

# TRANSNATIONAL AUDIENCES OF TURKISH DRAMAS: THE CASE OF SWEDEN<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The Swedish public service television company, SVT (Sveriges Television), has been airing Turkish dramas regularly for the past decade. By examining the reception of Turkish TV series in Sweden, this ongoing research aims to shed light on the cultural exchange between the two countries and to contribute to ongoing debates surrounding the role of television series in facilitating transcultural encounters. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the audience's reception of Turkish television series in Sweden, this study employs in-depth interviews with loyal viewers, bloggers who wrote about Turkish dramas and executives at SVT and the Eccho Rights distribution company, which played a role in bringing these series to Sweden. This approach allows for a nuanced examination of the motivations, perceptions, and experiences surrounding the broadcast and reception of Turkish TV series in Sweden. The paper concludes that Turkish TV series that appeal to Swedish audiences with a range of unique and compelling elements tend to create loyal audiences with strong ties to these shows.

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## INTRODUCTION

Turkish TV series have entered international circulation at an increasing rate since the 2000s and have reached a wide range of audiences, especially in the Middle East, the Balkans, East Europe, and Central Asia (Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu 2016). The popularity and remarkable transnational success of Turkish TV drama series continued with new audiences from different countries in Latin America, the Far East (Doğanay and Atik 2016) and Nordic countries.<sup>2</sup> Universal themes such as love, passion, intrigue, conflicts, virtue, betrayal, honor, life, death, and family values, which express the feelings of the global audience and touch their emotions, have a high share in the global success of TV dramas around the world. These themes are handled extensively in Turkish TV series. Plenty of academic studies on the international success of Turkish TV series focus on geo-cultural and geo-linguistic factors; debates such as cultural proximity, cultural diplomacy, and globalization; elements such as production quality and images of modernity, and they are mainly carried out with a political-economic perspective (Karlıdağ and Bulut 2014; Yeşil 2015; Öztürk and Atik 2016; Berg 2017; Özalpman 2017; Kaptan and Algan 2020). The transnational reception of Turkish TV series is limited to a few studies (Uysal 2011; Yanardağoğlu and İmad 2013; Anaz 2014; Çaylı Rahte 2017; Aslan 2019; Saleem and Sadik 2021; Suhud et al. 2021) focusing on why and how Turkish TV series are watched in the Middle East, the Balkans, and Latin America.<sup>3</sup>

Audio-visual narratives play a vital role in the formation of social imagination. In transnational cultural encounters mediated by the media, challenging or strengthening stereotypes about “cultural others” is highly related to cultural proximity, awareness, or perception of cultural distance. Based on this basic assumption, this paper reports on some early findings and discussions from my ongoing research project with the main goal of exploring how Turkish TV series are received and how they contribute to the image of Turkey in the minds

of the audience in Sweden. In my research, I aim to examine the connection between the “real” interactions that people have in their daily lives and the extended, “mediated” encounters that are prevalent in a media-saturated society, in order to understand the cultural and social context in which the audience experiences these encounters. This will involve analyzing the role that media plays in shaping the audience’s perception of reality.

I also aim to examine the “lived experiences” (Yoon 2018) of the audience as they engage with television dramas, with a focus on understanding their motivations for choosing and watching certain shows. I seek to explore how the audience perceives and relates to these dramas and how they incorporate them into their daily lives. This will involve analyzing the ways in which the audience uses and shares these shows in their everyday routines. In other words, I want to understand and interpret the “media practices” of the audiences. Nick Couldry (2004, 2012) suggested the concept of “media practices” as comprising acts performed through – and pre-conditioned upon – media. Media practices are open sets of practices that cannot be analyzed narrowly with a text-centered focus but through a holistic perspective catching all-encompassing attendance to practices manifesting around different media uses and their consequences on social practices and meanings of the social world (Couldry 2012; Seufferling 2022). “Media practices” have been figured out with a scope of media itself as well.

Apart from the fieldwork, qualitative content analysis has been employed to find out how Turkish TV series are covered, discussed, or commented on in the Swedish online media. I try to answer what media content the Swedish audiences create via blogs, social media groups and internet forums. Although they are watched by large audience groups in East Europe and some other European countries as well, such as Spain and Sweden, there is no specific audience research on Turkish dramas in these areas. Sweden has been broadcasting Turkish TV series on its national channels since 2013.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, my research examines why and how Swedish audiences watch Turkish TV series by examining the audience of these programs, related media coverage, and

2 “How popular are Turkish TV series in Latin America?” <https://www.quora.com/How-popular-are-Turkish-TV-series-in-Latin-America> (last accessed 12-11-2022).

“Anders Björkman: Best new foreign series is Turkish” <https://www.expressen.se/noje/recensioner/tv/anders-bjorkman-basta-nya-utlandska-serie-ar-turkisk/> (last accessed 12-11-2022).

3 Apart from the transnational audiences of Turkish television series, there is a limited amount of research on the diasporic and transnational audiences of Turkish films (Kevin Smets 2013) or diasporic media cultures of Turkish immigrants (Çiğdem Bozdağ et. al. 2012).

4 In the order of broadcasting dates on SVT, so far, six Turkish television series have been broadcasted on the Swedish national broadcasting channel: *Son “The End-Lögnen”* (2013), *20 Dakika “20 Minutes-20 Minuter”* (2014), *Paramparça “Broken Pieces-Förväxlingen”* (2016), *Cesur ve Güzel “Brave and Beautiful-Hämnad och Kärlek”* (2019), *Anne “Mother-Modern och Dottern”* (2020), *Kırmızı Oda “The Red Room-Själens Röda Rum* (2021). “Själens röda rum” is in the “popular” category of SVT play “series” list.

those who buy TV serials for distribution in Sweden. The reception study includes audience ethnography (in-depth interviews with Swedish audiences that vary by ethnicity, gender, age, and occupation), interviews (with purchasing officers and sales managers of Swedish national channels, distribution, and copyright companies), and content analysis (the coverage of Turkish TV series in Swedish online media and social media platforms). The analysis from the Swedish online media will provide a deeper understanding of the cultural aspects of the relationship between the Swedish audience and Turkish TV series and complement the findings from the field. However, the focus of this article is on the early findings of my field research, which does not include an analysis of the media coverage, a key element within the scope of my overall research.

The theoretical framework of the research centers on the synthesis of national, transnational, collective, and subjective elements (Bondebjerg 2020) of cultural encounters in the imagination of the audience. In this paper, I briefly describe the theoretical stance of the research and its connection to the fieldwork and provide some highlights from my interviews with Swedish viewers, bloggers who wrote about Turkish dramas, and officials from SVT and Echo Rights, I also mention the difficulties I have experienced in the field and my strategies for coping with the obstacles I have encountered. In line with Sweden's diverse and multicultural population, the Swedish audience for Turkish television series includes viewers of Nordic, Baltic, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern backgrounds, as well as members of the Turkish diaspora. This reflects the broad appeal of these series among a range of cultural groups in Sweden. In my ongoing field research, I try to capture the diversity of the audience for Turkish television series in Sweden, including viewers of various cultural backgrounds. By conducting interviews with the viewers from the Turkish diaspora, which are still in progress and therefore not reflected in this paper, I investigate the meaning of the aura (Kaptan 2020) created by Turkish TV series in the lives of diasporic viewers of Turkish origin, who watch these series in order to maintain a connection to their cultural heritage. Apart from the general audience, the research will also include interviews with Swedish journalists, media professionals, and a lot more bloggers who have an interest in or have written or broadcasted about Turkish dramas are also in progress.

