# Turkish Dramas and Saudi Female Perceptions of Socio-cultural Values

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## Abstract

In the 2000s, Turkish drama series began airing in Saudi Arabia and other countries outside Turkey. Perhaps unexpectedly, they have proven exceptionally attractive to global audiences. Typically, these dramas define and present female characters who can be considered liberal in their adherence to traditional cultural values. To date, despite the growing popularity of these Turkish drama series abroad, research into the attitudes and behaviors of Saudi women who watch such dramas has been limited. The present study evaluates Turkish drama series's influence on the perceptions and attitudes of Saudi female viewers, drawing on social identity theory and cultivation theory perspectives. For the study, 1.274 online questionnaires were completed by Saudi female viewers aged from 20 to 60. The results revealed three different groups of attitudes associated with socio-cultural values. Firstly, acceptance or otherwise of 'independent and self-reliant women' and their 'ability to survive without a man.' Secondly, rejection of 'other' socio-cultural values, such as (1) 'Having a child outside of marriage,' (2) 'marital infidelity, (3) 'restricting religion to older people,' (4) 'presenting alcohol consumption, (5) 'women getting married without permission, and (6) 'couples dating.' Finally, neutral attitudes towards 'friendships between couples,' 'traditional roles of women as mothers and wives and 'fighting for love.'


Keywords: Cultivation Theory, Saudi Female Viewers, Social Identity Theory, Turkish Dramas

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**Introduction**

Saudi society could be one of the most conservative ones (Salamah 2016; Montagu 2015; Alfarran, Pyke and Stanton 2018). Saudi audiences could be one of the viewers living in a traditional society among Middle East North Africa (MENA) countries. In other words, audiences have had specifical social norms and cultural values under their Muslim identity. It can be seen that Muslim identity could have complicated identification between multiple forms of religious identity from being less religious to moderately religious and extremely religious. Saudi audiences had been exposed to foreign dramas or soaps since the 1980s (Alnaser, 2013). They might have enjoyed watching serial dramas because they did not have any other options as Western dramas did not fit into their culture. (Bajnaid, 2016). In other words, Saudi audiences did not have any social conflict because they were exposed to those dramas which provided identical socio-cultural values and the media content as it reflected their national identity in a restrictive religious society as it is in reality. It started with Western dramas, specifically American soap operas (Alnaser 2013), then Mexican telenovels (Kharroub, 2016), followed by Turkish dramas (Buccianti 2010), and others as Indian and Korean. Even though the Turkish dramas had attracted Saudi viewers since 2000 (Ustek and Alyanak 2017; Özalpman 2017).

**Literature Review**

Turkish drama has been considered one of the most popular soap operas or dramas globally. They have successfully attracted diversified audiences; for example, in 2002, 150 Turkish dramas have been sold to over 100 countries, including Algeria, Morocco, and Bulgaria (Bhutto 2019). In 2006, 75 Turkish dramas were broadcasted to Arabic audiences, interestingly, the highest rate of consuming Turkish drama was for Saudi Arabia (Berg 2017; Toul 2020; Bhutto 2019). In 2008, Noor was the most popular romantic Turkish soap and was watched by 85 million people in the Middle East (50 million were women) (Buccianti 2010). In 2011, Magnificent Century, a famous historical Turkish soap, has been viewed by over 500 million people worldwide (Bhutto 2019). Currently, Turkish dramas have been presented to multiple cultures such as Croatia (Okumus 2020), North Africa (Al-nashar 2017; Anaz 2014), South America (Constantinou and Tziarras 2018; Özalpman 2017), Greece (Pothou 2020; Kraidyand Al-Ghazzi 2013), and Pakistan (Malik, Haq, and Mukhtar 2017; Zafar, Arafat and Sial 2019). Arabic audiences, especially Saudi women, were the most prominent ones (Buccianti 2010). As mentioned earlier, the Saudi people have complicated Muslim identity; they perceive social-cultural values through Turkish dramas in different ways. The existing literature about Turkish dramas reveals several patterns; for example, some scholars have investigated Turkish dramas' impact on audience's identity negatively (Homed 2017; Zhag and Sakry 2019) or positively (Al-Ali & Alshammri, 2018; Temraz 2016). Another scholar has emphasized on investigating the perceptions or attitudes of exposure to Turkish dramas in different perspectives such as identity (Yanardağoğlu & Karam 2013), gender interaction (Madni, Hassan, Aziz & Amin 2014), fashion & clothes (Madni, Abdullah, Hassan & Nawaz 2014) and purchasing intentions toward Turkish apparels (Aljammazi and Asil 2017). Other scholars have investigated the audiences' perceptions of socio-cultural values through Turkish dramas. For instance, Al-Hashani (2019) investigated Turkish dramas (TD) effect on young Algerians' attitudes of marriage issues by gathering data from 74 Algerian participants. The study found, most respondents have a positive attitude towards emotional and romantic topics through TD. Also, the study found that most participants had a positive perception of Turkish marriage patterns; participants could change their social-cultural values due to their admiration for Turkish culture. In the

