandler and Jennifer Anniston movie, god, same stuff all and all over again, disgusting!” (Canan), “If it is a Netflix ‘original’, I’m always cautious and check IMDB first” (Defne). However, the most used phrase in interviews is Netflix “making a fool of” the audience (“*insani aptal yerine koymak*”), where participant’s language becomes intensely emotional, and they sometimes shift to the second person singular once again:

“After a while, I got really pissed off because Netflix originals were almost taking us as fools; they were making fun of our intellect. Story no longer offers you something. I think they don’t even care about the story and stuff anymore. They are just messing around.” (Zeynep)

“All these screenplays making a fool of the audience. You understand this when you start to watch something. Did you really do this? You have all that money, and you found this actor? Did you shoot this story? Didn’t you have anything else? Cheesy, stinking screenplays, you already know what is gonna happen, and they never tell you anything meaningful.” (Arda)

Zeynep and Arda define quality as telling stories that are smart, interesting, unpredictable, and with detailed and complex characters. Interestingly, despite their harsh attitude towards Netflix originals, they continue to watch these shows. They mainly refer to the critical media talk on Netflix’s data-driven content based on heavily measured audience taste while expressing their anger. Zeynep’s “solution” to data-driven storytelling is very significant in illustrating how users can be aware of the limits of their agency against a service that they are “lured in,” which, paradoxically, increases their agency:

I wish it could know my needs specifically and serve me better. Ok, let them use my data or information, whatever... If you are that ‘smart,’ see where I get bored, see what I *really* like, and produce good stuff. If they are already formulating everything, then they should do it better. Because when I watch Netflix, I don’t see any genuine, humane feelings. There are certain patterns all around. I challenge them, let them make their ‘robots’ analyze my taste perfectly, and produce according to that.

Zeynep’s frustration towards Netflix and how she addresses or challenges the company or the service is due to the time and effort “she lost” to the service. She defines her relationship with the platform as similar to a “romantic one,” and she is highly aware of her contradictory attitude toward it. She states that because she was once satisfied with Netflix and its originals when they were in the “flirting” or “honeymoon” phase, she still expects that attitude or quality of content and gets very disappointed or angry when she cannot find it. While she uses the word “subscribing” for Netflix as technology, she uses the word “commitment” to describe her relationship with the content. Netflix’s friendly marketing language, and its overemphasis on the individual user taste, do not help the service completely conceal its corporate interests, which audiences are highly aware of. While some users are more reconciled or uncritical about their status as consumers, many are highly critical about what is served to them under the name of “personalized choice.”

Conclusion

Hartley argues that “there is no ‘actual’ audience that can be separated from its construction as a category—audiences are products of institutions and don’t exist prior to them, or outside them’ (1987: 125). Morley further mentions how “the television audience does not so much constitute an empirical object as exhibit an imaginary status, a realm in which anxieties and expectations, aspirations and fantasies, as to the predicaments of ‘modern society’ are condensed.” (2003, 170). This article does not aim to produce generalizable claims about “actual” Netflix audiences but to show how heterogeneous, diverse and contradictory their experiences are. In constructing the Netflix or SVOD audience as an empirical object, it examines their emotions, anxieties, and expectations. The qualitative nature of this study opens a rich space to observe how contemporary audiences relate to internet-distributed television as a medium, technology, storyteller, and leisure activity and explore the dynamics of intimacy between them.

Firstly, this article examines the discourse of technological convenience and the practice of binge-watching through users’ feelings of guilt, laziness, and addiction. Next, it analyzes how users perceive Netflix in relation to broadcast television and examines how highly privatized spatial dynamics create a certain kind of intimacy. Then it discusses how users embody their experience of the recommender system through food metaphors. Lastly, the article concludes by examining users’ feelings of frustration about content and how they personify Netflix to convey their criticism more intimately. As the findings of this research illustrate, users respond to Netflix’s personalization discourse by pointing out the complexity of their taste through emotional and sensual responses. They are highly aware of the time and effort they invest in watching Netflix and how it - sometimes unsuccessfully- tries to “lure” them in.

The intensity of audience emotions towards Netflix as a technology and a storyteller is a consequence of their intimacy. Users feel a need to personify Netflix as “an other” in their intimate relationship with the service, intensified through Netflix’s personalized interface, recommendation algorithm, and social media language. The way the service addresses each user as an individual creates a neoliberal sense of self in audiences. Nevertheless, it is crucial that Netflix’s relationship with its users is twofold because its recommendation system is an algorithm that learns from and adapts to users. Unlike clicking a personalized ad in an online

shopping platform, Netflix also *produces* content according to data obtained from the algorithm. Back to Morley's theorization of audiences "as imaginary" empirical objects, this research imagines an audience that is constructed within their intimate and intersubjective relationship with Netflix.

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CHAPTER 3

Disciplining the Audience: MUBI and Limiting the Choice in the On-Demand Era

Drawing on in-depth interviews with subscribers of MUBI Turkey, the second empirical chapter explores the ways the audience relates to the imagined audience that MUBI assumes, promotes, and celebrates as a cultural gatekeeper and artistic patron/expert; and how, in turn, being a MUBI user becomes a sign of cultural taste. This chapter argues that even though users appreciate MUBI's limited choice model compared to Netflix, they still experience feelings such as frustration, stress, and inadequacy. These feelings mainly result from MUBI's artistic authority over them, established through the discourse of expertise/artistic patronage and limited time model.

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“Disciplining the Audience”: MUBI and Limiting the Choice in the On-Demand Era

MUBI, founded by Turkish entrepreneur Efe Çakarel in 2007, began as an “information-sharing platform for a global audience of online cinephiles” (Nikdel & Smits, 2018: 4) and evolved into an online streaming & distribution service that focuses on the specialized film. The service aimed to fill a gap in the nascent VOD market of the early 2000s by targeting niche audiences/cinephiles. Its catalog includes “a hand-picked”¹ limited selection of films, provided in a 30-day window, which “maintains a sense of rarity” (Kasman in Hessler, 2018:11) to compensate for the loss of the “fleeting experience (...) as one of the hallmarks of the first generation of cinephiles” (Haegener and De Valck, 2008: 21). After failing to maintain Netflix’s “all-you-can-eat” and “capital intensive” model (Çakarel in Kenny, 2017), the service turned to the long-tail model instead. Over the years, MUBI has grown into an “anti-Netflix platform” (Hessler, 3), appealing to Internet viewers, festival followers, and cinephiles interested in independent and arthouse cinema. In a media landscape defined by audience empowerment, the ubiquity of media, and freedom of choice, MUBI has significantly expanded its subscriber base despite its manually curated catalog with a limited number of films. Although primarily an operational decision, MUBI successfully framed this limited availability of choice and short window of streaming as an escape from the “tyranny of choice” (Çakarel in Mankus, 2018) toward a filtered selection that guarantees “high quality.” The service offers its “artistic patronage” (Hessler, 2018) as a solution to the problem created by its “cultural other”: Netflix and its algorithmically generated indefinite options.

Through the case of MUBI, this article inquires into the changing audience habits with the proliferation of VOD platforms and the discourse of control and choice, increased mobility, and democratic access. Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted online in May and June 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic with 25 users of MUBI Turkey², this study explores how the audience relates to the imagined audience that MUBI assumes, promotes, and celebrates as a cultural gatekeeper & artistic patron/expert; and how, in turn, being a MUBI user becomes a sign of cultural taste. I argue that even though users appreciate MUBI’s limited choice model compared to Netflix, they still experience feelings such as frustration, stress, and inadequacy. These feelings are mainly a consequence of MUBI’s artistic authority over them,

¹ “What is MUBI?” MUBI website. Available at: <https://mubi.com/about>

² Please see Annex 4 for detailed demographic information of the participants.

which is established through the discourse of expertise/artistic patronage and limited time model. The intensity of these emotions varies according to the different cultural & economic capital levels of the participants. On the other hand, users do not always automatically accept the expertise of the service, and they are more critical of it than they are of other VOD services (such as Netflix) because they consider watching MUBI as a form of “intellectual labor.”

Following its first launch in 2015, which was canceled because of the company’s global financial regression, MUBI was re-launched in Turkey in 2019. As a local branch of a streaming service that has exponentially grown in three years in terms of subscribers, collaborations, and media visibility, MUBI Turkey is an emblematic example of the service’s “glocalization” move. This study is not primarily interested in users’ local identity; however, the locality is a significant aspect of users’ cultural taste and choices. For example, many users state that being able to access local movies has been a significant factor in their decision to subscribe to MUBI because it is difficult to find pirated copies of those films. Consequently, even though users from Turkey share particular concerns or conveniences with the global MUBI audience, these aspects are occasionally intertwined with their local identity.

The transformation of MUBI’s marketing rhetoric from a more user-oriented, dialogic, and democratic one to a highly exclusive and curated form of artistic patronage in years has implications for the audience too. The service imagines its audience as a form of “new cinephilia” with “high and legitimate cultural taste” who is also familiar with digital technology and easily adapts to the rules of the on-demand era. The “Vision” section³ on MUBI’s website reveals the way it imagines its audience. MUBI confidently defines itself as “an online movie theater where you watch, discover, and discuss auteur cinema” in this section. Through this self-definition, the service merges the discourse of cinematic authorship that is associated with old cinephilia with “online film theater,” a film viewing practice discussed for new cinephilia.

The empirical part of this research illustrates that this assumed identity of the audience that MUBI promotes is sometimes adopted by the audience - mostly as “a symbolic good/service” as a sign of legitimate & good taste (Gronow, 1997). On the other hand, the very same identity is also challenged and even criticized by users, who sometimes find the service “too niche” and sometimes “too populist.” Before delving into MUBI’s ties with the new cinephilia in detail, a brief discussion on the significance of the concept in terms of choice and

³ <https://mubi.com/vision>

control is necessary to engage with the audience's experiences with the service critically. This discussion on the changing face of cinephilia is also necessary to define a more heterogeneous audience as an analytical category rather than a group of people defined by their cultural taste.

Literature Review

The participation, access, and mastery of the audience drastically increased in the convergence era, and consumers learned “how to use (...) different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers” (Jenkins, 2006: 18). However, the optimistic view on the increasing control of the audience and the democratization of access (Jenkins, 2006; Miller, 2011; Tryon, 2013) has given its way into a more critical approach as the industry started to take back the control it lost and reframed it as “the empowerment” of the audience. While the audience “is constructed and then sold to advertisers” by the media industry (Biltereyst & Meers, 2011: 424), the audience power, on the other hand, “is produced, sold, purchased and consumed (...)” and “like other ‘labor power’ it involves ‘work’” (Smythe, 2001: 233).

Klinger examines audiences in the context of home viewing and argues that audiences have an “implicit activeness.” This activeness does not necessarily translate as “a progressive political position” but involves the audiences’ process of meaning-making and technologically/socially transforming modes of viewing (Klinger, 2006:11). She discusses the contemporary cinephilia in relation to their use of home viewing technologies, and argues that they no longer define themselves with the theater experience but mostly with “possession” of films as tangible objects (videocassette or DVD) (Klinger, 2006: 56). This new type of cinephilia is constructed as an “insider” by the media industry, mainly defined by the technological mastery over home viewing technologies.

The new cinephilia, a term also named “cinephilia take two” by Thomas Elsaesser, is defined as “the post-auteur, post-theory cinephilia that has embraced the new technologies” (2005: 36) and is generally seen as a disruption and reformulation of the hierarchical and elitist image of the traditional cinephilia. The spatial and temporal experience of the film theater is no longer their primary concern, and they need to deal with the overabundance of content on their home screen. This creates a “choice fatigue” in new cinephilia that has “to live in a non-linear, non-directional ‘too much/all at once’ state of permanent tension, not so much about missing the

unique moment, but almost its opposite, namely about how to cope with a flow that knows no privileged points of capture at all” (Elsaesser, 2005: 39).

MUBI offers its subscriber base a curated choice model with a certain promise of “eliminating the paradox of choice” (Çakarel in Cookson, 2015). However, in its transformation from a site relying on “democratic interaction among site users (...) toward a new logic of artistic patronage”, the curation model of the service turned into “a gatekeeping mechanism,” according to Hessler (2018: 4). Although MUBI imagines its audience as a part of the new cinephilia, it constantly returns to the traditional discourse that defines old cinephilia, and its choice model based on scarcity. While promoting its limited and curated choice model through this scarcity and rarity by referring to the “fleeting experience” of the festival and film theater, MUBI maintains the discourse of mobility and democratic access in a contradictory manner. However, as Hagener suggests, “it is this simultaneity of different technological formats and platforms, subject positions, and affective encounters that characterizes the current practice referred to as cinephilia” (2005: 22).

Nikdel and Smits elaborate on the methods MUBI uses to construct itself as a reliable tastemaker and a cultural gatekeeper for its user base and how it negotiates its different subject positions (2018). They discuss in what ways MUBI maintains certain traditions of media delivery and exhibition and collaborates with cultural institutions such as film festivals and cinema magazines. In addition to the corporate partnerships, the service also positions itself as a continuation of cultural gatekeepers such as film museums, cinematheques, or independent/arthouse theaters (2018). On the other hand, Frey states that MUBI and other curation-style VODs “seek to fill in market gaps of diversity and distinction left open by Netflix and others” (2021: 7). He argues that although MUBI’s marketing rhetoric antagonizes Netflix, in fact, algorithmic and curated choice models work as complementary to each other (2021).

Based on his empirical study, Frey calls MUBI’s audience a “lazy cinephilia”, users that are “cash-rich, time-poor, middle-class consumers who want to keep up with current trends and discover or revisit hidden gems and old classics, but lack the ability to the will or ability to read back issues of *Sight and Sound* or got to festivals” (2021: 122). This study mainly confirms Frey’s findings in terms of demographic information but brings another aspect into the discussion: Audience labor. I argue that audience experiences with MUBI and the feelings such as laziness, stress, and boredom are related to not only participants’ relationship to films or their

cultural capital but also MUBI's "high expectations" from its imagined audiences in its marketing rhetoric, interface, and curation. Audiences consider watching MUBI as a form of serious mental and emotional labor, which brings feelings of stress, guilt, and incompetence. In investigating these issues thoroughly, this study asks the following questions: How are the users perceive these decisions, and what do they think about this "reverse" choice mechanism that seems "out of the spirit" of the on-demand era? What does being a MUBI user mean to them? How is the imagined/assumed identity of the MUBI user being shaped? How do they feel about MUBI's correspondence with traditional gatekeeping mechanisms? The next section explores audience expectations from MUBI and examines the tensions between the industrial assumptions and the actual audience experience.

"Risky, Stressful, Dark and Intellectual": The Audience Experiences with MUBI

"If I want to watch some light stuff, I open Netflix. If I want to watch something that requires concentration and something that would improve me, I open MUBI, as if I'm going to the movie theater."

İrem, a 30-year-old acquisitions executive, is a regular film festival follower and a cinephile. For her, an easy watch on Netflix is not necessarily something that needs to be limited and can coexist with her distinct viewing practices/habits associated with MUBI. Although this reconciliatory approach is not always the case, this article suggests that contemporary VOD audiences experience many dichotomies (such as light/heavy content, mainstream/arthouse cinema, algorithmic/curated choice, active/passive viewership) that are circulated throughout the industry in a very complex way. The way audiences understand, negotiate and talk about these dichotomies becomes a way to perform their cultural taste. MUBI audiences are mostly "cultural omnivores" who are also subscribed to Netflix (Frey, 2021), and their insights are significant in our understanding of both VOD services as representatives of two distinct, seemingly opposite, yet complementary choices and business models.

The Cultural “Other”: MUBI and Netflix

The way participants talk about their experience of MUBI in relation to Netflix is significant as a reflection of MUBI’s core marketing rhetoric. As discussed earlier, the service promises to make up for disadvantages caused by Netflix and its ambitious/mass-scale/algorithmic interface: The paradox of choice/choice fatigue and the lack of human curation. However, participants do not always position MUBI as a solution or compensation to Netflix but also as a complement. One noteworthy aspect of participants’ statements is the way they digress from the initial question about their MUBI experience and tell more about their Netflix experience. Although the interviews were semi-structured, I had to redirect the conversation to MUBI at some point. This section further discusses participants’ viewing practices and experience with Netflix briefly and then delves into the way they talk about MUBI as a cultural opponent and complement to Netflix.

Participants state that they watch “normal TV” with their parents or family, they “cut the cord”⁴ years ago, and they would not call Netflix television. However, they still describe their experience with Netflix via expressions/habits generally associated with television. Most of them consider Netflix as “light content,” as Akın’s quote illustrates above. Although the service does not have a linear schedule, they still use it as a background screen for the purposes of entertainment or to watch things they already know by themselves or with their family and friends. Their comments on Netflix’s “TV-like” features are not always judgmental, but some of them express an explicit “guilt” or “regret” about watching “unnecessary” content on Netflix. For example, İrem states that she watches “quality shows” on Netflix, such as David Fincher’s *Mindhunter*, however, she chooses “lighter” shows, such as romantic comedies or stand-up shows, as representatives of her Netflix experience. On the other hand, she defines MUBI as a more “festival-like” service that “keeps the mind occupied as in a festival.”

Similar to İrem, many participants consider Netflix as a leisure activity and a substitute for television. On the other hand, they generally describe watching MUBI as an intellectually challenging experience, which is not suitable for entertainment purposes or leisure time. Except for the participants that confidently define themselves as cinephiles, many users state that they cannot watch more than one or two films per week on MUBI since they feel like they are not in the mood for “dark,” “intellectual,” “arthouse,” “slow,” “serious” or “cerebral” films. The use of

⁴ A term referring to the act of cancelling the subscriptions to TV broadcasting services, cable or satellite.

these adjectives and their level of intensity change from participant to participant, primarily according to their relationship to film culture in general. For example, while self-entitled cinephiles avoid using the term “arthouse” as a category and etiquette, users with a lower film culture occasionally use the term to illustrate their “highbrow” taste and cultural identity.