## 1. THE THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAME OF THE RESEARCH AND ITS RELATION TO THE FIELDWORK

### 1.1. Audience ethnographies in the context of diasporic transnationalism

In *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (1995) Marie Gillespie focuses on "TV Talk" of adolescent British Asians living in London. She concluded that media talk provided the young audience with resources to mediate among the native culture, the dominant culture, and the global culture through the process of self-narration and cultural translation. Gillespie's study provides evidence that TV can be a powerful tool in mediating cultural identity and providing a platform for exploration and exchange of different cultural values and beliefs. By examining the experiences and perspectives of the diasporic viewers, this study sheds light on the role of Turkish TV series in shaping identity and fostering a sense of belonging among members of the diaspora.

In her study *Diaspora, Identity and the Media: Diasporic Transnationalism and Mediated Spatialities* (2006), Myria Georgiou carried out an in-depth study of the media consumption of the Greek/Greek Cypriot communities in London and New York. She observed that the diasporic media contributed substantially to the everyday living and identity negotiation of individuals. Georgiou pointed out that the diasporic media created a diasporic community, members of which have a perspective beyond the nation-state and cosmopolitan understanding of the self and their community. Media consumption helped to reinforce diasporic identities, as well as to create a sense of shared values and collective memory. Furthermore, she argued that media consumption was a way for individuals to maintain links between the diaspora and their homeland. Therefore, the acceptance and fascination of Turkish series by viewers in Sweden is particularly significant for Turkish-origin viewers in terms of preserving their connection to their country of origin.

The term "diaspora" has been widely used for any group which has migrated away from its homeland. The notion of "diaspora" is related to the idea of cultural dislocation. Members of diaspora retain a conscious or subconscious attachment to the traditions, customs, values, religions, and languages of their ancestral home. Home may be far removed in time and space, but they constantly return to it through an act of imagination – they return to "imaginary homelands"

(Eswari 2014: 28). Diaspora identities produce and reproduce themselves through transformation and differences (Hall 1997).

In their prominent research on how Turkish families living in London receive Turkish channels in their daily life, Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy (2005) have improved the conceptualization of “cultural de-mythologisation”. They discovered that following Turkish media content had a “demystifying” effect on diasporic audiences by presenting them with a closer look into their homeland. Keeping up with Turkish media content creates a sort of realistic insight by preventing nostalgic idealization tendencies and cultural mythologisation. The conceptualization of Robins and Aksoy is used in the research to interpret the Turkish-Swedish audiences’ reception of Turkish dramas and the imagery of Turkey in their minds.

The global circulation of media content has increased the importance of discussing transnational cultural encounters in audience research. Adopting the idea that there is a creative interaction between transnational and indigenous cultures, Tristan Mattelart (2010) suggests that audiences create new cultural forms by synthesizing foreign cultural forms with their local realities. In the context of television series audiences, global media content can be seen as fostering reflexivity and contributing to the development of a critical perspective by encouraging audiences to reflect on their everyday lives. On a global scale, the audience is presented with imagery that they can easily relate to and interpret using their own cultural codes, leading to a sense of similarity and connection (Çaylı Rahte 2017). This study intends to capture the self-reflexivity of audiences in their relationship with Turkish dramas.

To figure out how they make sense of the stories and self-reflective dialogues in Turkish TV series within the context of their everyday lives and to uncover dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading practices by audiences, I informed them about the current criticisms of Turkish TV series to help them construct their critiques from different perspectives. First, I mentioned how Turkish dramas are praised for their high production quality and for effectively addressing universal themes and emotions. Then, I asked what the best parts of Turkish dramas are and why these dramas have caught their attention. I also reminded them that Turkish dramas have been criticized for reproducing traditional gender roles and discriminatory discourses, promoting violence against vulnerable groups, particularly against women, and for issues with representation such as “symbolic annihilation”, misrepresentation or underrepresentation of women, differ-

ent gender groups, LGBTs, ethnic groups, age discrimination, and class prejudices.

To gain insight into how participants interpret and make sense of Nordic TV dramas and other dramas from different nations, I asked if they also watch Nordic dramas, Korean dramas, and Latin American dramas. I requested that participants compare these different genres, if they have any knowledge about. These types of questions allowed a comparative analysis of the way national, transnational, collective, and subjective elements of cultural encounters are synthesized in the imagination of the viewer. I adapted Ib Bondebjerg’s three categories, namely:

- *Subjective encounters* (the link that the audience establishes between their own personal life and the stories presented in media narratives)
- *Collective encounters* (knitted around the sense of “we”, local, regional, national and transnational patterns and partnerships and separations established by variables such as class, gender, etc.)
- *Universal cognitive-emotional encounters* (themes such as death, love, etc. of people in different parts of the world) (Bondebjerg 2020).

I collected stories about the participants’ personal ties, attachments, and encounters with Turkish dramas. I asked the viewers if they had any ties to Turkey through their origin, friendships, or family, and if they had any interest in Turkish culture. That’s why I tried to figure out if they have ties with Turkey in terms of origin, friendships, family members etc.; if they have ever been to Turkey or if they have any special interest in Turkish culture in terms of music, food, traditional arts. etc. During the interviews, I had the opportunity to capture how the subjective elements of each person’s connection with a TV series touched on different aspects of their personal stories. For instance, Helen,<sup>5</sup> one of the interviewees, said she was drawn to the TV series *Red Room* (2021) because her daughter is a psychologist, and she advised her daughter to watch it at the same time. Another viewer, Annika said that she watched the TV series *Mother* (2020) because she had a difficult time balancing work, life, motherhood and all the challenges she had to struggle with. That’s why she was very impressed and inspired by the strong mother character. Another interviewee, Maria expressed her interest in the actors and male characters because she says she has al-

5 Information about the interviews, including the participants, their background information, date and place of the interview can be seen in the “General Information About the Interviewees” table in the next section.

ways found Middle Eastern men very attractive and finally she got married to a Turkish man. More highlights from the interviews can be seen in the next section.

## 1.2. Cultural hybridity and cosmopolitan cultural universe through mediatized everyday life encounters

“Hybridity” is central to the diasporic identity (Bhabha 1994). Diasporic identities are constructs and they are related to “diaspora spaces” which means the intersection of borders where all subjects and identities become “juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed” (Eswari 2014). Following Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) framework, it can be said that the way images circulate globally through media constructs deterritorialized identities. Building on Benedict Anderson’s arguments that “imagined communities” form nations, Appadurai postulates that transnational or postcolonial diasporas are “imagined” through the images produced by mass media. These images flow across the world, blurring boundaries to create new cultural geographies and transcultural identities (Eswari 2014). “Hybrid imagined communities” are “never secluded and bounded away from the Other” (Georgiou 2006: 156) and hybrid individuals find themselves constantly in conversation with the Other in everyday life (Ong 2009). Such encounters are counted as an opportunity for the subject to be ‘decentered’ and thus to become a springboard for redefining boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Levinas 1969). Repeated encounters with differences in the banality of daily life, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah argues (2006: 77, as cited in Ong 2009), have the potential to transform the way we deal with others over time.