same vein, Bozaida and Bosees (2018) investigated the Algerian women's attitudes of exposure to dubbing Turkish drama by conducting a survey of 80 students from Jijel university. The study concluded that Algerian females had positive (responsibility, fairness, self-concept, and friendships) and negative (marital infidelity and nudity) perceptions with some socio-cultural values via Turkish dramas. But very few studies have investigated the perceptions of Saudi viewers about socio-cultural values through Turkish dramas. The present study fills this gap by examining Saudi women viewers' attitudes and perceptions towards the socio-cultural values from three different angles (acceptable, neutral, and unacceptable) that received while engaging in Turkish dramas under the social identity and cultivation theory.

**Theoretical Framework**

The study has used the social identity theory as the main theory. Tajfil (1979) formulated this theory, who divided it into three sub-theories: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. This study focuses on social comparison by comparing and contrasting groups. He also provided three components of social comparison: first, individuals identify their group membership as part of their self-concept. Second, social situations must allow social comparison. Finally, the out-group must have a connection to similarity and proximity.

Secondly, the cultivation theory by Gerbner & Gross (1976). This theory is connected to audience exposure and the audiences' perception of their social reality. The main concept of that theory states that heavy viewers would be more impacted than light viewers. To explain that, Saudi females, for instance, can form various assumptions and prejudices about daily life simply by watching Turkish dramas as televised or online regularly. That means repeating the portrayed meaning also aids in the development of those beliefs of Saudi viewers.

**Methods**

In this study, the quantitative method was applied; the data was collected using an online questionnaire conducted on 1,274 Saudi female viewers from four generations, ages ranging from 20 to 60 years, who regularly watched Turkish dramas. The current study attempted to address two major research questions; how do Saudi females perceive socio-cultural values while engaging with Turkish dramas? And what are the attitudes and perceptions of Saudi females about Turkish dramas? A survey questionnaire was used to collect data and then analyzed statistically to get more precise and in-depth results from which discussion and conclusion could be drawn.

**Sample**

Table (1) shows the ages of 1274 respondents that participated in the study. It ranged from 20 to 60; the majority fell into the 20-to-29-year age group (68.4%). In Saudi Arabia, this age group makes up about 52.4% of females' total population (Saudi Youth in Number: A Report for International Youth Day, 2020). No study that assessed the impact of Turkish drama on this specific age group was found in the literature, but existing research does indicate that the majority of consumers of Turkish dramas are adults in their 20s and 30s, as shown in this study (Abasi 2019; Salih 2016; Temraz 2016).

Table 1: Demographic Background of the Sample

| Demographic information | Items | % |
|---|---|---|
| *Age* | 20 – 29 Years Old | 68.40% |
| | 30 – 39 Years Old | 17.80% |
| | 40 – 50 Years Old | 9.50% |
| | More Than 51 Years Old | 4.30% |
| *Social statues* | Single | 61.70% |
| | Married | 34.60% |
| | Divorced | 3.10% |
| | Widow | 0.60% |
| *Living place* | City in Saudi Arabia | 95.50% |
| | Town in Saudi Arabia | 3.20% |
| | Outside of Saudi Arabia | 1.30% |
| *Education level* | Elementary School | 0.10% |
| | Primary School | 0.50% |
| | Secondary School | 20.10% |
| | Bachelor's Degree | 63.30% |
| | Postgraduate Degree | 15.90% |

## Results and Discussions

Female Saudi audiences were asked to rate the attitudes or perceptions that they have towards some socio-cultural values using a 5-point Likert scale. The mean, standard deviation and rustle for each statement were calculated. This section investigated the perception of female Saudis regarding specific socio-cultural values after being exposed to Turkish dramas.