The cultural hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1984: 366) that Netflix maintains by constructing itself as an alternative to traditional television alters as the service becomes more popular, globalized, and data-driven. Some users name this transformation as a kind of “mainstreamization” instead of sole popularization. Kemal, a 50-year-old creative director, states that “Netflix is not what it was before, it is a disaster now that it became more popular with a need to address very diverse audience segments.” Doruk, an 18-year-old university student, and Zeynep, a 29-year-old screenwriter, use the expression “being fooled by” new Netflix series, which are too predictable and formulaic. Participants’ personification of both services is an interesting pattern, which reflects their emotional attitude towards them. Related to the service’s brand identity, social media language, and interface design, the intensity of personification also changes. Contrary to Netflix, most of the participants address MUBI with a neutral attitude, in line with the service’s more serious and less “interactive” brand identity (or its “snobbish and pretentious attitude,” as Canan, a 29-year-old actress, states). While users personify Netflix, a service that boasts about its algorithmic capabilities, it is ironic that they are taking a more distant approach to MUBI, a service that emphasizes manual curation and “human touch” all the time.

In terms of the choice system, most of the users state that MUBI is more “neat,” “orderly,” “understandable,” and “accessible,” and they do not feel “lost” when they log into the service. There are two main factors that participants indicate in expressing their satisfaction: The simple and minimal design of the interface that does not strain the eyes and the limited number of films. In contrast, many users state they are “being lost” in Netflix because its interface is “messy,” “unpredictable,” and “sloppy.” Orhan, a self-entitled cinephile, explains how MUBI’s limited choice system is a “remedy” for the choice fatigue created by Netflix:

It’s good that a new film comes every day because it gives us some kind of discipline. This is kind of a remedy for the problem I mentioned for Netflix, looking for hundred things and then finding nothing at the end. MUBI’s selection is at least laconic.

Orhan argues that there is a kind of “Netflixization” in MUBI after the service introduced its ‘Library’ section, which includes films that stay in the catalog for more than 30 days. The relative “permanence” of the films in this section is actually a diversion from the MUBI’s initial promise of being “a Netflix for arthouse film.” The FAQ section of the MUBI’s website states that “in Library, you can stream films you missed the first time,” which contradicts MUBI’s strategy promoting scarcity and temporality, concepts that are associated with old cinephilia.

Another crucial point Orhan’s quote illustrates is the issue of discipline, which is actually a way to deal with temporality and the fleeting experience for the users. Some of the participants use similar phrases to describe how MUBI’s limited model works as a “ticking clock” and how it structures their viewing experience: “sophisticated,” “encouraging,” “like a task” or “a homework assignment,” “triggering,” “forcing,” “annoying,” “stressing.” The range of these phrases includes both positive and negative feelings, and sometimes participants use two opposing adjectives together. For example, İrem finds the limited time model both “encouraging” and “annoying”:

There is a contradiction with MUBI. The limited-time thing is both encouraging and annoying because I don’t always have the motivation to watch a particular film. If it was not limited, I would at least have a chance to find that motivation to watch that ‘hidden gem’ at the end of the day.

Similar to İrem, even the heaviest and most loyal users of MUBI among the participants have complicated feelings about the choice mechanism offered to them as a solution to the paradox of choice. Doruk, who is a very enthusiastic young film lover, talks about MUBI very fondly and states that he sometimes feels like he is not yet “ready” for films in the service’s catalog. He says that he “forces” himself to watch something before it “expires,” and this feeling is as if he is “completing a task.” MUBI’s limited-time model is a stress for the majority of the participants, yet, a few of them approach it in a more positive manner. Using the metaphor of “festival-like” to describe the temporality and scarcity of content in MUBI, these participants state that the film-per-a-day structure and the limited-time model give them a sense of rarity and make them feel like they are “keeping up” with a festival. Murat, a 54-year-old civil engineer, states why he finds this system “alluring”:

We cannot always have everything. Films being offered for a limited time create a fear of loss, and you feel like you need to watch them after a while. Human life is not that long to have too many options. That's why watching something stupid is a loss of time.

Murat's emphasis on "possession" illustrates how the audience's relationship with the "film object" changes as the technology of film does. The technology of streaming that turns the film into an intangible object (data) is retrospectively compared to the festival experience within a similar discourse of nostalgia, temporality, and loss. Murat also relates the discussion to the issue of choice (no time for "too many options") and builds a connection between quality and "curated choice." This is also parallel with Çakarel's definition of MUBI's purpose to "complete the experience with a very focused offering" (Morris, 2017) in the service's compensation for the paradox of choice.

In summary, MUBI's discursive framing of itself as the opposite of a mainstream/popular "other" ("Popular doesn't always mean good."⁵) finds its reflection on the audience too, sometimes in the form of opposition, sometimes in the form of completion, and sometimes in both. MUBI's "complementary solution" to Netflix by limiting the choice & control may be emblematic of the future direction of the industry. It can offer an alternative to deal with the intensified choice fatigue caused by the expansion of the VOD market with new and ambitious players. On the other hand, the intensity of adjectives users prefer to describe this limited choice, and the time model has many implications. It is not only the VOD technology that structures the audiences' viewing experience but also the identity, business model, and marketing rhetoric of the service. The crucial question that needs to be asked here is, why do the audiences let themselves be "disciplined" by this limited choice system in an era that encourages "flexible leisure" on extreme levels? If MUBI offers a solution to a system that makes people "choice fatigue," why do people subscribe to a platform that disciplines, forces, or causes stress? The following section examines possible reasons behind this "endurance" of the audiences and how they relate with the audience MUBI imagines and assumes.

⁵ help.mubi.com/article/21-what-is-mubi

Between “Too Popular and Too Niche”: Negotiating Taste

“What is MUBI?”

MUBI is a curated online cinema where you can watch, discover, and share great movies.

Our film experts hand-pick cult, classic, independent, and award-winning movies for you to watch on multiple devices at home and on the go. We also bring you editorial coverage of what’s new in cinema culture and let you share your passion for film and meet others who love it just as much as you.

MUBI strategically blends the discourses of old vs. new cinephilia and picks certain features from each tradition to create a technologically up-to-date but still culturally legitimate image. In doing so, it reinforces the long-standing cultural hierarchies between film & TV, arthouse & mainstream. While reproducing the discourse of artistic patronage, expert knowledge, and cultural gatekeeping that are the main characteristics of old cinephilia, it also emphasizes the requirements of the on-demand era, home viewing, mobility, and multiple screens, all associated with new cinephilia. Lastly, the service emphasizes the social aspect of cinephilia, emphasizing the word “passion” as a more direct reference to cinephilia in general.

When I asked the participants how they chose what to watch on MUBI, most of them stated that they first have a look at the brief Summary and Our Take sections. While the former gives a basic plotline, the latter is more about MUBI’s own critical appreciation of the film, together with the festival and awards info. Participants who define themselves as cinephiles and who are strict followers of “auteur cinema” are more critical of the curation and catalog of MUBI. Other participants who have a looser relationship with film culture mainly state that they “trust in” MUBI because it chooses films with “a certain quality.” Olcay, a 49-year-old engineer, states that she feels like “fewer films mean more quality” because it feels like these films are chosen more “neatly.” Buket, a 58-year-old environmental engineer, notes that she trusts in the curation because of “the festival information” that the service provides: “I chose films on MUBI after I have a look at its theme and the festivals it was screened. There are more artsy, old, and director/actor-oriented films there.” On the other hand, Kemal states that he watches MUBI

because he likes “difficult films.” Users who are less critical of the authority and patronage of the platform refer directly to cultural institutions such as festivals to define their experience and identity as MUBI viewers. Moreover, cinephiles are more critical of the catalog for different reasons. They use phrases such as “too popular/populist” and criticize the curatorial capabilities of the service and position themselves as superior to it. On the other hand, there is another group of participants which I refer to as “incompetent cinephiles,” who find the service “snobbish” or “too niche,” which evokes a feeling of “inadequacy” in them.

An emblematic case of bringing together the different views on the catalog is the Nuri Bilge Ceylan retrospective streamed in MUBI Turkey, which is part of the national cinema canon. Since Nuri Bilge Ceylan is one of the most popular and canonical arthouse directors of Turkey, his films are more widely available, watched, and discussed due to their critical acclaim in festivals such as Cannes. While some of the participants criticized the retrospective of MUBI Turkey for being “populist,” some users stated that they were happy to access his older films or rewatch them. On the other hand, while some of the users find the “Rediscovered” section or selections such as “New Brazilian Cinema” overly niche and unnecessary and put into the catalog “just to fill in blanks,” a few users stated that they are happy to discover films that they have never heard of, even though it is “risky.” Each pattern in these various reactions carries in itself an endeavor to define one’s own cinephile or audience identity in relation to the image created by MUBI itself, mainly in the form of critique or approval. The tastemaker/cultural gatekeeper identity that MUBI embarks on is both questioned and appreciated by the users, depending on how they imagine themselves as an audience with a certain taste. MUBI sometimes becomes a culturally legitimate alternative to Netflix as a service that is now mainstream and “too popular” and therefore functions as a tool “to compensate” for the loss of time that Netflix causes. Hayal states that she doesn’t like “bestseller-like movies that everyone watches”, therefore, she prefers MUBI because she feels like she improves her film culture. This recurring emphasis on the “educational” side of MUBI indicates an ongoing trust in traditional cultural institutions such as festivals and film criticism, and the service’s collaborations with such institutions (e.g BFI, Locarno Film Festival, Documentarist, Istanbul Film Festival) also increase their legitimacy in the eyes of users.

Some of the users that are more critical of the service approach the catalog as a way to reveal their own cinematic knowledge. Melis, a 25-year-old graduate student and a self-entitled

cinephile who has moved to France recently, criticizes the selection by MUBI Turkey in comparison to MUBI France's collection for showing too popular films "to attract wider audiences." Melis, who is studying film studies in Paris, is the only user that has a different geographical context in the sample. She is in a very "intense" cinephiliac environment loaded with mostly traditional notions of cinephilia. Criticizing MUBI's "popularization" moves to include national/international canon, she also applies her more "Westernized" gaze, comparing the Parisian film culture to a more local one. On the other hand, Kemal, another self-entitled cinephile, is more positive towards this attitude and suggests that in addition to the well-known films in the catalog that "one already should have watched," there are also undiscovered, very niche films that attract him. Lastly, a few users are critical of MUBI in the same way they are of Netflix, by emphasizing the commercial aspect of the service that sometimes disturbs them. Canan states that MUBI is also not that "innocent" and brings the political economy perspective in by reminding us that the audiences are basically "consumers" for MUBI:

MUBI also fools us too in a way and they are not that innocent. At the end of the day, its main purpose is to make money. No one gives you free art. Netflix does this really well and we accept it, no ads, high resolution. In MUBI, I don't think it deserves what I pay. They say 'we put some quality arthouse films here' But there are a few of them, who knows who chose it for what? I feel I'm being deceived by all this 'cool stuff' they offer.

Even though Canan's harsh critique is an outlier among the participants, many of the points she raised recurred throughout the interviews. Users are generally aware that many films in the catalog are there because of some etiquettes that give them cultural legitimacy, such as festivals they were screened at. Zeynep, a 29-year-old screenwriter, states that she generally does not "trust" the way the service presents and promotes its own films, so she generally looks for films on the internet before choosing what to watch since "there is no rule that all arthouse films need to be good."

While choosing what to watch in MUBI, users have several strategies/methods to avoid "risky" films that may be a loss of time for them. While some of the users tend to watch films by directors they are already familiar with, most of them look for a "second" curator such as a festival or a director/curator (such as Nicholas Winding Refn's restorations that were published by MUBI), or they follow both international and national film magazines or newspapers for their

suggestions within MUBI's catalog. Some of them are also biased towards certain countries which they think are in the catalog just to be "diverse and niche", giving examples from the selections such as New Brazilian Cinema or New Argentine Cinema.

Considering the local selections and collaborations with festivals such as Antalya and Istanbul Film Festivals and Documentarist, which were all launched during the Covid-19 pandemic, many users state that the most interesting selections were those because there are films that they are familiar with. Emre states that it is actually the independent local films that are hard to find online and get lost easily, so MUBI's selections of directors, such as Özcan Alper, Pelin Esmer, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan, are highly valuable for him as a cinephile. Even though Çakarel states that they also use "data" to see geographical preferences, and in Turkey, people tend to watch Middle Eastern films, as Emre and many users suggest, it is not only about interest in local content but also about the issue of accessibility.

The critical attitude of the audience towards both the content itself and the way it is curated & presented affirms that the users are not "uncritical adopters" once again (Dijck, 2013). Even though their experience is structured by the expertise discourse of MUBI and the elegant interface design that reinforces the service's role as "a trusted tastemaker and cultural advisor", users utilize tools of the internet actively to search for the content they watch. Therefore, the empowered agency" and increased cinematic knowledge discussed for "cinephilia 2.0" (Jullier and Leveratto, 2012) is not only a consequence of the choice & control "endowed" by the industry. The audience gains control both from "above" and "below" (Biltereyst & Meers, 2011), through a combination of the technological opportunities, increased access and the diminishing role of the traditional cultural gatekeepers. Lastly, the next section focuses on the users' contestation of the viewing experience "prescribed" by the service as a part of the recreation of "cinephiliac desires."

Recreating "The Cinematic Experience"

A general sentiment shared among the participants is that MUBI shows films that require a certain intellectual engagement, labor, and concentration. Apart from the accuracy of this statement, it is certain that the service uses specific discursive tools to create this perception that is discussed above and also structures the viewing experience. This section is going to explore different ways users watch films on MUBI and strategies they use to "concentrate" and create a

“cinematic experience,” which evokes Casetti’s definition of a more “mobile spectator who can nonetheless isolate himself from his context and concentrate on what he is seeing” and “also responds to a desire to re-create the movie theater in (his) living room” (Casetti, 2015: 7). In its marketing rhetoric, MUBI lets its users “watch on multiple devices at home and on the go” and “believes cinema should be viewed on screens of all shapes and sizes.” However, does the audience quickly adapt to MUBI’s promise of mobility and small screens? Is the technological infrastructure only an indicator of the viewing experience, or is the content/form of what is watched also significant? One of the most interesting patterns shared among the users is the viewing environment they create for watching films on MUBI.

While most of the participants define their viewing experience as the opposite of what they do with Netflix, they especially emphasize the aspect of “concentration.” Users have several strategies to create what they call a “cinematic experience.” Except for one participant, who sometimes watches MUBI with her boyfriend, all of the participants watch the platform on their own in order to concentrate properly. They also prefer to watch the service alone because they think watching a film on MUBI with family or friends is “risky,” as İrem calls it, and the film can be “too boring or weird” for them. Although they generally experience films individually or with their partners/families (also due to the pandemic situation), they sometimes restore their ties with the cinephile community online. Osman, an outlier in the sample as a blue-collar worker who watches MUBI on his cell phone because he doesn’t have a laptop, states the importance of the online cinephile community, which he names the “Film Twitter.” Some of the members of the sample also know each other from “Film Twitter,” which is basically a more coincidental, dispersed, and unregulated version of a forum. Even though “the social and ceremonial” aspect of film viewing is not really crucial for the users as it is in the older generations of cinephilia, a certain longing for theater experience reveals itself in users’ attempt to “recreate the experience.” Many interviewees stated that they turn the lights off and put their phones on silent or away not to be distracted. The users that have big screens or projectors watch MUBI on these devices instead of small screens of laptops, iPads, or smartphones that they generally use for watching Netflix. Doruk, who tried watching MUBI on his smartphone, explains why he could not do it after a while:

I used to spend 1.5 hours in traffic every day on my way to school, it's the average duration of a film. So I decided to watch a film on MUBI every day on my way. After a while, I realized that people look at my screen on the bus while I'm watching a film. They are art films so that they may include sexually explicit scenes, what can I do in such a situation? Will I censor it with my hand, fast forward? It would be weird; also, I couldn't enter the world of the film properly so I couldn't do it.

As the youngest participant, Doruk is technologically very literate and is used to watching content on many different screen sizes. However, the content of the platform still determines his watching experience. As a counter-example for Casetti's "isolated mobile spectators," who "succeed in isolating themselves in an environment, in recuperating the magnificence of images, in concentrating on a story, and in enjoying the reality that reappears on these new screens" (Casetti, 2015: 31), Doruk "fails" to be isolated and recreate the cinematic experience in his phone, due to environmental factors.

Similar to Doruk, Melis states that before she starts watching something on MUBI, she gets "ready" because it is a special time for her. However, she also adds that she does the same thing for Netflix too if she is going to watch a cult or classic film, emphasizing the content as the main determining factor of her viewing habits. Therefore, even though the services or the VOD industry imagines its ideal audience as a technologically versatile one, ready to consume content anywhere, anytime, and in "any screen size," audiences do not always follow the directions or instructions that are given to them by the industrial "manuals."

Conclusion

In her discussion on the use of digital devices in movie theaters and festivals, Stevens states that "digital technology poses the greatest disruption and contestation of contemporary auditorium-based cinephilic experience" and suggests that "with each new arrival [of a new technology], the question of what constitutes the 'proper' way to engage with the cinematic image has come under review and debate." (2017:672). Following the disruption Netflix caused for the market, on-demand era audiences are flooded with different forms of content coming from competing services. While TV content became more popular and mainstream than ever, not only the question of "what is the proper way to watch a film?" but also the question of "what is a proper film?" came under review. While having enjoyed being a "culturally legitimate" medium

for almost a century, films are now contested with a TV “born from its ashes,” more global and more accessible than ever before.