The imagination of other cultures is lived and performed in everyday life. Television helps to bring the native culture closer, allowing the local community to familiarize themselves with their native cultural media products while simultaneously offering a view of the global society (Eswari 2014). Thus, television provides the diasporic population with the possibility of navigating seamlessly through diverse worlds to create a “placeless culture” (Meyrowitz 1986). It is assumed that television dramas contribute significantly to the creation of “hybrid audiences” who are already interested in different cultures and who constantly engage in dialogue with their self-identities and cultural belongings. Television dramas create an environment in which audiences can explore and understand different cultures, values, and beliefs. The participants’ comments in my interviews suggest that this

allows viewers to gain a better understanding of their own culture and identity, as well as those of others, and to engage in meaningful dialogue that can lead to greater understanding and acceptance. This can contribute to the cosmopolitan universe where different cultures, values, and beliefs are embraced and interrelated.

“Cultural hybridity” (Burke 2009), defined as a product of the encounter of different cultures, refers to the fusion of different cultures (syncretic culture), a “polyphonic” and “dialogical” cultural environment. Transnational cultural encounters in the global media culture – where cultural diversity and difference are essential – take different forms as the common feelings that audiences share against them (Bondebjerg 2020).

Arguing that the identity is not fixed but fluid, Stuart Hall (1997) established media as a powerful tool in the construction of transcultural identities. He viewed cinema as a form of representation that can constitute the audience as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable them to discover new places and new spaces. Hall’s ideas apply to television dramas as well. Via television dramas, audiences may learn about cultures they are unfamiliar with. Their encounter with the new cultural element contributes to intercultural communication in different dimensions. Related to these points mentioned above, in the interviews I asked the participants how we can interpret the encounters between Nordic and Turkish culture in everyday life routines within the context of intercultural communication. I also asked if they believe Turkish dramas contribute to these cultural encounters and if they could make a comparison between Turkey as depicted on TV dramas and Turkey in everyday life encounters.

In the cosmopolitan cultural universe, which is very much related to cultural hybridity, the imagination of the viewer is shaped through transnational cultural encounters. In Ulf Hannerz’s (1990: 239) famous words, cosmopolitan culture is: “A willingness to engage with the Other”. It entails an intellectual and aesthetic openness towards divergent cultural experiences and a search for contrasts rather than uniformity. Cosmopolitanism as an ‘openness to the world’ is related to the idea of identity as a symbolic project (Thompson 1995), a way of being and becoming (Hall 1996). Cosmopolitanism is an identity that is developed in particular contexts and expressed in different ways to suit particular purposes and, crucially, can be examined empirically by the reception and ethnographic approaches (Ong 2009: 454).

Ulf Hannerz (2007) speaks of an “ethnography of cosmopolitanism” that examines diasporic culture and deals with

cosmopolitan culture in relation to multiculturalism and cultural diversity. At the core of cosmopolitanism is a series of tensions that enable and disable it (Ong 2009). This research employs the reception of Turkish TV series in Sweden within the framework of “cosmopolitanism ethnography” and trace the tensions between closeness and distance, global and local, ‘us’ and ‘them’, universals and particulars in the experiences of the audience.

In this research, which synthesizes the perspective of “ethnography of cosmopolitanism” with “audience ethnography”, field research reveals how it becomes more possible for the audience to be open to interactions with new cultural forms while at the same time maintaining their commitment to the cultural forms they are familiar with. The defining characteristic of the “ethnography of cosmopolitanism” is its ability to document the multiplicity and intersectionality of the various representations and interactions through media, travel, and daily encounters that shape the subject’s multicultural experience. In the field research, interview questions were included to determine the cultural flexibility of the participants and the level of multiculturalism present in their own lives. The objective was to understand the correlation between their interest in various cultures, their everyday life routines, family structure, and their perspectives on cultural diversity. Concerning this point, in the interviews, the participants are asked questions such as how often they travel abroad, whether they encounter people from different cultural backgrounds other than their own, if they have people from different ethnic origins in their family and close circle, etc.

## 2. HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FIELD: INTERVIEWS WITH AUDIENCES, BLOGGERS, SVT AND ECCO RIGHTS OFFICIALS

The highlights from the fieldwork in this article is based on fourteen interviews with the viewers of Turkish TV drama series in Sweden<sup>6</sup> and with the executives of SVT and the distribution company Ecco Rights.<sup>7</sup> Field research that started in the beginning of 2022 is continuing and expected to be com-

pleted with approximately thirty participants until February 2023. The Swedish audiences that vary by ethnicity, gender, age, and occupation are recruited via online advertisements and snowballing (Marcus et al. 2017). In-depth interviews that contained open-ended, semi-structured interview questions lasted approximately one hour and were all conducted in English. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2013) has been used to analyze the data gathered from the interviews. Because the field sites can be multi-sited, digital, or in hybrid forms between the digital and the non-digital (Mortensen 2020), the field in this research is organized considering the preferences of the participants. The interviews are held both in-person and online. Most of the participants preferred online interviews: Seven participants are interviewed online and six are interviewed face-to-face in cafes and workplaces. Their ages range from 27–69 years. The occupations of the audience participants are housewife, nurse, businesswoman, public service worker, entrepreneur, factory worker, academic, financial advisor, and store employee. The nationalities of the audience participants span a large spectrum: German, Spanish, Finnish, Kurdish, Turkish, Syriac, Latvian, Greek and Swedish. The executives who I interviewed gave informed consent for their names to be used. To protect the anonymity of other interviewed audience, pseudonyms compatible with their ethnic origins are used. A short project briefing and interview questions were sent to all participants before the interview, along with the ethical statement.

6 Of the eleven audiences I interviewed, three of them are Swedish bloggers who have been writing about Turkish dramas.

7 I conducted three interviews with the executives of SVT and the distribution company Ecco Rights: Fredrik af Malmborg, Managing director of Ecco Rights (22.02.2022, Zoom); Magdalena Löfström, Then Acquisitions Executive of SVT (23.05.2022, In-person) and Göran Danesten, Then Acquisitions Executive of SVT (22.11.2022, In-person).