Choice and control, two key concepts of the on-demand era, gained a new layer of meaning with the proliferation of VOD platforms and the “indefinite” options they offer. The main tension has been between “the disruptive innovators” that give more control & choice to the users through ancillary technologies and the traditional media industry trying to limit or recapture them. In addition to this tension between industrial players, the on-demand era is currently witnessing a paradox of choice on the side of the audience due to the overabundance of physically and financially accessible content. This research explores this assumed paradox through the case of MUBI, a platform that promotes itself with its very own “solution” to the paradox: Limited and curated content. MUBI also serves as an emblematic product of the on-demand era, an online streaming platform blending new media delivery formats with traditional cultural gatekeeping practices, a case exemplifying how “established practices in the physical media market have been relocated online” (Nikdel and Smits, 2018: 1).

Even though MUBI imagines its audience as a part of “new cinephilia,” as this study shows, the users of the service are very diverse in terms of their relationship with films. Since Netflix has “normalized” watching on-demand content on TV sets through smart TVs or intermediary devices such as AppleTV, many other online platforms are now available to more traditional viewers that are not used to accessing on-demand content through laptops or smartphones. Older generations or traditional TV audiences also have a chance to encounter a niche platform like MUBI alongside Netflix or Amazon since the different platforms are positioned on the screen of the smart TV like “different TV channels,” as one participant states. Even though the viewing preferences and practices of the audience are highly related to the technological infrastructure they have (since many users state that they use Netflix and MUBI because it is “easier” to watch something on them instead of finding or downloading it online), it is not only limited to it. As the findings of the study suggest, viewers try to maintain their older viewing habits, such as the “cinematic experience,” both according to the platform and content they watch, and there is a certain continuity from analog to digital. Users are definitely more critical and less adaptive than imagined by the industry towards the constantly changing and diversifying options to consume more content. They are highly aware that more choice and control is not equal to more empowerment or agency, and some of them are critical of not only

the data-based “profiles” and recommendations of Netflix but also the artistic patronage and curated model of MUBI too.

Even though MUBI discursively maintains the long-standing dichotomies of niche-mainstream, arthouse-popular cinema, or high-lowbrow culture, the users experience these dichotomies in a more complex way according to their multiple subject positions. In the case of MUBI, users’ recurring emphasis on their emotional and intellectual labor is not only related to their choice fatigue. It also becomes a way to challenge MUBI’s artistic patronage and the way industry frames audiences as consumers with predictable and knowable tastes who prioritize technological convenience.

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CHAPTER 4

Paper I. Ildır, Aslı, and Ipek A. Çelik Rappas (2022) "Netflix in Turkey: Localization and audience expectations from video on demand." *Convergence* 28.1: 255-271.

The third empirical chapter focuses on taste and habits of the local VOD audience in Turkey specifically. This article looks at the local VOD industry and the audience to delve deeper into this multi-centered global flow. Drawing on in-depth interviews with users of Netflix Turkey and the Turkish streaming service BluTV, it explores the emergence and impact of VOD in Turkey. It is interested in how VOD is adopted, negotiated, reformulated, and received in a non-Western context where global and local services compete, substitute, and emulate each other. The article is specifically interested in the complexity of local taste and argues that local content services offer a central juncture through which audiences articulate their larger expectations from VODs.

This paper is a co-authored article written with Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ipek Çelik Rappas.

Netflix in Turkey: Localization and Audience Expectations from Video on Demand

"Now, *they* will be watching *our* shows with subtitles: Turkish TV series and movies are currently broadcast in 190 countries."

This is a slogan used in one of the latest marketing campaigns of Netflix Turkey in 2021 and was seen on billboards all over the country, advertisement videos on Youtube and social media. The slogan does not only highlight Netflix's localization efforts through purchasing local films and TV shows and the intensifying production of local Netflix originals, but it also underlines how these efforts have global resonance, introducing international audiences into Turkish shows. There is no novelty in the internationalization aspect, as Turkish TV series have already been heavily exported globally (Vivarelli, 2017). However, the ad campaign shows how significant it is for Netflix to shape its Turkish audience's understanding of the platform's localization efforts, as this understanding often shapes the users' larger expectations from the platform.

This article examines the emergence and impact of Netflix in the Turkish VOD market following its launch in 2016 and analyzes how local audiences perceive the platform's localization efforts. As Netflix offerings consist predominantly of TV series, it is significant to explore its reception in a country with a strong culture of TV series production and consumption. Netflix's entrance into the Turkish market in 2016 coincided with the launch of the leading local VOD platform in Turkey, BluTV, which highly influenced the localization policy of Netflix as its main competitor. We examine how these two platforms shape their branding, production of local originals, local and global offerings, and articulate localization policies.

Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted online in March and April 2020 with twenty users of Netflix Turkey and BluTV, as well as the analysis of press releases and original TV series produced by these platforms, this study explores audience expectations from VODs in a non-Western context. We ask the following research questions: Why would VOD platforms appeal to a local audience in a country with a strong traditional network TV and piracy culture? How are the local audiences'

social, psychological, and technological needs and expectations from Netflix articulated in relation to their experience of traditional network TV, local VODs such as BluTV, TV and internet regulation/censorship, and informal networks/piracy? In response to these audience needs and expectations, how do global and local VODs adapt their offerings in Turkey?

In order to respond to these questions, we explore Turkish audiences' insight into what VOD means to them and what they think of the VOD content offered by the global and local platforms, in comparison to the platforms' own marketing discourses. The article argues that a) the local content (both original and acquired) that platforms offer is a central juncture through which audiences articulate their larger expectations from VODs, and b) Netflix's localization attempts do not always correspond with the audience demand; it is heavily critiqued and often rejected by the local audience.

The local audience's preference or refusal of certain local content by VOD platforms is examined through Uses & Gratifications theory since "emerging technologies provide users with a wider range of source selection and channels of information, individuals are selecting a media repertoire in those areas of most interest" (Ruggiero, 2000). Following the latest applications of uses-and-gratifications theory for new media -also named as "Uses and Grats 2.0" by Sundar & Limperos (2013) - we argue that discussing and comparing VOD platforms on a global and local scale offers us a new way to rethink "active audience," not only in terms of social and psychological factors but also technological and medium-related factors. As our understanding of television has been drastically changing with the introduction of digital platforms and online streaming, there has emerged a necessity to redefine the 'TV audience' and differentiate between their needs, practices, and gratifications. In this article, we propose the expectations, needs, and gratifications of VOD audiences depend on multiple contextual factors: Their interpretation of local VOD content in relation to their cultural experience with broadcast TV, their technological needs such as instant access to global content and time/space shifting opportunities, and lastly the political context and policies such as the internet regulation and censorship.

Background

Regulating VOD, TV, and the Internet in Turkey

Turkey was among the 130 countries that Netflix included in its rapid internationalization strategy announced at the Consumer Electronics Show in January 2016 (Netflix, 2016). Doğan Media Group, a Turkish media conglomerate, introduced BluTV also in 2016, around the same time as Netflix's entry into the Turkish market, as the first local subscription-based VOD platform also producing original content.¹ Until 2019, these VOD platforms promised a censor-free watching experience for Turkish audiences. According to a new regulation promulgated in August 2019 (Resmi Gazete, 2019), the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTSC) is now able to monitor and regulate web broadcasts in Turkey, including video sharing sites such as Youtube and Vimeo as well as VOD platforms. The decision caused a severe backlash on social media, especially on Twitter under #DontTouchMyNetflix, #DonttouchmyBluTV, and #Notocensorship hashtags.

Before the RTSC monitoring law passed, *Yeni Akit*, a conservative newspaper, had published homophobic and trans-phobic articles titled "The Trap of Perverts: Netflix" (2019) and "Netflix and the Dangers of Homosexual Perversion" (2019), targeting the digital platforms and inviting authorities to implement sanctions. The former article states, "No authority regulates this digital platform that shakes the throne of television" (Yeni Akit, 2019a). Beyond the conservative arguments to protect 'public morality' lays a premise of protecting the "regulated" local TV against the "unregulated" international flows.

2019 RTSC censorship on VOD platforms is a continuation of regulatory practices on the media environment that have already been applied on cable TV and the internet since the mid-2000s. Strict RTSC censorship policies (censoring nudity and sex scenes, blurring cigarette and alcohol use, beeping strong language) were promulgated in 2008, following a 2007 law (Resmi Gazete, 2007) that enabled government authorities to

monitor the internet and temporarily block websites such as Wikipedia and Twitter. A draft law that was introduced in 2011 (Resmi Gazete, 2011) which required mandatory filters (family, child, domestic, and standard) for internet service providers started a protest in online platforms with the slogan "Don't Touch My Internet," similar to the #DontTouchMyNetflix campaign. In 2014 the application of this law became easier when authorities such as the Telecommunications Communication Presidency and the Ministry of Transport, Maritime Affairs, and Communication were allowed to take websites down in 24 hours without a court order. These regulations resulted in the frequent use of VPN, DNS and proxy services in addition to the increase of pirated content in Turkey (Bozdag, 2016: 130).

After the RTSC law that regulates the subscription-based online streaming platforms passed in August 2019, Netflix declared that it is committed to remaining in the Turkish market, which meant that it would, at some point, accept to implement the new regulations that censor its content. Netflix Turkey canceled the release of a new Turkish original, *If Only*, in July 2020, allegedly due to the government's objection to a gay character in the story. Screenwriter Ece Yorenc states that the government refused to grant the series the necessary license to be broadcasted, which can be considered as one of the first applications of VOD censorship law: "Due to a gay character, permission to film the series was not granted and this is very frightening for the future" (2020).

Digital Piracy in Turkey

The increasing number of laws and practices of media censorship, along with other reasons such as the high price of tickets in multiplexes, the limited number of films released in theaters, and limited offerings and many commercials the audience is exposed to on network TV, led to demand for illegal streaming or downloading of film and TV content in Turkey. MUSO, the global authority on digital piracy, reports that in 2017, there have been 11.9 billion visits to piracy websites across music, TV and film, publishing, and software in Turkey, which ranks fifth in the world (MUSO, 2017). The report also mentions that the global increase of VOD platforms has the counterintuitive effect of increasing piracy. International Intellectual Property Alliance 2017 report on

Turkey states, "Piracy issues continue to plague the Turkish marketplace... Digital piracy—via the Internet, mobile phones, peer-to-peer (P2P), BitTorrent and linking and top sites—permeates the marketplace" (quoted in Dziadul, 2017). An EU report titled "Counterfeit and Piracy Watch List" shows that one of the most popular piracy sites (<http://Fullhdfilmizlesene.org>) in Turkey had 450,9 million total visits from April 2017 to April 2018 (European Commission, 2018).

Television Viewership in Turkey

Despite the censorship and availability of a large number of contents on illegal platforms, network TV still has a strong viewership. According to the research among over 2000 participants conducted by RTSC in 2018 (RTUK, 2018), in Turkey, the average time spent on TV viewing is 3,5 hours per day, which is comparable to the average TV consumption in countries that are among the top ten who watch TV most (Maina Wambugu, 2018).² Four hundred hours of TV series are screened weekly in Turkey, and their global export brought annual revenue of 350 million dollars in 2016, making the country the second-largest exporter of scripted TV content after the US (Vivarelli, 2017)—a broad global appeal that Netflix takes into account in its selection of Turkish series offerings and increasing production of Turkish originals. Each Turkish TV series is screened within a three-hour slot, with an average of two hours of scripted material and one hour of advertisement, often screened again during daytime broadcasting. These series range from period dramas such as *Magnificent Century* (2011-2014) that represent the Ottoman court to melodramas such as *1001 Nights* (2006-2009) that portray rich boy-poor girl romance.

Turkish TV landscape and the quality of programming have also been affected by the introduction of a new rating system in 2012, which created a less stable environment for media producers.³ TV series started to be canceled after several episodes, the duration of each episode increased as more ads are shown during the screening to compensate for the expenses of the show (Bulut, 2016). In this larger Turkish TV and digital media context of censorship, unpredictability, and alleged lack of quality, our research shows that VOD platforms are expected to provide an alternative media space. Especially for young

urbanites whom we interviewed, VODs are demanded to offer alternatives a) beyond network TV offerings subject to censorship and lacking, in their opinion, global quality standards and b) beyond pirate sites that do not propose a quality viewing experience with their spam links and adware.

Literature Review

Exploring strategies of localization of global VOD and other media platforms in their expanding territories is significant since "locality of taste" is "stubborn," and especially when it comes to the TV audience, "the global will not simply displace the local" (Lobato, 2019: 109). Lobato explains that every local market offers new challenges; while in Japan, the company produced original anime series to attract users, in India, the multiplicity of languages, the strength of the local film industry, the relative lack of internet infrastructure, and high pricing make Netflix a premium service reserved for affluent classes. In countries with strong network TV cultures such as the UK and Germany where "cord-cutting" (Tyron, 2013) is not a common practice, Netflix serves as a complementary service rather than a replacement. Ward explains that in the UK, "[Netflix's] approach has been characterized more by *assimilation* and *integration* with the existing local television ecosystem, rather than on any claim to supersede it" (original emphases, 2016: 220). Stiegler similarly considers Netflix as a platform that situates itself in parallel with (rather than in opposition to) network TV culture in Germany: "Netflix tries to stick to traditional consumer behaviors in Germany, for example, using the same German dubbing actors known already from previous non-Netflix productions" (2016: 242). In both European and Asian markets, what concerns audiences and scholars is often the abundance of US content compared to the relative scarcity of local shows (Lobato, 2019: 135).

Netflix's entry into the Turkish market was disappointing for the local audience for similar reasons: "...with a very limited catalog which was especially poor in local content, the company gave the impression that it had nothing to expect from its potential Turkish audience who have been binge-watching for years Netflix mainstream original

series...through illegal streaming platforms" (Vitrinel, 2018: 6). Vitrinel also points out that Netflix's Turkish catalog aspires for a particular locality based on "widespread taste for national series" (2018: 6), a locality, as will be discussed below, that seems to attract a global audience, and is not necessarily appealing to Netflix's Turkish users.⁴ Vitrinel introduces an element that often lacks in scholarship on localization of Netflix, an element that we explore further in this article: the complexity of local taste and the audience's search for a quality experience.

Literature on quality TV and the way Netflix situates itself within this definition are extensive (Baran, 2017; Jenner, 2015; Lobato, 2019; Newman & Levine, 2012). While Baran describes "quality" as a narrative trait ("higher production values, a cinematic audiovisual style, complex and controversial storylines, genre hybridity, and reflexivity") (2017), Jenner points out the significance of the audience perspective by emphasizing "binge-worthiness" as "viewers use the recognition of a series as 'quality' to justify or alleviate guilt over binge-watching" (2015: 11). Levine and Newman focus on how quality is defined as the opposite of network TV associated with lower-class, women and seriality: "The new conception of TV as a good cultural object rejects every characteristic of the pre-convergence-era medium, and new technologies and textualities are seen as progressing beyond and improving upon this past" (2012: 7). Even though Netflix describes itself as "a global Internet TV network," in its discourse and iconography television "is being simultaneously re-imagined, integrated, erased and remediated" (Lobato, 2019: 43).

Binge-worthiness, opposition to network TV, and high production values are equally significant to understand the definition of quality in Turkey, but the context of censorship and wide availability of illegal sites are local complexities that extend this definition. Local interpretations of taste are frequently discussed through exploring how Netflix's catalog interprets "local". Baschiera and Re-emphasize that in UK and Italian catalogs, national categorizations are used as labels that guarantee quality—such as "British crime shows" or "Italian cinema" (2018: 408)—but are often limited and lead the user back to the global category. Steigler explains that Netflix's discourse of quality offerings is part of a strategy to justify its limited local options in the German catalog (2016). The literature

on Netflix's localization predominantly explores the variety of local content (and lack thereof) that the global VOD platform offers, often assuming that local Netflix audience demands local content (Barra, 2017; Baschiera & Valentina 2018; Lobato, 2019; Ward, 2016). This article argues that locality is not something that is unquestionably desired and accepted by the audience; rather, it depends on the context determined by several variables: The traditional TV culture, alternative content offered by other VOD platforms, availability of free content through piracy, and peer-to-peer sharing, and lastly media regulation policies.

Less frequently explored in the literature on Netflix's localization are the needs and experiences of local Netflix users themselves. As recent research on viewing habits of Netflix UK shows, audience reception is based on what is available on network TV and on other VOD platforms (Theodoropoulou, 2017). At times the focus solely on Netflix and its content results in avoiding how other VOD options, especially the local, non-US ones, that situate themselves in relation to the international platform and vice versa.⁵

In what follows we examine how Netflix is situated (and how users/ audiences situate it) within a non-Western context in competition and in dialogue with another VOD platform, internet and TV regulations, and pirate sites. Elizabeth Evans and Paul McDonald explain that media research needs to "recognize and interrogate profound differences in how digital media is deployed, organized, monetized, used, adopted, understood, and evaluated across local, international or regional contexts" (2014: 159). Lobato's work on Netflix's internationalization and its implications on global TV studies also acknowledge that television culture is dependent on space, "Television is still bounded and 'located' in all kinds of ways" (2019: 11), and relatedly Netflix cannot be a "consistent object" but changes from market to market. In establishing this difference, however, exploring Netflix's relation with traditional broadcasting and analyzing the platform's content may not be sufficient to understand local TV dynamics. In the following sections, after providing our methodology, we explore how both global *and* local VOD platforms negotiate locality and quality in dialogue and also examine the ways that Turkish VOD audiences define these terms.

Methodology

During the research, we interviewed ten men and ten women whose ages range from 18 to 60. All interviewees belong to the middle class, have a high education level (university graduate degree), and have the economic power to afford a subscription to several platforms. We conducted the interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic since this is a period, as most of the interviewees confirm, of increased VOD consumption. Some of the interviewees preferred to remain anonymous, so pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

Starting the interviews with preplanned and standardized questions, we kept the flow of the interviews flexible and semi-standardized, trying not to impose "any *a priori* categorizations which might limit the field of inquiry" (Punch, 1998: 178). Semi-structured interviews with the users of the platforms opened a space for them to express the social-psychological factors in their selection process and describe their viewing experience while also not losing our focus on some specific aspects of the local content offered by the digital platforms. In addition to the precoded categories such as the factors affecting the selection process, content preferences, and daily habits of watching the platforms, we also used categories that emerged through the flow, which affected the coding and analysis of interviews as discussed below.

We have selected our interviewees through the snowball sampling method, from the highly educated and urbanite internet users, an audience segment that no longer prefers what they call "regular/traditional/cable TV" and adopts VOD as a part of their daily life. Our inquiry towards their selection process includes questions regarding their social, psychological, and technological needs and experience with the platforms: their content preferences, the viewing environment they prefer, the specifics of their on-demand watching process (regarding practices such as binge-watching, time-shifting, and cord-cutting), their opinion on the local content produced both by Netflix and other

platforms, their experience with the interface, recommendation system, special curations and algorithmic infrastructure of the platforms and the change in their content/platform preferences in the presence of family and friends. Lastly, we inquired into how their selection process is affected by internet laws and censorship, availability of pirate sites, as well as the particular temporal condition—pandemic situation and quarantine circumstances.

The interviews were coded and analyzed according to the Miles and Huberman (1994) approach. Starting with basic category labels, which are mainly "descriptive codes with little interpretation" prior to interviews, we added inferential/pattern codes in the later phase of our analysis. These pattern codes were composed of both recurring themes in the interviews and also some leitmotifs, sometimes occurring through the use of a particular word by the interviewees. While we used our main categories to structure the main chapters of our research, our main hypothesis and argument regarding the complexity of local taste were highly related to these pattern codes obtained in an earlier stage of the research. As the patterns became more apparent, a process of "periodic rereading" applied to earlier interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 57) in order to find some causal links between the pre-coded categories and secondary pattern codes. Not only the common patterns but also the differences, subcategories, and outliers helped us to portray a rich, heterogeneous and inconsistent audience sample, helping us to deconstruct the simplistic and sometimes essentialist conception of "local/locality" in return.

Data and Discussion

Localization of Netflix in Turkey and Audience Expectations

In December 2016, Netflix announced its entry into the Turkish market with a blog post on its website emphasizing its locality, "Netflix Is Now Truly Turkish" (Netflix, 2016), and mentioning the availability of Turkish dubbing and subtitle options. Soon after its launch, Netflix acquired complete seasons of Turkish series that have been hugely

popular at the time of their broadcasting on network TV, shows belonging to varying genres such as comedy *Leyla and Mecnun* (2011-2014), crime drama *Behzat C.* (2010-2013) and historical period dramas such as *Magnificent Century* (2011-2014) and *Resurrection: Ertugrul* (2014-). Most of these shows have been globally popular and previously exported to many regions, including the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. Bhutto evaluates the international success of Turkish series as "a sign of the way new forms of mass culture from the east – from Bollywood to K-pop – are challenging the dominance of American pop culture in the 21st century" (2019) and gives the most famous example of *Magnificent Century* which has been seen by more than 500 million people worldwide as she states: "The foreign press called it an 'Ottoman-era Sex and the City' and compared it to a real-life *Game of Thrones*" (2019). For such series that have already been screened on Turkish TV and exported, Netflix Turkey serves as an interface that provides them for a wider range of international audiences interested in global content. Most of these shows receive enthusiastic Tweets from users abroad, including those by stars such as Cardi B, who recently commented on the death of one of the main characters in *Magnificent Century*: "I couldn't even sleep. Thinking about Hurrem's death. I feel so heartbroken. This is crazy" (@iamcardib, 07/07/2020).

Since such series are associated with traditional network TV, Netflix Turkey users either do not pay attention to this content or underline that the platform shall offer "quality TV" defined as distinct from "traditional" TV. Netflix users we interviewed target the quality of Netflix originals produced in Turkey and berate them for being too similar to network TV offerings and targeting regional markets. Zeynep, a 29-year-old scriptwriter, states:

Netflix Turkey originals are very low-quality because they target the Turkish and Middle Eastern market, and they do not have any reason to go beyond what we are used to seeing on traditional TV. Turkish originals are always based on specific formulas, and this can also be observed on the narrative level too. It is a pity because Netflix can produce with low production costs, thanks to the favorable exchange rates.

Zeynep describes "traditional audience" tastes in Turkey and the Middle East as "low-quality" at the same time as she excludes her own tastes from those of the country and the region. She also criticizes Netflix for going formulaic even when high-quality local series can be produced affordably in Turkey. Similar to Zeynep, most of the interviewees complain about the genre-based formulaic narrative structures in Netflix originals. Emre, a 40-year-old editor, describes Netflix Turkey originals as "fantasy dramas with an orientalist historical touch":

Netflix Turkey originals are produced with the purpose of producing something for the "other parts" of the world, like the Middle East, that is why they are very low quality. They are based on some textbook definitions: "Turkey as a country between two cultures, having Islam, but also a Westernized face..." That is why they always include some mythological, religious, or archaeological stuff.

While both users criticize Netflix for stereotyping the local, they themselves appeal to clichés about Middle Eastern audiences. The users especially criticize the first Netflix Turkey original, *The Protector*, a drama fantasy series featuring a young 'superhero,' taking place mainly in the historical parts of Istanbul. The producer of this series, O3 Medya, has been known for their popular TV Series *Wounded Love*, a period drama set in the 1920s (*Vatanım Sensin*, 2016-2018) and *Bride of Istanbul*, a rich boy-poor girl romance drama, a big hit in Israeli TV (*İstanbulu Gelin*, 2017-2019) (Melamed, 2019). The blog post that announced the first Netflix original, *The Protector*, recalls tourism commercials and also reflects the users' concerns about the orientalist approach: "a hero-driven action story with Ottoman and Turkish legend and history (...) will explore the rich cultural history of Istanbul and take the audience on a riveting journey into the heart of this magical city (...)" (Netflix, 2017). The hero, Hakan, is a young man with superpowers and has a mission to protect Istanbul from the 'Immortals' who aim to destroy the city. The story has its roots in the Ottoman Empire, and most action takes place in tourist attractions such as the Grand Bazaar and Basilica Cistern. Shots of skyscrapers and mosques are juxtaposed to emphasize that Hakan does not only 'save' the contemporary city but also its historical heritage.

The Protector seems to fit Netflix's declared interest in producing "local stories with global interest" (cited in Barra, 2017: 24). From its international audience, the show received mostly enthusiastic comments about its representation of Istanbul. A review on *Decider* recommends the show as a production that "...breaks Netflix's cycle of depressing and cynical international dramas" and as "one of the winter's most engaging shows" and states that "...the idea of this ancient battle taking place in modern Istanbul is very intriguing" (Keller, 2018). Most spectators in Turkey, however, reveal their disappointment with *The Protector*. Most users that we interviewed state that it was almost "intolerable" to watch the series. Emre explains that the series was so bad that some of his friends watched to tease it. Defne, a 24-year-old student, states that *The Protector* feels like it is written "by someone foreign to someone foreign." While most of the users refused to continue watching the series after they gave it a chance, some users watched it only because it is a Turkish original. Melih underlines that he was curious about a Netflix Turkish original taking place in Istanbul but is disappointed with it:

Even though it is interesting to watch a fantasy series in Istanbul in theory, it lacks the decades of graphic novel tradition that the American productions in the fantasy genre are based on. I like how they try to adapt the structure of "hero's journey" that we know from American series to local stories, but it does not work because it is poorly written.

His comments reveal Turkish audiences' curiosity for Netflix's local productions, which often turns into a disappointment. Most users identify themselves as part of a global quality TV audience familiar with "American productions," structures, and conventions, and therefore distinct from "traditional" TV viewers. Arda, a 29-year-old coordinator, working in civil society, explains why he prefers Netflix over Turkish TV: "I think Netflix is *exactly* the same thing with TV, but of course not with Turkish TV! I watch Netflix instead of TV because there is no censorship and there is more diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity." Even though Arda sees Netflix as an extension or a digital version of "traditional" TV, he still prefers it to Turkish TV. His choice shows how the freedom of content together with "diversity" becomes a crucial part of quality in a local context where there is censorship on media.

Canan, a regular Netflix Turkey user who also happens to be an actress performing in Turkish TV series, comments on how Netflix fails to achieve the quality of its US or European originals in its Turkish productions:

In my opinion, the “quality” of a TV show is about how the creators use the advantages and artistic freedom provided by digital platforms. The creators perceive freedom in Netflix Turkey originals as follows: "Oh, we can show people swearing, drinking alcohol, and kissing!" These stories are still about love, and there is no other theme. By using some local stars, they think that it will all work out. I am not talking about that kind of freedom.

She mentions how Netflix's Turkish originals center around a romantic plot and are marketed through stars, implying that they are not distinct from traditional melodramas in Turkish broadcast TV. While expecting content beyond traditional narratives, Canan also complains about how producers "misinterpret" the freedom that digital platforms provide. These platforms in Turkey have been, so far, less regulated than the broadcast, satellite, and cable TV, which are tightly monitored by Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTSC) and are censored on a regular basis. Canan's comments on Netflix originals in which "freedom from censorship" is confined to the use of alcohol and drugs or sexually explicit scenes reveal her expectation that the platform offers quality beyond traditional TV narratives that are bounded by recurring genre tropes.

Canan's explanations reveal that VOD audiences' tastes are shaped by factors ranging from the original content offered by traditional network TV to structural constraints such as censorship and regulation policies. How audiences define, appreciate or criticize the locality depends on their experience with these factors, which in turn constitutes "the local" as particular, changeable, and inconsistent. The different opinions in our audience sample on what is/what should be local or localized content also reflect the heterogeneity of the VOD audiences. Locality, a slippery term for TV studies, becomes an analytical tool to contemplate audience reception of VOD platforms' content and examine their expectations while paying attention to their own definition of the locality.

Netflix users in Turkey evaluate their experience and the limits thereof, not only through comparison with network TV and other VODs but also in relation to the content available on illegal sites. Berk, a 30-year-old computer engineer, complains about the regional differences and inadequate content: “Netflix could not meet my expectations because there is a huge difference between the US and Turkish catalog. I even tried to find the best VPN service to access Netflix USA, but at some point, I asked myself, ‘Why bother? Just download it via torrent.’” Canan criticizes the popularization of the platform over pirate sites that provide better quality content and claims that this popularity is due to the VOD’s rendering the audience “lazy”:

Not everything is on Netflix Turkey, and their catalog is random. People are watching series on Netflix because it is ready for them to watch; they are too lazy to discover and find other stuff through pirate sites like in the past when there was no Netflix. Now they complain about ads or low-quality images. Netflix is becoming like traditional TV, and everyone is watching the same series. I do not want to watch something because it is on Netflix or because everybody watches it. I generally use illegal streaming sites and watch according to the specific content I look for.

Canan distinguishes herself from not only the traditional TV audience but also from a conception of Netflix users that is similar to “lazy” TV audience, the so-called couch potatoes, a derogatory phrase attributed to network TV users by referring to their alleged passivity and lack of interest for quality content. These critiques reveal the initial expectation of Turkish users that Netflix provides unlimited, original, and mainly global rather than local content. Geo-blocking and the late arrival of content due to local streaming rights become a source of irritation, and the users are quick to raise the “option” of pirated content and insist that Netflix shall fulfill its promise of unlimited content and free choice. For Turkish users, the demand for diversity of content, along with mobility and time-shifting opportunities, also means freedom from censorship. Several interviewees use the word “courage” to define their expectation from Netflix Turkey as an alternative to network TV, not only in terms of quality but also in terms of overriding media regulations. Netflix Turkey users’ comments reveal that they value the platform for its “globalness,” allowing them to access global shows in a timely and uncensored manner. Users’ preference of global (though mainly American) shows over

local Netflix originals emerges from the assumed low quality of the local Netflix originals.

Netflix for “Them,” BluTV for “Us”: Demanding Quality

Melih, a regular Netflix user and a 40-year-old video game designer, similarly criticizes Netflix Turkey originals, arguing that "poorly written" Hollywood formulas only produce "unoriginal" narratives. Stating his opinion on Netflix in a comparative manner, Melih brings BluTV into the picture and emphasizes how its approach to locality drastically differs from its international counterpart:

Netflix Turkey originals are “rootless,” and their motivations do not originate from genuinely local issues. They are either poorly written or adapted from second-class pulp fiction or fantasy novels. They do not satisfy me at a narrative level. BluTV productions, on the other hand, are more genuinely local because most of their creators come from a local tradition of theater and art-house cinema, and they are not writing Hollywood conventions.

The value judgments over Netflix local originals quality is often conveyed through comparing them with those of local VOD platforms, as Melih further states: “Netflix Turkey originals feel like they try so hard to be qualified for ‘Netflix’ and that they are authentic. However, BluTV originals are not interested in “superhero-ish” fantasy stuff. Instead, they aim to tell local stories and issues. They try to adopt an artistic perspective.”

Melih’s comment shows that the audiences are not necessarily against the “locality” of the show but against what is provided to them as local, and there is a certain desire to align “local” with “artistic” and “authentic” and to the “quality” expected from other international shows. In the construction of Netflix as a platform superior to traditional TV, along with freedom of choice, claiming quality and audacity of their productions have been essential: “[Netflix] offers autonomy to consumers with the freedom to choose what they want and when they want it, as well as creative freedom to artists to develop riskier and more demanding shows” (Sim, 2016: 72). In the Turkish media landscape,

“riskier” and quality VOD originals mean daring in terms of their approach to censorship and their ability to go beyond network TV series’ narrative codes.

Content quality is demanded along with technical quality, a seamless watching experience not disturbed by censorship. Orhan, a 57-year-old mechanical engineer who subscribed to Netflix for a year, emphasizes the lack of censorship in online platforms, which also allows him to have a better “quality” spectatorship experience: “I like the lack of censorship in digital platforms because otherwise, it feels less authentic, detached from reality. Cuts of certain scenes and blurs on alcohol and cigarettes make me lose my concentration.”

For the VOD audience in Turkey, the definition of quality is connected to several factors ranging from unblurred/ uncensored images, narratives, and watching experience, to a definite length, as opposed to over-extended network TV series narratives. Narrative’s ending is essential to the description of quality, “...across the history of prime-time seriality we see a repeated valuation of the serialized narrative that successfully concludes...a definitive conclusion, an ending is seen as determinative of its legitimized status” (Newman and Levine, 2012: 90).

An example of the spectator’s association of quality with limited series is BluTV’s first original, *Innocent* (2017), an eight-episode crime show. Beyond being unexpectedly short, as opposed to often interminable Turkish TV series, *Innocent* stars Haluk Bilginer—a prominent actor known for appearing in quality productions and winner of an International Emmy award (2019)—and was directed by Seren Yüce, a young director of art-house films. The series, based on an investigation of a murder, makes subtle political references to traumas resulting from compulsory military service in Turkey. Defne compares *Innocent* with Netflix Turkey originals and states that the series is a textbook example of the opportunities and freedom digital platforms may provide for the creators: “Netflix Turkey originals such as *The Protector* and *The Gift* are very similar, they are using the same genres and formulas. *Innocent*, however, is not limited to its genre. Even

though it is a crime series, it takes risks and experiments with complex characters and storytelling.”

VOD audiences in Turkey often demand risk-taking and experimentation from local originals, the ability to go beyond cliché formulas and genre conventions. The head of the drama production in BluTV, Sarp Kalfaoglu, states that their platform is in the stage of experimentation both as an economic model and content creator. He defines his target audience as the young internet user who no longer watches network TV: “Here we are talking about an audience that we call ‘early adopter,’ which is open to all innovations in every sense and adapts immediately” (2017). In addition to its original productions, BluTV’s acquisition of VOD distribution rights of several HBO series and art-house films from Turkey shows that the platform markets itself as one providing global and local quality content. The discourse of providing “quality” also validates the lack of a matching number and variety of content when compared with a global platform. Along with the idea of providing a “quality niche,” BluTV also markets its local know-how. Kalfaoglu underlines that they are familiar with and invested in local production contexts by counting the cities they aim to portray in Turkey: “Our motto is: ‘BluTV, *Turkey’s* online platform.’ Adana is ours, and Central Anatolia is also ours. Tomorrow, we will produce content from Van, Trabzon, Sivas... Because the platform provides us the means to tell stories from everywhere” (2018). BluTV maintains the common discourse of quality by degrading local network TV simultaneously as it differentiates itself from the global through its local stories and intimate knowledge of its audience.

Levent Cankar, the screenwriter of another popular crime series *Steppe* (*Bozkır*, 2018) on BluTV, describes his intended audience as follows: “It is easy to sell local TV shows to Middle East, Africa or South America. I would like to sell my series to Western Europe or the United States. I would not like to produce series like Netflix, but more like HBO” (2019). While hierarchizing audiences according to preferred and derided regions, such statements from the creators of BluTV productions also emphasize the artistic freedom that platform provides them as opposed to the limitations of network TV. Tunc Sahin, one of the creators of *7Faces* (*7Yüz*), another BluTV original featuring seven

independent stories on facing darkest fears and sins, states: “The freedom that this medium offered us was lack of any directions, BluTV gave no directions such as ‘Make all the episodes connected so that people can follow’ or ‘make a less abusive and ‘TV-friendly’ version of it” (2017). In a public interview, Kalfaoglu cautiously underlines that their understanding of freedom is related to narrative experimentation and breaking the codes of network TV, rather than going beyond censorship codes on sexuality and politics:

I guess even the most unexpected artists apply self-censorship. Of course, this issue is not related to ‘sexuality, politics, etc.’ There are so many limitations in the understanding of traditional TV series that -such as not allowing a character to be upset- the screenwriter cannot even write an upset character (2017).