Number of The Interview	Name/pseudonym of the interviewees	Brief information about the interviewee	Time and type of the interview
1	<b>Fredrik af Malmborg</b>	Managing director of Echo Rights, an international copyrights company based in Stockholm	22.04.2022-Online (Zoom)
2	<b>Magdalena Löfström</b>	Then Acquisitions Executive of SVT	23.05.2022-In person. Radio Sverige
3	<b>Göran Danasten</b>	Then Head of Fiction at the acquisitions department of SVT	22.11.2022-In person. SVT Drama
4	<b>Helen</b>	63 years old. Mother. German. Academician. Lives in Sweden, Stockholm for 23 years. Her partner is from Argentina.	24.05.2022- In person. Cafe
5	<b>Jose</b>	27 years old. Spanish. Phd student. Lives in Stockholm for 3 years. His father is from Argentina. His partner is from Greece.	20.06.2022-In person. Cafe.
6	<b>Maria</b>	40. Swedish. Mother. Born and raised in Gothenburg. Lives in Gothenburg. Married to a Turkish man. Works at a factory. Has a University education.	29.06.2022-Online (Messenger)
7	<b>Karin</b>	69. Finnish. Retired. Mother. Her ex-husband was from Germany. She lives in Stockholm for 46 years. Her son is married to a Brazilian. She has a blog where she writes about Turkish dramas.	5.07.2022-In person. Cafe
8	<b>Anna</b>	Half Finnish (mother side) Swedish. 53 years old. Living with her two cats. She has a Turkish boyfriend who lives in Turkey. Born and raised in Sweden. Now she lives in a town in Northern Sweden. She started her own business. She is an entrepreneur now.	7.07.2022-Online (Zoom)
9	<b>Annika</b>	Half Turkish (father side) Swedish. Mother. Divorced. Lives in Stockholm. 54 years old. Works in public service.	7.06.2022- Online (Zoom)
10	<b>Melanija</b>	She is 37. Latvian. Her mother is Polish. Her father is Russian. She is married to a Lebanese. They have been living in Sweden for 7 years in a village near Norrköping. She has three kids. She had a Russian and Polish ethnic shop. Her husband has a business in Mersin, Turkey at the moment. Her brother is married to a Brazilian girl.	18.07.2022- Online (Messenger)
11	<b>Evangeline</b>	53. Greek origin. Born and raised in Sweden. Divorced. Head Hunter. Mother. Her ex-husband was born in Romania and grew up in Canada and moved to Sweden in his early 20s. She wrote about Turkish dramas on her blog.	22.07.2022- Online (Zoom)
12	<b>Maya</b>	She lives in Linköping. 28 years old. Her mother comes from Turkey. Her father is from Iran. She was born and raised in Sweden. She is a nurse. She didn't complete her university education. She wrote about Turkish dramas on her blog	22.07.2022-Online (Zoom)
13	<b>Gabriel</b>	He is 22. Born and raised in Stockholm. He is a Syriac. His parents migrated from Midyat. He graduated from high school. Works at a second hand store. He is living with his parents.	15.11.2022-In person. Workplace
14	<b>Zeynep</b>	She is 33. Born and raised in Stockholm. Her parents are from Konya, Kulu. She is single. Works at a cafe.	25.11.2022-In person. Cafe

#### GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE INTERVIEWS AND PARTICIPANTS

## 2.1. The process of reaching out people and persuading them to participate in interviews

The process of recruiting interview participants posed several challenges. First, I needed to find a way to reach Swedish audiences. Where could I meet them? Secondly, once I had located and met them, I needed to persuade them to participate in my research. And the third thing, would I be able to make interviews with all the Swedish audience in English? Would the language become a problem? These were the main obstacles I had to overcome in the field.

In the beginning, I tried to meet people and invite them to my research through in-person encounters in everyday life. For example, when the bank employee at the branch where I opened a bank account learned that I was from Turkey, she said that her mother loved Turkish TV series. The employee at the second-hand store where I shopped said that his family had migrated from Midyat and he watches Turkish TV series with their whole family. When the cashier at an H&M store learned that I was Turkish, she smiled and said that she watches Turkish TV series. Similar things happened several times in supermarkets, bus stops, shoe stores, and other places where I had the opportunity to start conversations. However, when

it came to inviting them to participate in my research, they were a bit shy and not very open to the idea. During my interviews with the manager of the copyright company Ecco Rights and the acquisition executive of SVT television, I asked for their recommendations to find and meet Swedish audiences. They advised me to participate in some fan groups on social media and shared some links to these groups. I then searched for additional social media groups where I could announce my research and invite people to participate. I found several Facebook groups and joined them.

The audience I have interviewed so far has largely consisted of members of these groups<sup>8</sup> and fans of Turkish TV series. I aim to reach a wider variety of audiences, including middle-aged and older women of Nordic origin and audience groups belonging to the Turkish diaspora, by using

<sup>8</sup> In my preliminary search of these groups, I observed that most of the members were Northern European women (from countries such as Sweden, Finland, and Latvia). As the project progresses, I will conduct a detailed content analysis of the group members and their posts to determine:

- The distribution of group members by nationality, age, and gender
- The motivations and preferences of the audience, as revealed by their posts and their engagement with Turkish series
- Whether there are any other Facebook pages or fan groups for Swedish audiences interested in other TV series.

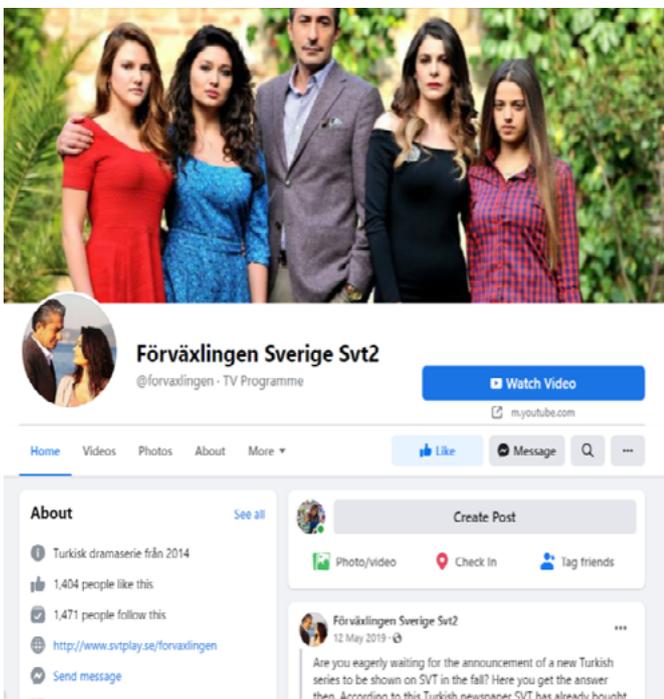


IMAGE 1. SWEDISH FACEBOOK FAN PAGE OF ONE OF THE TURKISH SERIALS BROADCAST ON SVT



IMAGE 2 THE END (2012, 2013) WAS THE FIRST TURKISH SERIES SHOWN ON SVT. IT HAD A FAN PAGE ON FACEBOOK WITH MORE THAN 2000 MEMBERS



IMAGE 3. ONE OF THE "CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS" ANNOUNCEMENTS ON A FACEBOOK GROUP PAGE

different sources such as: WhatsApp groups of Turkish diaspora in Sweden; announcements on various internet forums; and email groups to reach audiences of Nordic descent etc. A sample of the announcements I sent to one of the social media groups can be seen in the image 3 above.

I had the opportunity to meet more people through social media groups and it was easier to find interviewees this way. I was able to make more progress in my fieldwork. Most of them were eager to participate in online interviews. Below is a sample of the announcements I sent to one of the social media groups:

To overcome the potential language barrier during the interviews, I took several steps:

- I offered participants the option of answering the interview questions in writing in Swedish prior to the interview, if they needed to.
- I enrolled in SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) classes to improve my Swedish language skills. This allows me to use some Swedish expressions during the interviews and clarify points in Swedish if necessary.