The claim for quality through narrative experimentation aims to evade quality through thematic liberty that could potentially attract the attention of regulatory organizations. Head of the drama production in BluTV implies that the VOD platform is not against TV and internet regulations but standard narrative restrictions of network TV series. Indeed, instead of producing shows with overt political content, BluTV originals approach politics in suggestive and covert ways. They mainly underline aesthetic experimentation by producing originals with genres that have not been previously produced in Turkey—such as a fantasy thriller featuring vampires *Immortals* (Yasamayanlar, 2019), absurd comedy-drama featuring a lesser-known actor’s adventures *Me Bartu* (Bartu Ben, 2018), and horror series *Possessed* (Sahipli, 2017). While some users are content with the generic experimentation, others, such as Canan, are critical of the limited definition of freedom in VOD platforms, often narrowed down to the ability to swear freely.

Conclusion

Our study shows that there are several different social, psychological, and technological factors in digital TV audiences’ experience, needs, and VOD platform/content selection. Studying the digital television audiences requires us to rethink

the dichotomy of habitual versus instrumental approach for TV in U&G theory, often positioning TV audiences as an object of study for the habitual/ritualistic approach, considering them “less active.” “Newer media have ushered in new rituals (...) and new instrumental activities” (Sundar and Limperos, 2013: 511), which has also complicated the selection process for the audiences, who constantly encounter new platforms, new content, and choice models tailored for their own “taste.” As our study shows, the audiences engage in a complicated selection process, considering factors such as the regional availability of the content, technological convenience, the level of censorship/regulation, and the quality of content offered by the traditional alternative (linear TV) other competitors. Along with social, psychological, and technological affordances, local political context, internet regulation, and policies along with competing providers and platforms need to be taken into account in assessing gratifications for users.

There have been several research limitations we have encountered, mainly due to the pandemic situation. Since pandemic increased home consumption drastically, observing the changing/adapting audience experience in their living environment would have been highly beneficial. The quarantine period did not allow us to combine our interviews with participant observation. Also, the newly emerged local and global VOD platforms in Turkey, such as Amazon Prime, Exxen, and Gain Media, were not active in the market when we conducted this research. We suggest that further research should include a broader examination of the Turkish VOD market. It should also consider the potentially changing attitude of Netflix Turkey towards the local content since Netflix Turkey originals are steadily increasing in number.⁶

Despite its limitations, this research enabled us to observe that in terms of its local productions and content selections, Netflix Turkey invests in narratives appealing to its global audience, potentially familiar with Turkish TV series with an already established worldwide reputation. Turkish users, on the other hand, often find Netflix Turkey originals as formulaic and stereotypical in the ways that it approaches “the local.” They state their desire to be considered as part of the audience in the Global North rather than that in the Global South. The platform’s Turkish users are critical of Netflix’s “unrisky”

investment in the local content that is too close to network TV series, programming that they seek to escape from by subscribing to the VOD platform. They also are critical of the fact that Netflix originals present stereotypical depictions of the “local,” in the case of Turkish originals presenting the country as a mystical tourist attraction.

In an environment of highly regulated TV, what is relatively unregulated and outside of the traditional narratives are often associated with quality. Netflix’s entry into the Turkish market coincides with the emergence of another local VOD platform BluTV that formulates an understanding of local quality separate from what Netflix can offer and using a discourse of ‘local knowledge as a self-marketing strategy. At the same time as it competes with Netflix, BluTV also conducts business with the global platform as it recently sold its original *Innocent* to Netflix—a potential sign of Netflix’s changing attitude towards localization in Turkey.

Beyond the local-global divide, however, users in Turkey define quality as being able to have a submersive experience or to be able to watch uninterrupted: without advertisement, without beeps and blurs, and other forms of censorship and in a timely manner. For Turkish users, unlimited content, free choice, mobility, and time-shifting opportunities that VOD promises also mean freedom from censorship and the narrative restraints that censorship and network TV broadcasting regulations bring onto scripted material. Most users see a subscription to VOD platforms as a way to access uncensored quality content and viewing experience, a reasoning which is questioned now thanks to the recent VOD censorship law. Beyond limits to narrative freedom, censorship signifies a barrier, limiting the ability to reach the global quality that would bring them closer to European or US (and not Middle Eastern) VOD users. In any case, users are resourceful in the many ways that they find to go beyond digital censorship practices and claim their independence from VOD platforms and right to access global information and content. When we asked Orhan if he would continue to follow VOD platforms if there is censorship, he states, “I will continue my membership, but I will also watch stuff on pirate sites. In the end, these platforms did not exist a few years ago. We did not discover foreign series thanks to Netflix.”

Notes

1. Also, in 2006 Doğu Media Group, the second-biggest media conglomerate in Turkey, announced the first original production of its own advertising-based free VOD service, Puhutv, whose lack of subscription fee and membership helped the platform to become popular. Puhutv has been operating since 2012 as a web platform where viewers could watch TV series broadcasted on scheduled TV in their own time, without commercials, and in a “censor-free” manner. The platform produced two highly popular originals [*Fi* (2017, see Baran for a more extended discussion of the series) and an Emmy award winner (2019) *Personality* (best performance for actor Haluk Bilginer)]. Due to its content that does not go beyond traditional TV (apart from these two originals) and lack of membership, the platform is not part of this study.
2. According to Maina Wambugu, this number is 233 minutes in Spain, 223 minutes in Germany, and 212 minutes in the UK.
3. Between 1990-2012 AGB Nielsen measured ratings based on education level in larger cities; after 2012, TNS determined the audience categories according to their income level and started covering regions with populations under 2000. Bulut points out that under the new system, instead of cultural capital, financial capital is the determining factor for audience ratings and taste became less predictable (2016).
4. For further information on Netflix viewership in Turkey please see Turkey Dossier on Global Internet TV Consortium (Ildır & Vitrinel, 2020).
5. The sheer volume of VOD services in some countries adds to the challenge of such analysis. Ward points out that in the UK, “over 150 services fitting the regulator’s definition of video on demand”.
6. When this research was conducted, one of the latest Netflix Turkey productions, *Ethos* (2020), has not been streamed on Netflix yet. *Ethos*, a series written and directed by Berkun Oya -who also wrote BluTV’s launching series, *Masum*- received many reactions from different segments of the Netflix audience, creating a significant social media “hype.” The series opened up discussions ranging from

debates on polarization and the Islamist-secular divide to gender violence in contemporary Turkey. The series also shifted audience views on the quality of Netflix originals.

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CHAPTER 5

Paper II. Ildır, Ash (2023) Challenging Cultural and Political Taboos: A Turkish SVOD's Experiments in Taboo Comedy. Streaming Video: Storytelling Across Borders edited by Amanda D. Lotz, Ramon Lobato.

The fourth empirical chapter asks how the stories told change with the emergence of SVOD norms by analyzing two comedy series commissioned by the local SVOD service, BluTV. This chapter examines two series commissioned by BluTV—*Me*, Bartu (2017), and *Doğu* (2021)—and explores their distinction from linear television comedies in Turkey. Following Bucaria and Barra's (2016) conceptualization of “taboo” or “controversial” humor for television, finds evidence that SVOD services create space for storytellers to challenge culturally or politically taboo issues in Turkey through humor.

Challenging Cultural and Political Taboos

A Turkish SVOD's Experiments in Taboo Comedy

Asli Ildir

In Turkey, as elsewhere, the audiovisual ecosystem has been adapting to the entry of subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services. A local SVOD service, BluTV, launched in 2016 following that of Netflix the same year, and grew to become the leading local SVOD platform in Turkey. BluTV has experimented with different types of original content and has collaborated with many other players in the local and global markets, including S Sport (a major sports channel) and Discovery+.

This chapter examines two comedy series commissioned by BluTV—*Me, Bartu* (2017) and *Doğu* (2021)—and explores their distinction from linear television comedies in Turkey. Following Bucaria and Barra's (2016) conceptualization of “taboo” or “controversial” humor for television, this study finds evidence that SVOD services create space for storytellers to challenge culturally or politically taboo issues in Turkey through humor. This is particularly important within the Turkish context because SVOD content often uses humor to challenge the hegemonic ideological position of mainstream television, mainly through narratives that critique patriarchal and conservative values in society. Two main factors enable the sociopolitical freedom and generic experimentation emerging in these comedies: the lack of strict, formal content regulation, and the availability of limited series (six to ten episodes) and shorter episodes (of between 30 and

69 minutes) without ad breaks. The second factor is mainly a consequence of the subscription-based model, which is not bound by the constraints of traditional broadcasting, such as the pressure to attract the largest possible audience for advertisers.

Bucaria and Barra (2016, 5) argue that a subject is made humorous by breaking boundaries or societal conventions, an idea they trace back to the Freudian concept of displacement. The ad-supported, linear norms of television required it to function as a mass medium, in other words to aim to make its programming accessible and attractive to a broad and heterogeneous audience, and this established particular boundaries for humor. Streaming services differ due to their discrepant industrial norms of subscriber funding that require them to stand out from ad-supported services in order to attract payment (Lotz 2022). They can also serve many viewers with different content at the same time instead of selecting single titles to fill a schedule at a certain time. Bucaria and Barra also acknowledge that taboo humor appears in cable, satellite, and digital television within a context of “quality television” targeting niche audiences. Similar to many types of premium programming considered “quality television,” SVOD humor also breaks boundaries to distinguish itself from the mainstream rather than adjusting to the rules as in network television (Bucaria and Barra 2016).

As a Turkish service, BluTV is located within specific cultural and sociopolitical contexts and operates under different regulatory conditions from the U.S. and UK productions Bucaria and Barra examine. These contexts shape the use of taboo humor in BluTV series. For example, making a homophobic joke is considered as taboo humor in the United States or UK, but homosexuality itself remains a taboo for mainstream television in Turkey. Furthermore, homophobic humor is the hegemonic norm in Turkey, connected with conservative “family values” that have been arbitrarily defined and enforced by the regulatory institutions as discussed

in detail below. To better situate the chapter, the next section contextualizes BluTV and the regulation and censorship of internet television in Turkey to prepare this chapter's discussion of *Me, Bartu* and *Doğu* in the context of SVODs and taboo humor.

Dynamics of Turkish Television Production

To understand the significance of BluTV and its programming, we first need to consider the current state of television regulation and production in Turkey. Turkish television is known for its repetitive melodramatic narratives with extended durations and excessive ad breaks (comprising up to 20 percent of airtime). Yet, outside Turkey, audiences for Turkish television have increased significantly in recent years. Bhutto (2019) defines Turkish series as a “new form of mass culture” comparable to Bollywood and K-pop that disrupts the influence of American pop culture. Most high-budget, successful series are exported internationally for additional profits both for the channel and the production company. Series that fail to find a local audience also try their chances in the foreign market, mostly to compensate for their financial loss.

Domestic risk is mainly a consequence of the new ratings system that created financial instability and “a precarious workspace” in the market as audience taste became less predictable (Bulut 2016). Before 2012, ratings were measured based on the education level and cultural capital of viewers living in big cities (Bulut 2016). In this system, the “A & B” group considered most attractive to advertisers was the secular upper-middle class, known for its “Western taste” (Atay as quoted in Özçetin 2016). The new rating system provided by Transaction Network Services (TNS) now categorizes audiences according to their income level and includes regions with a population of under 2,000 people. These new regions include many parts of the countryside, including electoral districts dominated by Justice and Development Party supporters

and the Muslim bourgeoisie.¹ Consequently, the whole industry had to adjust its production dynamics and storytelling to engage these more conservative audiences by emphasizing tradition and family values.

This change to the rating system has disrupted production norms in many ways. For example, television channels now find it difficult to reach the necessary rating levels due to the expansion of the rating measurement region. In response, they extend the duration of the few series that find an audience (from 90 to 135–145 minutes) as a way to increase their ad revenue, since the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTSC) requires 20 minutes of content for every 7 minutes of advertising. Many producers also seek foreign distribution, especially for series featuring globally recognizable Turkish stars and generically familiar stories (soap operas and historical epics perform best). Producing exportable dramas to decrease financial risk in the domestic market has led to the adoption of certain narrative and generic conventions. Producers prefer content that is internationally legible, such as romantic comedies, dramas, or “Cinderella stories” (Bhutto 2019), and choose locations identifiable to tourists. The positive effect of exported series on tourism, mostly from the Middle East, increases the interest in period dramas with militarist or nationalist overtones, which aligns with the government’s soft power discourse.

The cultural impact of Turkish series is not limited to their global circulation. Their worldwide appeal and financial success also influence production dynamics and storytelling

¹Chapter 5. Challenging Cultural and Political Taboos

The Justice and Development Party is Turkey’s leading conservative and populist political party, which has been in power since 2002.

practices within Turkey. For example, the demand for exportable, star-driven series puts extra pressure on producers who are already dealing with the challenges of the new rating system. Faced with the challenge of fulfilling the expectations of both foreign and domestic audiences simultaneously, producers have adopted three main strategies derived from market research on stars and stories: managing production so that it conforms to state content regulations; adopting the “government’s soft power discourse and public diplomacy aspirations”; and following global television trends (Algan 2020, 446). Producers, who have mainly bowed to the government’s ideological demands, are expected to exalt the national values and history in their productions as “representatives of the country” (Kaptan and Algan 2020, 13) and to avoid politically or culturally controversial subjects in their narratives. Fulfilling these expectations required producers to reproduce the culturally and politically repressive mainstream media environment and has left limited space for alternative voices. Producers’ willingness to experiment with genre and style has also diminished under the new ratings system.

Formal regulation has also played a defining role in what is seen on-screen in Turkey. Initially, SVODs were not subject to RTSC monitoring, but the regulator’s remit was expanded in 2019 to encompass web broadcasts, a category that includes SVODs. The RTSC has been monitoring radio and television broadcasts since its establishment in 1994 and has regularly provoked controversy due to its ideological position. For example, broadcasting in languages other than Turkish is prohibited in accordance with “the state’s nationalistic and discriminatory policies against the Kurdish minority” (Kaptan and Algan 2020, 8).

In addition to censorship on nudity, sex scenes, cigarette and alcohol use, and strong language, the RTSC’s enabling legislation also includes an article that paves the way for a more conservative ideological agenda. Article 6112/8 states that broadcasters should not violate “the

general morality and the national/spiritual values of the family” (Koçer 2020). The regulation mainly works through direct monitoring by the RTSC based on complaints from viewers. This intensifies the ideological grounds for content regulation and increases industry practices of censorship and self-censorship. The direct evaluation of RTSC experts, and the specific complaints they choose to consider and respond to, reflects “the relations between the government and the media-politics-capital triangle” and cannot be seen “as separate from intentional efforts to make the society more conservative” (Demirdöğen as quoted in Koçer et al. 2018, 174). On the other hand, Akınerdem (as quoted in Koçer et al. 2018, 170) argues that “storylines involving sex have visibly declined as of late and been replaced by those revolving around violence and machismo” in response to RTSC decisions. The council’s criteria are highly relevant to the conservative ideological position of mainstream television in Turkey and also highly effective in establishing the “boundaries” that taboo humor challenges.

The balance of more secular programming—including entertainment channels and comedy programs—alongside more conservative and “family-oriented” programming has been in decline in the last decade as a consequence of an increasing authoritarian political scene and intensified regulation over the media sector. Koçer et al. argue that the extension of Turkey’s state of emergency, declared after the failed coup attempt in 2016, has had “a direct impact on media institutions and media workers and nurtured an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and habits of self-censorship” (2018, 6).² Even though many Islamist channels—as well as Kurdish

² After the failed coup attempt in 2016 by the Turkish Armed Forces, the government declared that the attempt was associated with the Islamist fraternal movement led by Fethullah Gülen. The events are generally interpreted as a power struggle between different factions of the political Islamist movement in Turkey.

broadcasters—were also affected by the post-coup d'état measures, the arbitrary nature of the RTSC law continues to consolidate the conservative and ideological positions of the mainstream media.

BluTV and SVOD in Turkey

This brings us to BluTV and its place in Turkey's television landscape. Although BluTV initially escaped the strict content regulation that applied to linear television, it, too, soon became subject to those same restrictions. Founded by media mogul Aydın Doğan, BluTV developed as part of D Productions, the in-house production studio of Channel D, a prominent linear television channel. After Channel D was sold to another company, BluTV had to downsize and function as a standalone SVOD service. This transformation affected BluTV's business model and content policy. BluTV began to follow international SVOD trends by commissioning high-profile original series instead of operating as a catch-up broadcast video-on-demand (BVOD) service. Today, BluTV offers a mix of original and licensed content, including high-profile foreign series such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Young Pope* and many international and local art house films, including exclusive titles.

BluTV's original productions include multiseason and limited series with long and short durations (unlike Netflix Turkey, it does not commission features). Three categories feature prominently: comedy series, genre shows (vigilante stories, police, and fantasy shows), and short documentary series about culturally "edgy" topics such as nightclubs, gambling, and dating apps.

Yanardaoğlu and Turhalli's (2020, 196) research, based on interviews with showrunners and producers, notes two crucial tendencies of production and narrative priorities of BluTV originals. First, the service mainly commissions small-scale, lower-budget productions and

works with independent producers rather than established names in the industry. Second, BluTV series position themselves as distinct from linear television in terms of storytelling and plot as “

on-demand series seem to create more space for different character types and story development. In addition, they allow more space for creativity and the application of different shooting techniques . . . to better meet audiences’ expectations for more creative and different content” (Yanardaoğlu and Turhalli 2020, 199).