## 2.2. Highlights from the interviews

### 2.2.1. Encounters, Connections and Attachments of the Swedish Audiences and Bloggers

Based on the early findings of the ongoing interviews, it is possible to say the following about the Swedish audience of Turkish TV series interviewed:

- They travel frequently.
- They are curious about different cultures.
- They have multicultural families.
- They live in multicultural circles.
- Most of them are middle-aged or older women who like reading novels.
- They are well-educated.
- They are working moms or retired women.
- Most of them have been to Turkey before.
- Most of them want to visit Turkey again.
- Some of them would like to live in Turkey for longer periods.
- They are loyal audiences and give feedback about their favorite Turkish dramas.

On their empirical research on the Moroccan, Russian and Turkish diaspora in Germany, Andreas Hepp et. al. (2012) developed the concept of "mediatized migrants" to underline the communicative connectivity of the migrants and their media culture. Extending the concept of the "connected migrant" to that of the "mediatized migrant", they focus on the comprehensive communicative connectivity and various possibilities for maintaining their previous communicative relationships with their place or country of origin (Hepp et.al. 2011: 1-4). To build up new communicative relations in their present living context, in terms of the Swedish audiences who have cultural and historical ties with Turkey, watching Turkish dramas gives them the space to be in contact with a geography they have witnessed from afar but with which they have also developed a sense of belonging. Through my daily interactions with individuals from migrant backgrounds, I encountered several Turkish drama viewers and had the opportunity to conduct interviews or casual conversations with them. Gabriel – a Syriac<sup>9</sup> young man who works at a second-hand store, with whom I had the chance for a quick interview – told me that because he grew up watching Turkish series, and because his parents were constantly watching them, he couldn't escape from these series. It turned into an interest and habit to watch them. His parents had moved to Turkey when they were young. He is familiar with Turkish culture and the way of life in Turkey. He was born and raised in Stockholm and

9 Syriacs (or Aramaens, a Christian minority originally from Turkey, Syria and Iraq, but scattered around the world) are one of the largest groups of immigrants in Södertälje, Stockholm. The first families arrived in the 1960s as refugees from Turkey and settled as workers for the factories in the area (Scania, in particular). As many immigrants do, the Syriacs followed the pattern of familiar links, tending to settle close to each other. See more: <https://www.nousngo.eu/en/our-stories/evs-lorenzo-interview-integration-and-extremism-in-sweden/>

has never been to Turkey. Despite this, he feels as though he has experienced life in Turkey through watching Turkish TV series. During our conversation at a patisserie about her viewing habits, Zeynep told me that she was a fan of Turkish dramas, even though she didn't have much time to watch them. She said she liked the fact that Turkish series were popular among the people around her, as it provided a contrast to the negative news often associated with Turkey.

As seen in the below table, the comments from different individuals about Turkish dramas focus on the following themes such as scenery, representation of the reality, unpredictable plots, language, music, duration, and the portrayal of women's empowerment. The *scenery* and environment depicted in Turkish dramas is a major factor that appeals to viewers. The presence of exotic locations and unique architecture seems to be a major attraction for viewers, with some even feeling a sense of familiarity with the places they see on screen. The *representation of reality* in Turkish dramas is also highly valued by viewers. Many of them mention how the stories and characters are "real" and reflect the "real life" of people. The *unpredictability* of Turkish dramas is another aspect that viewers enjoy. The fact that viewers don't know what will happen next keeps them engaged and invested in the story. The *storytelling* in Turkish dramas is highly praised by viewers. The stories are described as containing a range of emotions and experiences and are likened to real life issues. The *traditional culture* depicted in Turkish dramas is valued by some viewers, who appreciate the respect given to older people in these shows. The *acting* in Turkish dramas is also praised, with some viewers finding the men from the Middle East particularly attractive. The *language* used in Turkish dramas is admired by some viewers, who find the language to be expressive and emotional. "Because I want to learn Turkish I prefer Turkish dramas, to listen to their original soundtrack. I watch them with Swedish subtitles. The emotion given by the language is very similar to Greek. More passionate, more vivid" says Evangeline. Similar comments come from the other participants. They also underline how it is necessary and meaningful for them to watch Turkish Dramas with Swedish subtitles. Maria explains why she prefers SVT to watch Turkish dramas in these words: "We didn't have Netflix before. On YouTube not all the Turkish series had English or Swedish subtitles. To have Swedish subtitles made it attractive for me to watch". The *music* in Turkish dramas is also highly regarded. Some viewers even use Shazam to identify and save the songs they hear on the show. The duration of a Turkish drama is seen by some viewers as a measure of

its quality. Long-running shows are seen as being high quality, while shorter shows are dismissed as lacking in interest. Finally, viewers appreciate how the female characters are portrayed in both their weakness and strength, just as in real life, which they find *empowering*.

In addition to the "dominant readings" or positive responses from viewers, some participants approached Turkish dramas critically. My interviews also brought to light potential drawbacks and problematic aspects of these shows. My informants perceive Turkish dramas as depicting a skewed reality that portrays wealthy and luxurious lifestyles. Some also mention that the shows normalize physical violence and reinforce gender stereotypes. Others point out the exaggeration and spectacle in the acting and the censorship of certain topics, such as homosexuality. One viewer pointed out that the portrayal of violence, particularly against women, is not acceptable in Sweden and suggested that this is a form of normalization in the shows. Another viewer noted the *lack of representation* of male characters regarding domestic responsibilities and roles. She criticizes exaggerated portrayal of women with full makeup, suggesting that these are *stereotypical* gender roles. Additionally, some viewers found the *exaggeration* of certain elements in Turkish dramas to be off-putting. The acting, in particular, was described as over-the-top and similar to Spanish soap operas. Finally, the issue of *censorship* in Turkish dramas of certain topics such as homosexuality was also raised by some viewers, who felt uncomfortable with the lack of diversity and the suppression of certain topics and characters. That was seen as problematic and potentially damaging to their interest in the shows. Some interviewees express discomfort with the lack of diversity and the gender discrimination portrayed in the series. Making a comparison between Nordic and Turkish dramas Maria says: "Nordic Dramas are a lot more open. They are full of strong and happy women. We can see gay characters as well. Women take the front roles you cannot see in Turkish Dramas. Even if they have a leading role, they are always having huge troubles. Strong wife and mother but always with troubles."

**Positive Audience Outputs/Dominant Readings**

**Scenery:**

"You see the environment in Turkish Dramas. That's what most of the Swedish people like about them, I think. We like traveling and seeing different places... I see Galata Tower on the screen and feel familiar. 'Ah, I saw there' I say." (Anna, 7 July).

**Representation of Reality:**

"They're real. The stories are real. They show the real life of people" (Maya, 22 July).

"Very clear messages it gives especially against violence at home. Modernity and pre-modernity exist in the same society, women are very suppressed in the countryside. Clashes in a society. Polarizations can be seen on the series. And we see the troubles it causes in people's lives" (Helen, 24 May).

**Unpredictableness:**

"Turkish dramas are not predictable. You don't know what happens next. And it's the atmosphere in the series I love" (Anna, 7 July).

**Storytelling:**

"I love the stories. I am impressed by the stories. I like the people, the scenes but most of all the stories. It contains everything: pain, joy, laughter, and drama. Just like in real life." (Evangeline, 22 July).

**Traditional culture:**

"The elderly people are respected so much in Turkish dramas. In Sweden, elderly people don't have respect from younger people. Kids should be kids and they should respect adults" (Melanija, 17 July).