Yanardaoğlu and Turhalli also observe that producers see SVOD as an alternative to the limitations of the new ratings system, not only in terms of long episode durations and ad breaks but also in narrative and style. Producers develop “edgier storylines” in SVOD as an alternative to the family dramas and the melodramatic tone characteristic of Turkish linear television.

Instead, directors use different camera angles or lighting styles when creating SVOD originals (Yanardaoğlu and Turhalli, 2020). BluTV’s original content policy also promotes this “artistic vision” as a central part of its marketing strategy. For example, many BluTV originals are directed by art house directors, including those known for success in international film festivals, such as Emin Alper, Tolga Karaçelik, and Seren Yüce. For these reasons, BluTV describes its original content as “appealing to those who no longer want to watch Turkish series” (Kalfaoğlu as quoted in Sapmaz 2019).

As we have seen, BluTV’s founding promise was to offer alternative content that challenges storytelling norms of Turkish linear television. However, the aforementioned extension of RTSC regulation to include video-on-demand (VOD) services has partially hampered BluTV’s ability to deliver on this promise. The enforcement of the new VOD law is still arbitrary, and the content of BluTV is not regularly checked, but there have been instances where the service has self-censored its content to avoid the attention of the authorities. For example, the recent BluTV original *Çiplak*—a miniseries about a young female sex worker that featured explicit sex scenes and nudity—was controversially removed from the BluTV library,

prompting a flurry of online commentary.³ This reflects the delicate balance that BluTV must strike between creating edgy, distinctive content and adhering to restrictive government censorship policies.

Pushing the Boundaries of Linear Television: Taboo Comedy in *Me*, *Bartu* and *Doğu*

BluTV strives for a discourse of distinction for its original commissions and emphasizes the freedom it offers creators. Names of showrunners, directors, and screenwriters are included in BluTV press releases, something rarely done in linear television. In line with international SVOD trends, BluTV also invests in low-budget comedies starring emerging talent, including younger artists popular on YouTube. Initially, BluTV commissioned three miniseries created by

³ A popular journalist mentioned the series in his YouTube program by ironically referencing RTSC, stating that he wondered how the council “missed” the series. Many social media users and fans of the series blamed the journalist for targeting the show and provoking the council. After a serious social media backlash, BluTV removed the series from its catalog—a move harshly criticized as an act of self-censorship. Later, the service announced that the series was removed because they were in the process of implementing a child lock {~?~AQ: Consider wording “for parents with children under the age of eighteen, or something similar”} under the age of eighteen. As this example suggests, the chaotic regulatory environment of SVOD in Turkey is intensified by the conversation on social media. Demirdöğen (as quoted in Koçer. 2018, 177) states that a regular viewer complaint can be ignored by RTSC “if it does not elicit a strong enough reaction on social media” and points out the influence of online mass reactions to the council’s decision.

showrunners mainly known for their work in the art house scene: *Innocent*, a crime drama about the investigation of a murder within the family of a former police commissioner; *Seven Faces*, a seven-episode anthology series on facing the darkest fears and sins; and *Me, Bartu*, a comedy series telling the tragicomic story of a real-life actor. Experimenting with different formats, durations, and stories, these productions were distinct from conventional Turkish television narratives in terms of their political/cultural criticism and stylistic choices.⁴

Me, Bartu and *Doğu* are of particular interest because of the way they self-consciously mock the norms and practices of linear television in Turkey. Their storylines directly reference the strictures of linear television through scenes featuring television production sets, talent contest footage, auditions, and other signifiers of television tradition. In other words, linear television—with its restrictive norms, rules, and narrative conventions—becomes a part of the humor and is framed and problematized as a “cultural other”: an institution/medium that reproduces and consolidates the cultural/political taboos challenged within the same texts.

Me, Bartu, tells the story of Bartu, a failed and penniless actor who nonetheless resists performing in television shows or ads because he finds them “inferior.” Bartu moves between jobs in different media, where his occupation becomes a means for the series to explore the dynamics of the local entertainment industry. The series includes direct references to popular series and “exportable dramas” in linear television and teases them as typical productions that

⁴ These launching series were even included in the Istanbul International Film Festival as a part of the talk series organized by the festival’s coproduction, training, and networking platform, Meetings on the Bridge. The series was named as “Transformation of Series to Digital,” an event in which showrunners and content managers from BluTV discussed the new possibilities internet television offers in terms of storytelling and production.

reproduce cultural stereotypes without any artistic purpose. This criticism is mainly conveyed through its main character's failure to fit into linear television as an actor, which is explained as caused by his artistic and cultural incompatibility with the industry.

Television itself becomes an object of taboo humor in these texts—an external boundary that can only be addressed or challenged within the more intimate, “safe space” that SVOD provides. This safe space is defined by creative and sociopolitical freedom that results from a “tolerant and trustworthy” audience, presumably one that would not submit complaints to RTSC. In Turkey, internet users often respond to state censorship by emphasizing that they actively consent to what they watch on SVOD because they voluntarily subscribe to these services. Therefore, this space is “safer” for producers in terms of both official RTSC regulation and audience engagement. Based on mutual trust, SVOD stories exist outside the boundaries of linear television and enable taboo humor to emerge—albeit in subtle and indirect forms.

In *Me*, *Bartu*, and *Doğu*, the first layer of taboo humor is the mere “visibility” of topics such as sexuality and sexual identities, which are both complete taboos for linear television in Turkey. Since explicit scenes depicting sexual acts are strictly regulated in linear television, the relative lack of regulation provides these series space to not only normalize sexuality in their narratives but to also refer to them as direct themes—at least until the regulations were extended to SVODs. (Just like *Innocent* and *Seven Faces*, *Me*, *Bartu* was produced prior to the passing of Turkey's VOD law and thus took advantage of the “total freedom” in 2017 when the RTSC did not interfere with SVOD services. These titles are still in BluTV's catalog and can be viewed free of censorship.)

Another distinctive feature of *Me*, *Bartu* is its unconventional exploration of sexuality within the context of a comedy show. Traditionally, mainstream humor in Turkish television

reproduces the stereotypical representations of LGBTQ+ characters and women enjoying casual sex and nonmonogamous relationships (often presented as “bad” or “immoral” women), thus reinforcing the dominant ideology of patriarchal “family values.” *Me, Bartu* subverts this kind of humor through its politicized use of taboo humor and through its story about an actor and his “family of choice.” The series pokes fun at the traditional family as a patriarchal institution in which women are “protected” by their fathers from sexuality and LGBTQ+ people are excluded or rendered invisible. In contrast, *Me, Bartu* depicts an alternative family where everyone is free in their sexuality—a highly significant position given Turkey’s recent withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 to prevent the “normalization of homosexuality—which leaders declared as incompatible with Turkey’s social and family values.”⁵

In *Me, Bartu*, two characters are notable in this respect: Bartu’s cousin Gizem, a young aspiring actress, and his close friend Mercimek, a jovial, incisive, and openly gay man. Both freely discuss their sex lives and enjoy casual sex, sometimes with more than one partner. Even though these characters form part of the show’s comic narrative, they are more than caricatures: both have significant influence over the progress of the story and the transformation of Bartu’s character. Mercimek, whose taboo-breaking identity has been noted by the local LGBTQ+ community (Alpar 2018; Bahattin 2021), openly criticizes mainstream television by stating that gay characters only appear on screen as the butt of jokes or as the heroine’s best friend. Notably, *Me, Bartu* rejects this longstanding tendency: nonheterosexual identity does not become the sole object of the humor or something the audience laughs *at*, which is the case in most Turkish television comedies.

Through Gizem’s character, *Me, Bartu* also subverts a very common archetype in Turkish

⁵ For further information see Gupta (2021).

cinema and television since the 1970s: the young, naive, and virginal woman coming from the *taşra* (country/periphery) to the big city—Istanbul. Conventionally, these women meet the “wrong people” and become prostitutes (the specific idiom in Turkish used for these women is *kötü yola düşmek*, literally translated as “falling into bad ways”). The series depicts Bartu and Gizem in bars, nightclubs, and parties or the “bad places” where these women are tricked, abused, drugged, and raped. But *Me, Bartu* tells very different stories about these mainly urban spaces. Gizem sleeps with two of Bartu’s friends in his apartment and enjoys the night without regret, even praising their sexual performance explicitly to Bartu the next day. Shocked, Bartu is caught between Gizem and her father, who trusts him to care for Gizem and her “dignity and honor”—or virginity. The issue of *namus* (honor) is a popular theme in Turkish television, constantly victimizing women with agitating and didactic narratives, and reproducing male violence through stories showing women being exposed to domestic violence. These shows are often cautionary tales that police women by depicting the consequences of losing their honor and sometimes also implying they are to blame for not “protecting” themselves enough. In contrast, *Me, Bartu* offers a highly empowered female character while also problematizing the aforementioned stereotypical representations of women through Gizem’s story.

Secondary characters in *Me, Bartu* are also used to remind the audience of linear television tropes. The series opens with Bartu performing the role of a “sultan” for a linear television production, an obvious reference to popular Turkish series such as *Magnificent Century* and *Kösem Sultan*. During this scene, the director also wants Bartu to try a “Laz” role, a reference to another popular trend within mainstream dramas of portraying people from the Black Sea region as thin caricatures with heavy Black Sea accents. After Bartu fails again, the director wants him to call his friend (another real-life actor, Ömür Arpacı, who is known for his

“Laz” roles). In the following episodes, we see Arpaci speaking Turkish with no Laz accent, a surprise used repeatedly to comedic effect. He explains that he is “stuck” in the role of “Laz” because it is considered funny on mainstream television. In this way, *Me, Bartu* critiques linear television caricatures of ethnic identities and plays on viewers’ familiarity with these tropes. It positions viewers of *Me, Bartu* as in on the joke.

Doğu, another original miniseries by BluTV, marks its distinction from linear television comedy by using different kinds of humor: sacrilegious and blasphemous (Bucaria and Barra 2016, 3). The series tells the story of Doğu Demirkol, its eponymous character, who also wrote and codirected the series. As an aspiring young comedian, Demirkol became popular after he played the leading role in an art house film, *The Wild Pear Tree* (2018), directed by Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkey’s Palme d’Or-winning director. Doğu constantly becomes the object of ridicule and self-deprecating humor in the series as a result of his inappropriate jokes. His jokes break boundaries that are generally based on cultural binaries such as West and East, secular and conservative, or modern and traditional. Contrary to *Me, Bartu*—set in central Istanbul, which is known for its more secular and middle-class lifestyles—*Doğu* features characters from the peripheral regions of Istanbul with more religious, conservative backgrounds. (These two groups can also be interpreted as two audience segments. *Doğu* mostly represents people the new rating system takes into account, while its ideas challenge the conservative values of this segment. On the other hand, *Me, Bartu* clearly targets an SVOD audience with greater cultural capital.)

Yet *Doğu* has a distinctive tone: one that is critical of the conservative ideological position of its main character. The protagonist’s religious or conservative values are repeatedly challenged through cultural confrontations. However, as a comedian, Doğu also experiments with different kinds of taboo subjects including sexuality and religion. He constantly oscillates

between distinct tastes in humor (and thus audiences) to speak to different segments of the Turkish television audience.

On many occasions, the “holiness” of religious values and Muslim traditions becomes the focus of the show’s humor. Even though *Doğu*’s jokes are not as offensive or radical as in an equivalent U.S. show like *Ramy*, they can still be considered subversive given the deterioration of freedom of speech and humor in Turkey over the last decade, which has resulted in “the bastardization of its long-standing cultural tradition of political satire” (De Cramer 2021). In addition to the imprisonment of journalists and politicians, many authors, artists, and comedians have also been put on trial for “insulting” the president or “the national, moral, or religious values” of Turkish society. Additionally, several humor magazines known for their political satire have been closed or censored.⁶

While taboo humor in *Doğu* is not a direct form of political satire, the contemporary Turkish political context—which operates with an extreme “inviolability” of religious values—turns it into one. In one scene *Doğu* visits a pharmacy shop in Cihangir—a neighborhood known for its celebrity inhabitants—that is owned by a female pharmacist wearing a headscarf. (Discrimination against women with headscarves has been politically weaponized by the government on many occasions.) During the scene, *Doğu* assumes she is conservative and struggles to ask for a condom but gets scolded by the pharmacist for being sexist and prejudiced towards women with headscarves. After he leaves the shop, the pharmacist humiliates him as a

⁶ In 2020, online access to the cover of the famous humor magazine *Leman* was blocked due to a comic about (former) Minister of Finance and Treasury Berat Albayrak. In an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, the cartoonists stated that the government created an environment of censorship and self-censorship for humor magazines and artists (Unker 2020).

“loser” just trying to be famous, suggesting that Nuri Bilge Ceylan would “spit in the face” of Doğu. Apart from its comedic effect, this confrontation, and the self-referential joke, has many layers. The first layer critiques the main character and his assumption that anything related to sexuality or sexual health is taboo for a conservative/religious woman. On the other hand, the audience’s extra-diegetic information on Doğu’s leading role in a Nuri Bilge Ceylan film adds another layer of humor to this scene. After her mocking comment about Doğu and Nuri Bilge Ceylan, we realize the pharmacist is also prejudiced against Doğu as a comedian from the outskirts (conservative districts) of Istanbul and regards him as someone unworthy of such a role appealing to audiences with higher cultural capital.

Cultural binaries are also problematized through Doğu’s confrontation with different types of comedy audiences, from a conservative elderly group to young middle-class urbanites seeking a more edgy type of comedy. A scene in which Doğu gets a negative reaction from the elderly conservative audience is significant as it reveals the ideological boundaries of humor in Turkey. After realizing that the elderly audience is not his usual crowd, Doğu starts his routine with an inoffensive religious joke about the first surah of the Qur’an, Al-Fatiha, which is well received. However, as he runs out of jokes, Doğu decides to make a joke about the futility of penis enlargement ads. The moment he uses the word “penis” the audience starts to show their discontent and stop paying attention to his routine. Finally, Doğu gets angry and scolds them: “Isn’t sexuality a part of us? Why don’t you listen to the rest of the joke?”⁷ This scene’s image of a comedian being booed and intimidated by a conservative audience is highly symbolic given the

⁷ However, the series is cautious about not attributing this sexual taboo to a certain religious group. An elderly woman with a headscarf in the audience laughs a lot and congratulates Doğu at the end.

Turkish government's aggressive stance against humor. While the series uses sexual humor to criticize the conservative values assumed of the audience and of Doğu as a character, it still uses a mainstream type of humor to mock a gay character in an earlier episode. This character is portrayed in a stereotypical manner, as very clingy, sexually attracted to Doğu, and touching him all the time. The character's sexual identity becomes the object of humor in this case, rather than Doğu's reaction to it.

During these failed attempts, Doğu slowly learns how to calibrate his jokes for different audiences: when to go with the flow, when to break the rules and challenge boundaries, and of course, when to "self-regulate." In some way, this experimentation and adaptation process mirrors the series' and BluTV's attempts to understand local SVOD audiences and their specific tastes in comedy. As in *Me, Bartu*, this in-between position of Doğu and his eponymous series is not only based on cultural confrontations in everyday Turkish society but also reflects a confrontation between linear television and SVOD.

Conclusion

Through the stories of two failed comedy actors, BluTV's *Doğu* and *Me, Bartu* use their status as SVOD originals to challenge the norms of linear television and mainstream media in Turkey and position them as extensions of a conservative, patriarchal ideological agenda. This distinction is accomplished through the use of the protagonists' occupation as a narrative device to travel among different media including television and through their encounters—often confrontational—with cultural others (including women, LGBTQ+ characters, the elderly, and conservative or religious people). The series' use of self-deprecating humor becomes self-criticism in narratives that position the male protagonists as objects of ridicule due to their

own taboo behaviors or perspectives. Taboo humor—generally in the form of sexual and sacrilegious humor—is used in both series to point out the cultural/political boundaries of linear television that are shaped by the regulatory environment and the conservative taste of the mass audience.

These two series illustrate how SVOD stories can become distinct from linear television in Turkey as a result of the aesthetic and political freedom provided to creators. *Me, Bartu* and *Doğu* challenge the mainstream representations of gender, sexual, and ethnic/cultural identities through their use of taboo humor that normalizes sexuality and teases, if not criticizes outright, religious values. Such attitudes can be considered a highly political reaction to the Turkish government's intolerance towards any type of political satire or humor and its increasing emphasis on the family, nation, and morality.

As a service founded when no formal regulation of SVOD existed in Turkey, BluTV enjoyed freedom from censorship and self-censorship until 2019. However, given increasing enforcement of the RTSC law, it can be argued that BluTV may continue to enjoy its aesthetic freedom without challenging as many political boundaries (similar to the manner argued by Tiwary in the previous chapter)—although not as explicitly as achieved by *Me, Bartu*. The decrease in the level of politicized humor from *Me, Bartu* to *Doğu* may reflect the changing policies of BluTV and its growing inclination towards self-censorship.

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III

CONCLUSION

6. CONCLUSION

When I started to write this dissertation in 2017, the global impact of Netflix was not as significant as it is now, but its entry into the Turkish market had a significant impact on the local television culture in Turkey. With two other local VOD services (BluTV and PuhuTV) launched soon after Netflix, local viewers were often introduced to an internet distribution technology they were mainly unfamiliar with. The excitement and interest created by the introduction of these services in the audience and the industry foreshadowed that these services would continue to impact the robust television culture in Turkey drastically. In my research, I aimed to track this change from its earliest stage to today, its peak era, and I especially focused on the factors behind the quick adoption and popularization of streaming services and technology in Turkey. I searched for what kind of inconveniences and dissatisfactions of the audiences, producers, and distributors were effective in this transformation and how distinct structural dynamics of the Turkish media ecosystem prepared the necessary conditions for the growth of the streaming market in Turkey.

These services have now become an indispensable part of the viewing practices of viewers in Turkey and around the world. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that the widespread use of these services is still very recent, especially in Turkey. Hence, neither the industry with established market dynamics, structures, and production principles nor the audiences with highly established viewing habits and behaviors adopted these services by simply “cutting the cord” or leaving any other practices associated with broadcast television. On the contrary, what we observe as these streaming services become more popular in Turkey is that these services are in strong collaboration with television networks, channels, and production companies in Turkey. Even though the influence of Netflix and other streaming services was initially discussed as a disruption, an alternative, or a competitor to the broadcast television sector, we currently observe a certain continuity, collaboration, and interaction between broadcast and streaming services in Turkey. The nature and specificity of the relationship highly depend on geographical and cultural factors, which brings us to the significance of this research and its contribution to the field of media and television studies.

The local focus of this research and its analysis streaming market and audiences in Turkey is especially significant in the current age of television, which is also called the era of TVIV (Jenner, 2015), defined by the migration of television content to the streaming services and a global flow of content. Television is now more transnational and global than ever before, and the flow of the content is no longer limited to certain countries exporting certain shows within specific genres, storylines, or aesthetics (such as American crime serials, Brazilian telenovelas, Japanese animation, or Turkish “dizi”/series...). The introduction of the streaming technology and its popularization with Netflix all over the world created a more multi-centered global content flow, where any Netflix user in any part of the world has access to many series and shows from diverse regions and countries. This was mostly due to two basic structural components of these services - Netflix in specific: The need for diversity in the catalog and the technological convenience of the streaming technology.

Since subscription video-on-demand services no longer use the ad-supported system that is the main financial source of the broadcast, there was a need for a new content strategy. Because their main financial model is now based on subscription fees and there is a more direct relationship between the user and content providers, the audience's needs and desires are now more relevant than ever. This audience is now not the specific segment with high economic and/or cultural capital that appeals to the advertisers, but it includes every single individual that is subscribed to the service. This diversity in audiences necessitates diversity in content, and global content produced in different regions is a good source to satisfy this audience's needs. The second structural factor is the convenience of streaming technology, which enables the content to be streamed through the internet, relatively free from the regulation on broadcast, and less complicated in terms of copyrights and geographical restrictions.

Several aspects differentiate this study from earlier studies on transnational television. Notably, “local” is not defined as an extension or a reflection of a hegemonic global television culture, mostly dominated by American and European television. Due to historical circumstances, and widespread access to the technological infrastructure, television studies have flourished in the U.S. and the United Kingdom, and Western Europe mostly. There is a Western-dominated and centered understanding when it comes to the history of television in academia, which is currently

challenged. Since streaming services heavily depend on global content and audiences in terms of viewership/subscription fees and production/content, there is a need for a more global approach. Therefore, different histories of television in different countries result in distinct adoption strategies and dynamics when it comes to streaming services, and “local markets” are no longer minor extensions or additional ad revenue sources but a major component of global streaming services. This study contributes to the field by challenging the historically assumed position of non-Western local markets and viewing cultures as “subfields” or extensions/reflections of the global/American market and technologies.

There were only a limited number of studies on Netflix in 2017, especially about its global content and audiences. These studies generally discussed the service as “an innovative disruptor” that posed a challenge to existing industrial norms. The ambiguity about Netflix’s position in industrial and academic discussion roots in its double position as a distributor and content producer. This research started as an evaluation and critique of Netflix’s initial local content policies and localization attempts and continued to engage with the new viewing practices and experiences emerging around Netflix and other streaming services in a critical way. Even though this study did not initially aim to study the VOD audiences, through the course of the research, this approach changed. Following the launch of Netflix and other local streaming services in Turkey, I encountered many discussions on social media by the audiences. These informal discussions, which are generally about the localized ads and original series by Netflix and BluTV, gave me a lot of insight and ideas about how to approach the emerging culture of streaming in a critical way. Even though I aimed to engage with Netflix’s localization attempts in a critical way from the beginning and examine how it negotiates between local and global identities of the audiences, I considered the initial critical work on Netflix and the algorithmic taste culture inadequate in their engagement with the *real* audiences. The main critique was on “the datafication of taste” and how Netflix and video-on-demand imagined audiences as measurable taste clusters rather than individuals with a capacity to decide and behave in unexpected, spontaneous, and randomized ways. However, this initial critical stance also assumed a certain kind of audience in its methodology (which lacked any empirical evidence and audience research), and ironically, these studies also almost considered the VOD audience as an uncritical mass with a limited agency.

This research critically engages with the industrial discourse on Netflix as a “disruptive innovator” that provides total control, choice, and power to the audiences. However, it also diverges from the aforementioned critical work due to its insufficient engagement with real audiences. Positioning in the critical stance, this study constructs its criticism from within the complexity of the audience experience. Even though there are certain similarities and patterns observed among participants, what this study offers is a more in-depth analysis of the decision-making process and viewing experience of the audiences, which is defined by complex and sometimes contradictory statements/emotions about the streaming services.

Streaming services are still in an early stage, and the market is still shaping. Therefore the current media ecosystem around internet television is highly volatile and unstable to theoretically frame, define and study. The findings of this study indicate a similar confusion among the audiences towards streaming services or internet television, which makes the complexity and diversity in their statements a valuable reflection of the confusion and volatility in the market and the industry itself. Adopting “a bottom-to-top approach,” this study offers a theoretical contemplation on internet television and Netflix as “new media” or “disruptive media” based on the qualitative data obtained from audience insights. The qualitative nature of this study is an advantage in reflecting the diversity and complexity of the audience as separate individuals, and therefore, it adopts a suitable methodological approach to understand an “on-demand algorithmic culture” that allegedly addresses the user as an individual with a unique, diverse, predictable, and measurable taste.

6.1 Covid-19 Pandemic: An Accelerated Growth of the Streaming Industry

One of the most drastic changes in the current media ecosystem was the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, which increased the popularity of Netflix even further and changed the distribution dynamics of the film and television industry in a significant way. The availability of “on-demand” became a necessity rather than an option, especially during the lockdowns, and viewer habits have been affected by the changing spatial norms. This change not only changed the course of this dissertation in terms of methodology (Zoom interviews were conducted instead of face-to-face interviews and participant observation was also not possible due to the pandemic

restrictions.) but also enabled me to study audiences in a highly condensed time in terms of home viewing practices. For that reason, the overlap of the research period with the pandemic had advantages and disadvantages. While it allowed me to observe the changing viewing behaviors with the proliferation of streaming services at a peak period, the long-term effects of a pandemic are still uncertain. As an example, one of the most discussed issues during the pandemic was the situation of the film industry and movie theaters because of mandatory isolation and increasing subscriptions to streaming services. However, when we look at global and local data, we observe that people started to go to movie theaters as they were before the pandemic (There were 16.412.514 admissions in 2020 which increased by 20.082.135 admissions in Turkish movie theaters in 2022). Multiplexes stayed open, so the pandemic added difficulty to the already struggling small movie theaters. On the other hand, these numbers somehow show that the social experience of theater is still a significant factor, and audiences may not be “migrating” toward streaming services as was speculated during the pandemic. However, we can still argue that the viewing practices and behaviors that emerged and consolidated during the pandemic should be reconsidered in the long term as the streaming market and industry become more stable. Therefore, even though the findings of this dissertation indicate certain patterns and observations in internet television audiences, they should be considered together with the context of the pandemic. Lastly, this research does not discuss the effects of the pandemic on the viewing behavior or habits of SVOD audiences in specific. This is mainly because the empirical data did not indicate any meaningful results other than a simple increase in viewing hours.

6.2 Audience Experience and Emotions

While Netflix was discussed as a potential new media, internet television, or digital streaming service in its initial stages, it came to be experienced more like broadcast television inside the domestic space and created its norms and behaviors. Its audience has become more “mass” and global than before due to the technological convenience and composite content library it provides. For Netflix and any other SVOD service, it is mainly the experience they offer that matters because they need enough audience satisfaction to keep their subscriptions. This model emphasizes *audience desires and experiences* more than ever before, which is one of the main questions that this dissertation is interested in. While there were almost no empirical studies on Netflix (or VOD) audiences in 2017, they are now becoming a popular empirical object of media

studies due to their industrial significance. Netflix or subscriber-funded VOD is considered a game-changer because it emphasizes the desire and experience of the audiences, not the advertisers (Lotz 2022). As the primary and direct source of revenue for SVOD services, these users are now a source of scholarly and industrial attention and interest. The industrial significance of audiences does not necessarily translate into political power, but it forces the industry to change its production, distribution, and exhibition dynamics radically.

The first two empirical chapters of this dissertation, focusing on Netflix and MUBI audiences, study changing viewer behaviors and habits in depth. The dissertation takes an approach that focuses entirely on the audience in this first part and draws the theoretical framework in light of the findings of the first two empirical chapters. In today's media ecosystem, where personalized content is typical, distinct experiences of the audience as individuals become crucial. Therefore, qualitative audience research should adapt to the transformation of the audiences and treat them more in their differences rather than commonalities. For this reason, the first two empirical chapters construct their arguments on specific concepts, patterns, and expressions that emerged in the findings. Both chapters argue that audiences relate to services they use emotionally, and their experience of the technology is interwoven with their experience of the content. While Netflix is a more mainstream SVOD service providing a composite library with a personalized recommendation system, MUBI is a more specialized SVOD service for mainly arthouse audiences and has a limited library without substantial personalization. Even though Netflix and MUBI complement each other industrially rather than compete, audiences define these two services as opposites. As discussed below in detail, the business model, library content, and distinct brand identities of VOD services create different experiences for the audiences in *emotional* terms. These emotions range from anger, distress, and inadequacy to addiction, guilt, and supremacy. These chapters especially focus on the discrepancies between the public brand image of the services and the way users talk and feel about them. Exposing and understanding these discrepancies and conflict points are highly significant to engage in an audience-based analysis of the streaming industry with a bottom-to-top approach.

While analyzing SVOD audiences, these two chapters examine these services from the audiences' perspective. Therefore, in delving into more industrial characteristics and content

policies of SVOD as a distinct type of internet-distributed television, I use audiences as my “methodology” or “perspective” to analyze these services, especially Netflix. The main reason is that, as discussed above, Netflix is a subscriber-funded service. Audience demand, desires, and experience are crucial for the SVOD industry, even more than before. And this time, they serve many different audience segments and groups that are “minorities” in their tastes. As Netflix calls them, this new type of SVOD audience belongs to “taste clusters,” and they belong to “taste communities” (Lotz, 2022). The future will show if these taste communities will evolve into something more mainstream and mass and if Netflix will limit content diversification due to increasing market competition. For many participants of this research, Netflix currently relies too much upon formulas and semi-genres it obtains from the audience data, which one of the participants defined as “tasting the uncooked egg in a dish.” To sum up, studying Netflix or SVOD audiences does not only require a new approach but also studying services themselves requires audience insight because they are now in a more intricate and intimate relationship with these services in their quotidian lives.

MUBI’s case, on the other hand, serves as a counter-example to the individualization discourse of Netflix, which offers many types of content with different “qualities.” This research shows that even when a service does not directly use a personalized interface and recommendation system based on user taste, even VOD technology alone is a crucial factor in audience emotions and experience. Accessing specific content at one’s schedule and desired space -on-demand- is an essential factor that structures audiences’ personalized, emotional, and intimate relationship with these services. MUBI chapter also shows how Netflix became a new form of television for most audiences and a reference point when discussing their experiences with other services and content providers. As one of the participants stated, “It is the new, updated version of TV” in its pros and cons.

This study contributes both to the literature on Netflix (and other streaming services) and audience research on internet television viewers by remarking on the significance of audience experience and emotions. On the one hand, it challenges the discourse of freedom of choice and control that defines the streaming era by pointing out the limitations and disadvantages of a non-linear schedule and overabundant content for the audiences. On the other hand, this research

imagines the streaming era as a complex period, which is still in an early stage, and aims to bring out the contradictory aspects and disadvantages, as well as the advantages it provides to the audiences. The last empirical chapter engages in textual analysis of two comedy shows commissioned by the local streaming service, BluTV, and argues that there is a significant potential for a creative and industrial space that streaming provides to the producers, creators, and audiences.

6.3 Netflix as a “New Medium”

The third empirical chapter focuses on SVOD audiences and the VOD landscape in Turkey, and it transitions to the last empirical chapter, which discusses two series commissioned by a local SVOD service, BluTV. One of the distinctive features of Netflix as an SVOD is its global identity, and its localization strategies drastically differ from country to country. The third and fourth empirical chapters contribute to the localization literature on Netflix and SVOD by focusing on the audience's tastes and local stories. The third empirical chapter provides a detailed context on the media ecosystem in that VOD emerged in Turkey through a comparison between Netflix Turkey and BluTV. The first and third empirical chapters are constructed on the insights of the same participants but look into different parts of their very complex identities. Since their local identity was too complex to discuss within the first empirical chapter, it extended into a new chapter, where their experiences with Netflix are discussed in relation to local VOD services, broadcast television culture, local regulation and censorship, and the availability of illegal streaming.

While the second empirical chapter on MUBI provides a global counter-example for Netflix, the third empirical chapter provides a local case. The first three empirical chapters are connected through a strong pattern that appeared throughout the empirical research: The central position of Netflix as a vantage point. Participants talk about their experiences with other services and content providers *in reference to* and *in relation to* Netflix. Therefore, even in cases like the MUBI chapter, where participants are not directly inquired about their use of Netflix, they prefer to define their experience of MUBI in relation to Netflix. On the other hand, broadcast television also emerges as a strong reference point. However, Netflix is more central to the participants' experiences. Netflix itself is discussed mainly in relation to or *as* broadcast television. Rather

than the general categories such as VOD or SVOD, audiences perceive Netflix as a representative of their recent experience with internet-distributed television. Instead of a new distribution channel, Netflix is considered a “new medium” in its own right and resists any other categories in the eyes of the audiences. The first three empirical chapters are not only thematically connected in terms of their focus on changing audience habits and behavior with VOD but also empirically in their findings. Even though Netflix is certainly not a new medium, this research shows that this fact does not prevent the audiences from imagining, perceiving, and talking about it as a new medium. I believe this bottom-to-top or audience-to-industry approach contributes to the attempts to define “what Netflix is” in industrial terms and redirects attention to how it is *experienced*.

Lastly, the final empirical chapter focuses on content and engages in mostly textual analysis and inquiries into the creation/production side. This fourth empirical chapter examines how SVOD’s subscriber-based revenue model transforms the stories without the restrictions or norms of linear television. While analyzing two comedy series commissioned by BluTV, this chapter illustrates how SVOD opens a creative space even in a strong environment of regulation and censorship. The cases discussed in this chapter are especially significant for the literature on VOD because the case of Turkey illustrates how SVOD and internet-distributed television also offers a more visible arena of political freedom. This chapter is mainly connected to the third empirical chapter on Netflix Turkey and BluTV since it discusses how and why there is a certain locality and complexity of taste through textual examples. It shows why specific stories have different cultural and political meanings for different audiences and how these meanings are created not only within the text but also in the minds of the audiences. Therefore, although the last empirical chapter does not focus directly on the audiences, it illustrates how stories commissioned for SVOD audiences aim to appeal to their distinct and diverse desires rather than a mass audience, as in broadcast television.

6.4 Limitations and Suggestions

This dissertation is designed as a 'stapler thesis' with separate articles, according to Koç University’s Ph.D. program regulations. While this format provides extensive space to delve into different empirical objects and deal with distinct issues, its eclectic structure makes it difficult to

bring together four empirical chapters within a general framework. The introduction section, with an extensive literature review, aims to relate four empirical chapters by providing a general framework.

Another limitation of this dissertation was its subject matter's ephemeral and rapidly changing nature. When I started my research in 2017, there were few VOD services other than Netflix, and it was still in its “innovative disruptor” phase. The dissertation was initially designed to explore the disruptive potential of SVOD and its radical effects on audiences. However, many other global and local competitors entered the industry quickly, and Netflix changed its content and business strategies drastically. Netflix has been a very challenging empirical object due to its unstable identity. These challenges led me to work on the audience since the VOD industry was in a constant flux of disruption and transformation.

However, studying audiences also had shortcomings because, contrary to broadcast television, there is no reliable publicly available data about Netflix or any other VOD audiences. One of the difficulties I faced was that the subject I was working on was too up-to-date, and there were almost no studies on VOD/SVOD audiences. The lack of literature on VOD, Netflix, and their audiences turned into an overabundance of studies on Netflix in the last few years as the industry boomed. The instability and chaos in the industry were also reflected in these studies, and there was much (creative) confusion about what Netflix is and how to study it. On the other hand, audiences remained the least studied part of the on-demand era.

The chaotic environment of SVOD accelerated with the Covid-19 pandemic, where audience habits drastically changed as people started to spend more time at home. While it was a very interesting opportunity to observe such a rapid and mandatory change in audience habits, separating the effects of VOD and the pandemic on their behavior was challenging. I conducted my interviews at the beginning and during the pandemic (2020-2021) via Zoom, which had advantages and disadvantages for this research. While internet issues or other distractions disrupted the interviews, the availability to record the interviews allowed me to rewatch them and observe the feelings and expressions of the participants. On the other hand, participant observation and field research under these circumstances were difficult, and because of the pandemic precautions, I had to limit the research to online interviews. Another limitation was the timing of the research, which was before the peak era and widespread adoption of streaming services in Turkey. The audience sample discussed in this study cannot be considered

representative of today's streaming audiences - especially Netflix- in Turkey because the popularity of streaming services drastically increased after this research. Therefore, the findings of this study should be evaluated within a certain time limit in order to observe the audience's behavior, especially in the first transition period to internet television.