**Acting:**

"I always find men from the Middle East very attractive. I love a little bit darker men. I always found them very handsome. Exoticness is the point. I love dark hair so much" (Maria, 29 June).

**Language:**

"I love the Turkish language. How many words you have for love. An extremely broad emotional language. Love and anger are expressed with an extremely broad vocabulary in Turkish. That's why I love Turkish music as well. I love the feeling of it. Underlined meaning of the words. Swedish is very flat. We have a couple of words to say I love you. But not in that way like in Turkish." (Maria, 29 June).

**Music:**

"And the music is perfect. I shazam most of the music in Turkish Dramas." (Melanija, 17 July).

**Duration:**

"If a drama has so many seasons it means it is high quality. But if it has only one or two seasons it means it didn't get any interest. I don't watch them." (Melanija, 17 July).

**Women's empowerment:**

"My mom worked so hard for us. And I do the same for my daughters. In dramas we see both. In *Paramparça*, Dilara, the rich woman, she is very strong, but we see very weak women too. But real life is full of conflicts. Women are weak sometimes, and sometimes they get stronger. Turkish dramas show how women do anything for their families. Any woman from anywhere in the world would do the same things for their kids" (Evangeline, 22 July).

**Oppositional/Negotiated Audience Reviews**

**Representation of reality**

"If you watch this kind of series, you maybe think that all people in Turkey are rich and live in beautiful houses and have a lovely life, materially" (Karin, 5 Jul).

**Normalization:**

"In a series, the elder brother slaps her sister in the face shouting 'why are you late.' In Sweden, it is never acceptable. This way it normalizes physical violence. It is very clear that all discussions end with what the men say. Women can always have an opinion, but it is not always followed. Stereotypes of women and men are normalized" (Maria, 29 June).

**Stereotypes:**

"But women often stay at home and their husbands go to work. You never really know what the men are doing at work, most of all, they seem to sit and talk with other people, if there is a sequence of work life in the drama... We never see men cooking in the series. The women are always with full makeup. When men are working you never know what they are doing. If they're not policemen" (Karin, 5 Jul).

**Exaggeration:**

"Everything is a little bit extra, pushing a little bit to the edge in Turkish dramas. A little bit spectacular, especially by means of acting. Just like Spanish soap operas" (Annika, 7 July).

**Censorship:**

"Governmental censorship makes me feel a bit critical about my interest in Turkish dramas. Once there was a tv series that was canceled from the beginning because it had a homosexual character in it even if it wasn't central in the story. To what extent should I be interested in Turkish dramas if it is strictly controlled? It causes a lack of comfort for me. It's problematic to see low levels of diversity in dramas." (Jose, 20 June).

**Gender Discrimination:**

"Always weak women who need men. Men are always rich. I don't want my daughter to grow up in Turkey. Women have no rights in Turkey like they have in Sweden. Even I love Turkey and feel at home in Turkey" (Maria, 29 June).

The results of my detailed google search show that, after the broadcasting of Turkish Dramas in 2013, 10 Swedish bloggers have started to write about Turkish dramas in their blogs.

Until recently three of the bloggers have been interviewed. The details of the blogs can be seen in the table below:

	Address of the blog/date of the blog post	Highlights from the blog posts
1	<a href="https://mustybasol.wordpress.com/2014/01/07/turkisk-serier/">https://mustybasol.wordpress.com/2014/01/07/turkisk-serier/</a> 01.07.14	"I'm very happy to be able to watch '20 Minutes'. It is not that good series... But I will develop my Swedish with this series. Because they speak Turkish and there is Swedish subtitle."
2	<a href="https://vikingkiz.blogg.se/2016/november/forvaxlingen-paramparca.html">https://vikingkiz.blogg.se/2016/november/forvaxlingen-paramparca.html</a> 21.11.2016	"An exciting series full of intrigue that keeps you glued. My mother is completely hooked and has slavishly followed every episode from the beginning. A total of 100 episodes are shown. All episodes can be followed on SVT play."
3	<a href="https://somagaligis.blogg.se/2013/june/turkiska-serier.html">https://somagaligis.blogg.se/2013/june/turkiska-serier.html</a> 06.06.2013	"Right now I'm sitting on the couch at home watching a Turkish series called "20 Dakika" with mom and great-grandmother."
4	perfektpensionar <a href="https://perfektpensionar.bloggo.nu/about/">https://perfektpensionar.bloggo.nu/about/</a> 23. 04. 2021	"Yesterday I happened to read in DN about Turkish series whose recipe for success is based on strong emotions and often deals with current issues such as family values, religion and class. Today's Turkish series has developed into its own genre which goes by the name 'dizi' (a word that means series in Turkish)."
5	<a href="https://threedirection.wordpress.com/2014/08/28/turkiska-serier/">https://threedirection.wordpress.com/2014/08/28/turkiska-serier/</a> 28.02.2014	"I know that many have prejudices against the Turkish series but they are super good."
6	<a href="https://lyckogummi.blogg.se/2015/march/turkiska-serier-2.html">https://lyckogummi.blogg.se/2015/march/turkiska-serier-2.html</a> 02.05. 2015	"I love my Turkish series and had planned to share two of them."
7	<a href="http://speciellaa.blogspot.com/2013/01/jag-foljer-en-turkisk-serie.html">http://speciellaa.blogspot.com/2013/01/jag-foljer-en-turkisk-serie.html</a> 18. 01. 2013	"It came mostly by chance that I got stuck in front of the premiere episode of the Turkish series "The lie" as it is called in Swedish."
8	<a href="https://www.devote.se/linataha/helg-30910563">https://www.devote.se/linataha/helg-30910563</a> No date	"I watched a lot of Turkish series before but lost it completely later because you don't have time for everything. I could watch series all night, cry to the Turkish series and live it."
9	<a href="https://blogg.improveme.se/imanaldebe/2014/04/21/den-turkiska-dokusapan-har-bidragit-till-kvinnors-frigorelse-i-mellanostern/">https://blogg.improveme.se/imanaldebe/2014/04/21/den-turkiska-dokusapan-har-bidragit-till-kvinnors-frigorelse-i-mellanostern/</a> 21.04.2014	"What was unique about Turkish series was their Western way of life and that the viewers still recognized themselves in the characters as they still lived in tradition-bound lives."
10	<a href="https://daniellaibis.com/2016/09/28/alltsa-den-har-turkiska-serien/">https://daniellaibis.com/2016/09/28/alltsa-den-har-turkiska-serien/</a> 28.09.2016	"Turkish series are really good, have seen a few pieces, including one called "A Thousand and One Nights". Just like in that series, the plot is super good, the people are so good-looking, and the music."

As seen in the above table, bloggers' posts on Turkish dramas are all constructed around their positive reviews about their favorite Turkish dramas, apart from the first one who says the series is not very good but good enough to learn the language. Apart from that male blogger, the interviews with other bloggers and the information gathered from the blogs show that the bloggers are women of middle-age or older, who have ties or closeness with Turkey or Turkish culture:

"I had a Turkish friend ten years ago. She was a very nice person. Also, in my work life I encountered a Turkish lady as well" (Karin, 5 July 2022).

"Because I want to learn Turkish I prefer Turkish dramas, to listen to their original soundtrack. I watch them with Swedish subtitles. The emotion given by the language is very similar to Greek. More passionate, more vivid" (Evangeline, 22 July 2022).

"I watch Turkish dramas with my mom. I need to improve my mother tongue. I cannot speak proper Turkish, but I understand. That's why I watch Turkish dramas" (Maya, 27 July 2022).

Even though she has criticisms of Turkey's political situation in general, and Turkish dramas do not change her reservations about Turkey, Karin says that TV dramas have contributed greatly to her impressions of Turkey:

"I don't think about visiting Turkey even though my interest in Turkey increased after the dramas... Politically it is not a nice country today. Otherwise, I would love to see somewhere there" (Karin, 5 July 2022).

"I learned about that beautiful bridge in Istanbul. That's something I learned. Whenever I see that bridge I say, 'It is Istanbul'. I was thinking people were very poor everywhere in Turkey. After I saw the dramas, I saw the differences" (Karin, 5 July 2022).

These interpretations demonstrate the influence of various encounters on the formation of images in the mind of the viewer. These encounters may include personal interactions, media content, and media practices. In other words, TV series are not the only factor that shapes the audience perceptions and understanding of cultural phenomena. The

audience draws on information from sources such as the news, political debates, and their own experiences, which all contribute to the way we construct our understanding of the world through different media representations.

### 2.2.2 Interviews with the Executives of SVT and Eccho Rights

The executives of both SVT and Eccho Rights pointed out that the success of Turkish series can be attributed to the high quality of production, the strong storylines, and the fact that the stories are relatable to viewers from all parts of the world. They also mentioned that the Turkish series succeeded in Sweden because there was a demand for some new content in the Swedish market, and that the series appealed to a wide range of viewers, from young to old. Furthermore, the executives noted that the availability of the content online made it easier for viewers to access the series, and that the content was marketed well in Sweden, which further increased its popularity. Finally, they highlighted that the success of Turkish series in Sweden can be attributed to the fact that they were able to capture the emotions of the viewers, and that the characters were relatable and likable.

#### *How Turkish Dramas Appeared on SVT? The Beginning of the Story:*

"Deepest value for dramas for me is we enter different people's lives, step into the minds of characters. If a drama is well done it is more effective than documentaries, to make people understand the state of the world we live in.

From the other perspective, we must simplify things in order to cope with a super complex world. If someone has a prejudice against a certain culture, the dramas may also add something more to that as well" (Göran Danasten, 22 November 2022).

Göran Danasten is one of the key figures behind the journey of Turkish dramas in Sweden. During his time at the company, SVT made the decision to buy the first Turkish TV series from Eccho Rights, a Sweden-based copyrights company. The beginning of the story in his own words:

"When I was walking around outside I used to speak to many people from different backgrounds, investigating what we were missing, wondering why they

were not satisfied with what we presented. What they were saying was ‘we don’t really watch SVT, we don’t really watch British series’. The story was that I was on parental leave, spending a lot of time outdoors, noticing all the parabolic antennas on balconies and roofs around the neighborhood. That made me reflect on whether SVT felt relevant to everybody. Did we lack something?

Over time, I started to dig deeper into other markets, doing research, speaking with a lot of people in the business, learning more about what ‘worked’ in other territories, watching a lot of shows – different from the Anglo-American and Scandinavian output we are so used to. I wanted to explore other expressions, other ways of making TV drama, perhaps having the ability to make our slate more diverse and complete. Our team started to look into everything from South American telenovelas, to South-Korean dramas, to romantic European fiction, to Syrian Ramadan soaps. And more.” (Göran Danasten, 22 November 2022).

Danasten says he understood early that Turkish dramas played an important role in, for instance, Southeastern Europe and further East. After more research and a lot of screening, he decided it might be worth a try. However, the challenge when trying to add something ‘different’ was that they shouldn’t be ‘too different’. They, as SVT, had to find some sort of middle ground. Speaking with Eccho Rights managing director Fredrik af Malmberg, who has a deeper insight into the market in question, helped a lot. One day, they started to discuss trying something from Turkey. Another challenge was how to adapt the format of a Turkish series, with longer episodes, into a broadcast schedule. They cut the long episodes into thirty minutes shorter episodes which was more proper both for the target audiences and broadcasting schedule of SVT. *Son* (2013) was something very much Turkish but still possible for the Swedish audience to relate to. It was an alternative to what they were usually doing, to their usual broadcasts: “Those days broadcasting was more linear, and we aired Turkish series at 7.30 at SVT2 against the big News Show. It was a sort of challenge. The series gained momentum and became popular,” Danasten adds.

#### **Create a Habit:**

Danasten pointed out that the Scandinavian audience, specifically the Swedish audience, is rooted in psychological realism

and naturalistic, realistic storytelling. He said that they are naturally afraid of emotions. Turkish dramas offer a relaxed attitude towards emotions, letting themselves be full of emotions: rage, happiness, strong love, sadness. He added that it was scary for Swedish audiences and something that should never be offered to a Scandinavian producer:

“‘Hold your emotions’ and Turkish dramas are full of it, you know. Experiencing strong emotions is fulfilled by Turkish dramas. That was one need to be fulfilled. You can create a habit over time, love the characters. Because there are so many episodes.” (Göran Danasten, 22 November 2022).

#### **Dedicated Audience, Loyal Audience, Niche Audience:**

In our interview, Fredrik af Malmberg explained that Turkish dramas have gained popularity among various audiences in Europe, including Spain and Sweden. While Turkish immigrant populations may be among the primary viewers of these dramas, they are not the only ones. In fact, af Malmberg noted that Turkish immigrants are more likely to watch Turkish dramas on Turkish TV channels or platforms such as Netflix, rather than on European channels. He also pointed out that, although Turkish dramas have not had the same level of success in Sweden as they have in Spain, they do have a dedicated audience there. He attributes this, in part, to the fact that these dramas offer a unique and diverse portrayal of a Muslim country, which is appealing to many viewers:

“Because the only thing we hear about the Muslim world is, you know, from Iran or Arabic countries. Turkey shows some nuances through dramas even though they are full of stereotypes and moral values... They are often about rich and poor which is a universal theme but also gender roles are very different from what Swedish people are familiar with. Men are very strong, women are very weak, but there are also strong mother characters. All these varieties add a dimension to stereotype Western storytelling. Turkish drama characters are much more diverse when we compare them with cliché characters who are good or bad in western dramas. We see the transformation of characters much more in Turkish dramas. Also, Turkish dramas take family issues seriously. Western dramas generally take family issues in sitcom or comedy format” (Fredrik af Malmberg, 21 April 2022).

Swedish national channel SVT's then acquisitions executive Magdalena Löfström<sup>10</sup> made similar points and said that "Turkish dramas are affordable; it did not cost too much for SVT. It was not a super success, but at the same time Turkish dramas always had a very loyal audience". Also, she talked about how much feedback they got from the audience:

"After we first broadcasted *Lie (Son)* we had so many emails from Swedish middle-aged women. We had quite a lot of feedback... After the '70s so many Turkish immigrants came to Sweden. So, we were expecting their interest as well. Swedish older women keep the culture very vivid. They have an interest in different cultures. They were writing emails to us. To have good feedback is very unusual. Normally people give feedback when they are angry with something. But Turkish dramas had so much positive feedback and we never experienced this again ever after. We don't really get emails like this..." (Magdalena Löfström, 23 May 2022).