The VOD industry is in its golden age, where many major players, such as Disney+, Amazon Prime, and HBO Max, and local services, such as Gain, Exxen, and Tabii, entered the game. While Netflix is having financial difficulties and started considering transitioning to a half-advertising-based model, audiences started to adapt to on-demand technologies irreversibly. Therefore, while the industry is becoming more stable and creating a new "status quo," further research may focus on how audiences experience and navigate this chaotic environment. It is also crucial to ask how audience engagement with the content is affected by external factors such as social media and the attention economy - and how stories fit into this atmosphere of excess in terms of narrative, aesthetics, and, most importantly, rhythm. Thus the more direct and two-sided interaction between audiences and stories in subscriber-based on-demand media will offer more perspectives for future research.

Possible future research can also take a potential route in a larger context, focusing on distinct features of on-demand audiences in terms of gender identity/identification, ethnicity, or class. Adopting a hybrid methodology combining qualitative and quantitative methods can deepen the audience's insights, and the focus group and watch-party method can provide a route to observe viewing behaviors both in private and social viewing environments. The production dynamics can also be integrated into the audience research in a comparative manner through interviews with cultural gatekeepers/opinion leaders, producers, executives, and creators that work in local streaming services. Netflix has become a crucial industry player globally and locally, transforming not only the viewing practices and consumption of content but also the production, distribution, and exhibition of films and series, also structurally affecting the organization of film festivals. Future research can adopt a more relational approach by comparatively examining industry, creators, and audiences to evaluate the position of streaming services in terms of communication technologies and conceptualize them in the context of communication models and theories.

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Annex 1.

BİLGİLENDİRİLMİŞ GÖNÜLLÜ OLUR FORMU

Koç Üniversitesi *Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Tasarım, Teknoloji ve Toplum Bölümü* doktora öğrencisi **Aslı Ildır** tarafından yürütülen, Koç Üniversitesi Etik Kurulları'nın 2020.340.IRB3.127 sayılı onayı ile izin verilen, "Talep Üzerine Kültür ve Seyirci: Dijital Televizyonda Çağında Türkiyeli Seyircinin Davranış Pratiklerini Anlamak" başlıklı araştırmaya katılımınız rica olunmaktadır.

Bu araştırmaya tamamen kendi iradenizle, herhangi bir zorlama veya mecburiyet olmadan gönüllü olarak katılımınız esastır. Lütfen katılmaya karar vermeden önce anlamadığınız herhangi bir husus varsa çekinmeden sorunuz.

ÇALIŞMANIN AMACI (Neden böyle bir araştırma yapmaya gerek duyuldu?)

Bu çalışma artan dijital platform kullanımıyla beraber değişen dizi ve film izleme alışkanlıklarının izleyicinin seçim süreci üzerindeki etkisini gözlemlemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

PROSEDÜRLER

Bu çalışmaya gönüllü katılmak istemeniz halinde yürütülecek çalışmalar şöyledir:

Size kullandığınız dijital platformlar ile ilgili çeşitli sorular soracağım. Bu sorular dijital platformları kullanma deneyiminiz, içerik tercihleriniz ve film/dizi izleme alışkanlıklarınız üzerine olacak. Bu sorular üzerine bir saate yakın bir görüşme gerçekleştireceğiz. Bu görüşme sırasında izin vermeniz halinde ses kaydı yapacağım. Görüşmenin ardından bu ses kaydı tarafımdan deşifre edilip metin haline getirilecek ve araştırmada kullanılacaktır. Ses kaydınız ya da isminiz hiç kimse ile paylaşılmayacak, ses kaydı olarak hiçbir yerde kullanılmayacak ve araştırma projesinin tamamlanmasının ardından silinecektir.

OLASI RİSKLER VE RAHATSIZLIKLAR

Görüşme sırasında rahatsız olduğunuz ya da cevabı kayıt dışı tutulsun istediğiniz bir soru olursa belirtmeniz halinde ses kaydı kesilecektir.

TOPLUMA VE/VEYA GÖNÜLLÜLERE OLASI FAYDALARI

Gönüllü katkınız gittikçe yaygınlaşan dijital platformların izleyici alışkanlıkları üzerindeki etkisini incelediğimiz araştırmada büyük önem taşımaktadır. Sizin ve diğer katılımcıların desteği ile literatürde eksikliği bilinen bir konuda bilim dünyasına katkıda bulunulacaktır.

GİZLİLİK

Bu çalışmayla bağlantılı olarak elde edilen ve sizinle özdeşleşmiş her bilgi gizli kalacak, 3. kişilerle paylaşılmayacak ve yalnızca sizin izniniz ile ifşa edilecektir.

KATILIM VE AYRILMA

Bu çalışmanın içinde olmak isteyip istemediğinize tamamen kendi iradenizle ve etki altında kalmadan karar vermeniz önemlidir.

Katılmaya karar verdikten sonra, herhangi bir anda sahip olduğunuz herhangi bir hakkı kaybetmeden veya herhangi bir yaptırıma maruz kalmadan istediğiniz zaman ayrılabilirsiniz.

ARAŞTIRMACILARIN KİMLİĞİ

Bu araştırma ile ilgili herhangi bir sorunuz veya endişeniz varsa, lütfen iletişime geçiniz:

Aslı Ildır

e-posta: aildir17@ku.edu.tr

Telefon: 0536 247 37 37

Yukarıda yapılan açıklamaları anladım. Sorularım tatmin olacağım şekilde yanıtlandı.

Dilediğim zaman ayrılma hakkım saklı kalmak koşulu ile bu çalışmaya katılmayı onaylıyorum. Bu formun bir kopyası da bana verildi.

Katılımcı Adı-Soyadı

Katılımcı İmzası

Tarih

Araştırmacının İmzası

Tarih

INFORMED CONSENT FORM (TRANSLATION)

You are kindly requested to participate in the research entitled “On-Demand Audiences”: Understanding The Streaming-era Viewing Practices For Audiences In Turkey, approved by the ethical committee decision no. 2020.340.IRB3.127 and conducted by Aslı Ildır, a Ph.D Candidate at the Institute of Social Sciences Department of Design, Technology and Society at Koç University.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY (Why was such a research needed?)

This study aims to observe the effect of changing television and film watching behavior with the increasing use of streaming services on the audience's selection process.

PROCEDURES

If you participate in this study voluntarily, the works to be carried out are as follows:

We will interview you for up to an hour on specific questions about the streaming services you use. These questions will be about your experience using streaming services, your content preferences and your movie/series watching habits. If you give permission, I will record your voice during the interview. After the interview, this audio recording will be deciphered, translated into text and used in research.

POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORT

If you are uncomfortable during the interview or if there is a question you want to ask, you can stop the interview and tell your concern or ask your question.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY AND / OR VOLUNTEERS

Your voluntary contribution is of great importance in our research on illustrating the effects of digital platforms and streaming services on audience behavior and habits. With your and other participants' support, we will make contribution to the literature on audience studies on an understudied field.

PRIVACY

Any information obtained in connection to this study and identified with you, will remain confidential and will not be shared with third parties. It will only be disclosed with your consent.

PARTICIPATION AND LEAVE

It is important that you decide whether you want to be involved in this work or not, entirely of your own free will and without any influence. Once you have decided to participate, you can leave at any time without losing any of your rights or being subject to any sanctions.

IDENTITY OF THE RESEARCHERS

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research, please contact:
Aslı Ildır / e-mail: aildir17@ku.edu.tr / Phone: 05362473737

I understood the explanations above. I am satisfied with the answers to my questions. I approve to participate in this study, that I reserve the right to leave at any time. A copy of this form was also given to me.

Name of the Participant

Signature of the Participant

Date

Signature of the Researcher

Date

Annex 2.

SET OF QUESTIONS

- From which channels or media do you watch the TV series you follow and the movies you want to watch?
- Do you have a TV in your house? Are there any programs you follow on TV?
- Which streaming services do you use?
- Why do you prefer these services?
- When and how did you first encounter with these services?
- How long have you been using these services and how long do you plan to use them?
- Can you describe what is “quality content” for you? Do you think the quality of the content varies from service to service?
- Do you have the habit of watching TV series or movies with your family or friends?
- What does the act of “watching TV” mean to you right now?

If you are using Netflix:

- What were your expectations before using Netflix, did you find what you hoped for?
- Is Netflix easy to access in technological terms?
- What devices do you use Netflix on?
- How do you decide what content to watch on Netflix?
- What do you think of the content on Netflix?
- What do you think about Netflix's domestic original productions? (*The Protector, Gift, Love 101* etc.)
- Does the content that Netflix provides, selects and recommends for you appeal to your taste?
- Do you feel that your taste has changed with the recommendations by Netflix?
- Do you think you have enough choice when deciding what to watch? Do you want more options? Which options would you like to have more?
- How would you describe your viewing experience? Do you watch episodes of the series consecutively or with breaks?

If you are using BluTV:

- What were your expectations before using BluTV, did you find what you hoped for?

- Is BluTV easy to access in technological terms?
- What devices do you use BluTV on?
- How do you decide what content to watch on BluTV?
- What do you think of the content on BluTV?
- What do you think about BluTV's original productions? (*Innocent*, *7 Yüz*, etc.)
- Does the content that BluTV provides, selects and recommends for you appeal to your taste?
- Do you think you have enough choice when deciding what to watch? Do you want more options? Which options would you like to have more?
- How would you describe your viewing experience? Do you watch episodes of the series consecutively or with breaks?

If you are using MUBI:

- What were your expectations before using MUBI, did you find what you hoped for?
- Is MUBI easy to access in technological terms?
- What devices do you use MUBI on?
- How do you decide what content to watch on MUBI? Which recommendation sources do you search before you choose a film?
- What do you think of the content on MUBI?
- What do you think about MUBI's special screenings for audiences in Turkey, especially local independent films?
- Does the content that MUBI provides, selects and recommends for you appeal to your taste?
- Do you think you have enough choice when deciding what to watch? Do you want more options? Which options would you like to have more?
- How would you describe your viewing experience?
- Does the limited time and choice model affect your viewing experience? How would you compare it to your experience with Netflix/BluTV or any other streaming services you use?

Annex 3.

CODING SCHEME INTERVIEWS

1. Streaming Services - Viewing Behavior and Habits

- 1.1 description of viewing practices and environment
 - 1.1.1. viewing devices and services
 - 1.1.2. viewing environment
 - 1.1.3. viewing style (binge-watching, episode per week, with or without breaks)
 - 1.1.4. individual viewing
 - 1.1.5. social viewing (with family and friends)
 - 1.1.6. behavior before and after viewing
 - 1.1.7. convenience/inconvenience with the technology and platform interface
 - 1.1.8. other activities during (second screens, messaging friends and family, eating, sleeping)
- 1.2. reasons/motivations for viewing
- 1.3. importance type of content
- 1.4. changes in time
 - 1.4.1. viewing just after the initial subscription
 - 1.4.2. most recent viewing and differences from the beginning
 - 1.4.3. frequency of viewing just after the initial subscription
 - 1.4.4. most recent frequency of viewing
- 1.5. emotional experience (choice fatigue, addiction, laziness, stress...)

2. Content Choice and Recommendation of the Services

- 2.1. views on different choice models
 - 2.1.1. “limitless” choice, broad catalog/library (Netflix, BluTV)
 - 2.1.2. limited choice and time, limited catalog/library (MUBI)
- 2.2. views on the recommendation system
 - 2.2.1. advanced recommendation system based on algorithm (Netflix)
 - 2.2.2. less advanced recommendation based on manual curation + user data (BluTV)
 - 2.2.3. manual recommendation and curation (MUBI)
- 2.3. influence of recommendation systems on taste/content preference
- 2.4. influence of recommendation systems on viewing behavior
- 2.5. influence of recommendation systems on viewing frequency
- 2.6. influence of recommendation systems on the relationship between the user and streaming services

2.7. Choice Fatigue and Alternatives

2.6.1. other forms of recommendation (word-of-mouth, social circle, Youtubers, critics)

2.6.2. random selection (bringing back the “flow” in broadcast television)

3. Content

3.1. Netflix content

3.1.1. use of formulas, genre shows, period pieces

3.1.2. catchy stories, cliffhangers, and addiction

3.1.3. geographical and thematic diversity in stories

3.1.4. repetitions and clichés

3.1.5. self-orientalism and orientalism in local series

3.1.6. comparison with broadcast television

3.1.7. general quality of content

3.1.8. comparison between quality of local and global content

3.2. BluTV content

3.2.1. diverse stories, characters, genres, and themes

3.2.2. “locality” of local content

3.2.3. differences from Netflix content

3.2.4. differences from broadcast television content

3.2.4. differences from other local streaming services

3.3. MUBI content

3.3.1. arthouse cinema

3.3.2. auteur cinema

3.3.3. festival films

3.3.4. niche content

3.3.5. cinema like experience

3.3.6. intellectual labor

3.3.7 differences from Netflix and other streaming services

Annex 4:

SAMPLE MATRIX RESPONDENTS

Respondent (alias)	Age at the time of the interview	Gender Identification	Country of birth	Current Residence	Living situation	Professional Situation	Education	Streaming Services They Use
AKIN	24	Male	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship, no children, living with friends	Student	Undergraduate	MUBI
ARDA	30	Male	Turkey	Turkey	No partner, living with friends	Civil Society Professional	Master's Degree	Netflix, BluTV, MUBI
AYŞE	63	Female	Turkey	Turkey	Married with children	Retired	Undergraduate	Netflix
BARAN	23	Male	Turkey	Turkey	No partner, living with family	Master's Student	Undergraduate	Netflix, BluTV
BERK	30	Male	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship, living alone	Computer Engineer	Master's Degree	Netflix, MUBI
BUKET	58	Female	Turkey	Turkey	married with children	Environmental Engineer	Undergraduate	MUBI
CANAN	30	Female	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship, living with friends	Actor	Master's Degree	Netflix, MUBI
DORUK	19	Male	Turkey	Turkey	No partner, living with family	Student	Undergraduate	Netflix, MUBI

DEFNE	24	Female	Turkey	Turkey	living with partner, no children	Student	Master's Degree	Netflix, MUBI, BluTV
DENİZ	39	Female	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship, no children, living alone	Journalist	Undergraduate	Netflix, MUBI
DİDEM	29	Female	Turkey	UK	In a relationship, living alone	Research Assistant	PhD	MUBI
EMRE	42	Male	Turkey	Turkey	living with partner	Editor	Master's Degree	MUBI
HAKAN	53	Male	Turkey	Turkey	Married with children	Retired	Undergraduate	Netflix, BluTV
HANDAN	32	Female	Turkey	Turkey	No partner, living alone	Marketing Manager	Undergraduate	Netflix, BluTV, MUBI
HAYAL	29	Female	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship, no children, living alone	Social Media Manager	Undergraduate	Netflix, MUBI
İLAY	27	Female	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship, living alone	PhD Student	Master's Degree	Netflix, BluTV
İREM	30	Female	Turkey	Turkey	No partner, living alone	Sales Executive	Undergraduate	Netflix, BluTV
KEMAL	50	Male	Turkey	Turkey	married with children	Creative Director	Undergraduate	Netflix, BluTV, MUBI
MEHMET	59	Male	Turkey	Turkey	Married with children	Mechanical Engineer	Undergraduate	Netflix, BluTV
MELİH	43	Male	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship	Game Designer	Master's	Netflix, BluTV,

					living alone		Degree	MUBI
MELİS	25	Female	Turkey	France	living with partner, no children	Student	Undergraduate	Netflix, BluTV, MUBI
MURAT	54	Male	Turkey	Turkey	married with children	Civil Engineer	Undergraduate	Netflix, MUBI
OSMAN	29	Male	Turkey	Turkey	No partner, living alone	Blue-collar worker	High School	Netflix, MUBI
OLCAY	49	Female	Turkey	Turkey	Married with children	Industrial Designer	Master's Degree	Netflix, MUBI,
ORHAN	23	Male	Turkey	Turkey	No partner, living with family	Sales Executive	Undergraduate	Netflix, BluTV, MUBI
ÖZGÜR	40	Male	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship, living alone	Film Director	Undergraduate	Netflix, BluTV
SEDA	29	Female	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship, living alone	Editor	Master's Degree	MUBI
SELİN	31	Female	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship, living alone	Film Acquisitions Executive	Master's Degree	Netflix, BluTV, MUBI
SEZEN	64	Female	Turkey	Turkey	Married with children	Retired	Undergraduate	Netflix
ZEYNEP	30	Female	Turkey	Turkey	In a relationship, living with friends	Screenwriter	Undergraduate	Netflix, BluTV, MUBI

Annex 5.

Chapter 4. Netflix in Turkey: Localization and audience expectations from video on demand

Doctorandus, Aslı Ildır: Data collection and analyses, application of the method, revising of the manuscript

Supervisor, Prof. İpek Çelik Rappas: setup of the method, data analyses, critical feedback on the study and method, revising of the manuscript

This paper is a co-authored article written with my supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. İpek Çelik Rappas. To collaborate in this research, we first followed audience reactions and feedback for different streaming services on social media. After this process, I conducted in-depth interviews. After we collected the data from the audiences, we started to work on the theoretical framework.

After we completed the empirical research and theoretical framework, we wrote the bibliography and did the formatting together. When we received the reviews from the journal, we discussed and worked on some parts of the article before re-submitting it with the corrections.

Since it was the first article that I completed during my degree, I became familiar with the article format and the process of co-authoring. Therefore, the process of writing this article was a crucial phase for my training in academic writing.