While Malmborg uses the expression "dedicated audience" and Löfström says it as "loyal audience", Danasten expresses something similar with "niche",<sup>11</sup> sharing his insights about the success of Turkish drama series in Sweden:

"My most favorite dramas are – one is Argentinian, one is Italian, from the United States, UK and Germany. Consumers don't care about nations. If they want strong emotions, they watch Turkish dramas, or South American stuff. What makes Turkish dramas a super strong market is niche. Otherwise, other countries also produce high quality dramas with strong emotions." (Göran Danasten, 22 November 2022).

SVT's then head of the fiction department, Göran Danasten, mentions how audiences were sharing their reflections and giving so much feedback from his personal experience. He says his mother and all her friends are Turkish series fans:

"What started out as a wish to reach an audience that was not watching SVT became something partly different. This new thing also turned out to appeal to a Swedish audience... Those days broadcasting was more linear, and we aired Turkish series at 7.30 at SVT2 against the big News Show. It was a sort of challenge. The series gained momentum and became popular. My mother loves them. She calls me whenever a Turkish series ends. She calls me asking 'do you know what the next Turkish series will be?'" (Göran Danasten, 22 November 2022).

### **Representation Issues:**

Löfström emphasized that Turkish dramas often have both problematic and strong representations of women within the same narrative. However, she also noted the high production quality of these series:

"...We sometimes see issues which are out of the question in our lives. For instance, in a series a woman was being forced to marry her rapist. In Turkish dramas women are more like in Sweden. They are more equal...Glamorous sceneries, emotions, luxury in the Turkish dramas. Better than telenovelas." (Magdalena Löfström, 23 May 2022).

Gender representations and the image of Turkey through the dramas were mentioned by Malmborg as well:

"Dramas are not propaganda movies, they are entertainment. When the audiences watch bad characters and problems, they don't think bad about Turkey, I think.... Representation of Turkish men who are very caring, responsive, moral, passionate, and emotional is not very much like in real life maybe. They cry for 7 minutes. Maybe they are not properly represented but it is a fiction not a documentary" (Fredrik af Malmborg, 21 April 2022).

## **CONCLUSION**

The motivation for this research was the long-standing presence of Turkish TV series on Swedish state television, which led me to ask the question: Why has Sweden, rather than Germany or Denmark, become a key market in the Baltic Sea

10 SVT is the first and only TV channel of Sweden that broadcasts Turkish dramas since 2013. It was Magdalena Löfström's time when SVT drama department decided to buy Turkish dramas from Echo Rights.

11 Niche is a specialized segment of the market for a particular kind of product or service. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/niche>

region for these series? This question served as the starting point for my research, which has focused on exploring the reasons behind this phenomenon.

The findings of current research suggest that the Swedish audience for Turkish TV series is composed of individuals who frequently travel, are curious about different cultures, and have multicultural backgrounds. Most of the interviewees are middle-aged or older women who enjoy reading novels, are well-educated, and are either working mothers or retired. Many of them have visited Turkey before and express a desire to do so again, with some even considering living there for longer periods. These viewers are loyal and actively provide feedback on their favorite Turkish dramas. Overall, this audience appears to have a strong interest in and connection to Turkish culture.

During the interviews, almost all of the interviewees shared their opinions that Turkish TV series are not at all similar to the productions of other countries. There is no doubt that this has a share in the global interest in Turkish TV series. In her profile of Turkish television series for the *Guardian* Fatima Bhutto argues that Turkish dramas are “powered by narratives that pit traditional values and principles against the emotional and spiritual corruption of the modern world” (2019). Family values are common issues in both Korean and Turkish dramas who are both rising players in the TV series industry. What makes their stories? Not sexuality, just pure and platonic love, a Cinderella, a dangerous outsider, class conflict without socio-political references, crime and punishment are the basis of their stories. There is a tendency to call Turkish dramas “dizi” because they are a “genre in progress” (Öztürkmen 2022). They are not soap operas (Anglo-American style melodramas, like *Dallas*, *EastEnders*, *The Young and The Restless*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*), or telenovelas (Latin America style, like *Los ricos también lloran* (“The rich also cry” Zenginler de Ağlar), or period dramas (historical dramas such as *Downton Abbey*): They are dizi. As oral historian Arzu Öztürkmen declares, they make a genre with unique narratives, use of space and musical scores.<sup>12</sup>

None of my interviewees, including SVT and Eccho Rights officials, identified Turkish TV series as a distinct genre or showed any tendency to call them “dizi”. However, they did note that there is a characteristic of the storytelling in these series that sets them apart from other genres. During my field research, it has become apparent that the audience tends to

be highly committed to specific genres of TV series. Göran Danasten, an official at SVT, mentioned in an interview that the audience for Turkish TV series tends to be a niche audience, distinct from those who typically watch telenovelas, Korean dramas, or Nordic dramas. This suggests that the audience’s engagement with Turkish TV series may be relatively distinct from their engagement with other types of dramas.

As the primary goal of this research is to understand the global interest in Turkish TV series by examining the characteristics of the Swedish audience’s relationship with these shows, I conducted interviews with officials from SVT and Eccho Rights, bloggers with an interest in Turkish dramas, and Swedish audiences from different ethnic backgrounds. These interviews allowed me to explore the potential influences of the Swedes’ experiences of traveling and exposure to different cultures, their understanding of democratic values and human rights, their sensitivity to gender equality, and their curiosity about the “cultural other” on their interest in Turkish TV series. For viewers who watch Turkish TV series on SVT, these shows have become a daily routine, almost like a habit. Some viewers have developed a strong attachment to these series, even expressing a fondness for the Turkish language. These series have been airing at the same time approximately every day for 10 years, and for some viewers, they have become a constant presence in their daily lives.

The Swedish audience’s interest in Turkish TV series appears to be driven by a variety of factors, including the scenic locations depicted in the series, the sense that the stories are grounded in reality, the unpredictability of the storylines, the traditional cultural values depicted, the attractiveness of the actors, the emotional depth of the Turkish language and music, the high production quality, the depiction of women’s empowerment and family dynamics, the normalization of certain gender roles and stereotypes, and the exaggeration of certain elements for dramatic effect. However, some viewers also expressed concern about the normalization of physical violence and the influence of government censorship on the content of these series. Overall, Turkish TV series seem to offer a unique and captivating blend of elements that appeal to the Swedish audience.

During my fieldwork on the reception of Turkish TV series in Sweden, I discovered that Swedish viewers of Slavic and East European origin have quite different ways of relating to Turkish TV series. These forms of relationship were particularly evident in how they considered traditional values which are overemphasized in Turkish dramas. This made me think that audience studies focusing on East European countries

12 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/sep/13/turkish-tv-magnificent-century-dizi-taking-over-world>

and Slavic audiences are very important and necessary. In addition, I believe that there is further need for comprehensive and comparative research on the reception of Turkish TV series by the audience in different areas that have not been studied yet. I hope that the transnational flow of Turkish series will continue to be explored and discussed with new questions and diverse research from different fields.

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## TV Series

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*20 Minutes* (2013)

*Broken Pieces* (2014-2017)

*Brave and Beautiful* (2016, 2017)

*Mother* (2016, 2017)

*The Red Room* (2020-2022)