Table 2: Perception of Socio-cultural Values of Turkish Drama

| Socio-Cultural Values | Mean | Std Deviation | Rustle |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fighting for love | 2.637 | 1.256 | Neutral |
| Women attending funeral prayers | 3.874 | 1.178 | Unacceptable |
| Restricting religion for the older people. | 4.258 | 0.940 | Strongly unacceptable |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Presenting drinking alcohol. | 4.217 | 0.981 | Strongly unacceptable |
| Dating between couples. | 3.696 | 1.232 | Unacceptable |
| Friendships between couples. | 3.323 | 1.316 | Neutral |
| Women getting married without permission. | 3.934 | 1.185 | Unacceptable |
| Having a child outside of marriage. | 4.542 | 0.838 | Strongly unacceptable |
| Marital infidelity from one member of a couple. | 4.482 | 0.913 | Strongly unacceptable |
| A forbidden relationship between a woman and man. | 4.409 | 0.975 | Strongly unacceptable |
| Freedom from the Hijab | 3.981 | 1.105 | Unacceptable |
| Freedom in what women wear | 3.542 | 1.301 | Unacceptable |
| Independent and self-reliant women | 3.835 | 1.255 | Acceptable |
| Ability to survive without a man | 3.549 | 1.313 | Acceptable |
| Non restricted regarding traditional roles of women as mothers and wives | 3.297 | 1.361 | Neutral |

As seen in Table (2), female Saudi viewers had different attitudes about socio-cultural values. The study reveals that participants have neutral perceptions about 'fighting for love' (mean: 2.637); did not accept the idea of 'women attending funeral prayers' (3.874) and were strongly opposed to both 'restricting religion for the older people' (4.258) and 'presenting drinking alcohol' (4.217). The study implies that female Saudi viewers also rejected 'dating between couples' (3.696). However, they have neutral attitudes toward the statement 'friendships between couples' (3.323). The results reveal that female Saudi viewers strongly reject 'women getting married without permission' (3.934); 'having a child outside of marriage' (4.542); 'marital infidelity by one member of a couple' (4.482) and 'forbidden relationship between a woman and a man' (4.409). Female Saudi viewers also rejected 'freedom from the Hijab' (3.981), and 'freedom in what women wear' (3.542). On the other hand, the study indicates that participants accept some Turkish socio-cultural norms as seen in statements such as 'independent and self-reliant women' (3.835) and 'ability to survive without a man' (3.549). Lastly, female Saudi participants selected 'neutral' in response to 'non restricted regarding traditional roles of women as mothers and wives' (3.297). Figure (1). Shows the perceptions of the Saudi female participants which presented three different categorisations of female Saudi perceptions of socio-cultural values that are exemplified in Turkish dramas.

Figure 1: The Perceptions of Female Saudi Participants in the Current Sample

**The First Group Category**

This group is the pro-category of the participants. As seen in the first column of Figure 1, the participants accepted two statements 'independent and self-reliant women' and 'ability to survive without a man.' These statements were selected as neutral under the theme of gender roles in the pilot study interview results. The results show that the responses of the female Saudi participants differed. While the responses were neutral in the pilot study, the current study participants accepted these statements. It may be that the results vary because the participants in the pilot study may have concealed their innermost thoughts during the interview because they wanted to appear conventional in a face-to-face setting. Female Saudi viewers may believe that a particular stereotype of a woman is being portrayed through Turkish dramas. Turkish dramas represent Turkish women as independent modern women living alone and can choose their life partner, pursue job opportunities, and raise children simultaneously. In other words, Turkish dramas may present women primarily from a Western view, being independent and self-reliant, which is also accepted by Saudi females. In essence, the participants took this image of women because they explicitly believe that Saudi women can have an independent life without the help of Saudi men. As Aljammazi and Asil (2017: 212) write: 'Turkish women participate in professional life and have more liberal relations with men' On the other hand, Saudi female participants could believe that Turkish women are self-contained and can survive without men. In this case, Saudi females could engage with romantic themes in Turkish dramas that represent friendship or emotional relationships outside the marriage framework; for instance, women who are wives and

mothers may prefer to watch only drama featuring romantic relationships. Thus, Saudi females may be indirectly decreasing the level of conservatism in the Saudi society's religious and cultural identity. Mahmood (2015) found similar results; most Jordanian women preferred women's Western image as portrayed through Turkish dramas. Abosaleem (2019) indicated that Turkish dramas attempt to present women as being strong, brave, and liberal. Similarly, when Khan and Rohn (2020) investigated the impact of socio-cultural values of Turkish dramas on Pakistani and Egyptian audiences, they found that Turkish dramas depicted women as independent and powerful. Conversely, in a recent study, Inceoglu (2020) argued that Turkish dramas primarily tended to represent the stereotype of a conventional woman; there is no representation of independent women in dramas. According to Inceoglu, (2020: 5), 'the most popular content, TV drama, continue to reproduce the stereotypical images of women as housewives and mothers that are dependent on men'

**The Second Group Category**

This category indicates which statements were unacceptable to participants. The second column of Figure (1) shows ten statements that Saudi participants rated from strongly unacceptable to unacceptable. The results indicate that Saudi participants explicitly disagree with the statement 'having a child outside of marriage' and that this is strongly unacceptable. Islamic law prohibits a woman from practicing sex outside of marriage any child that results from such a liaison would be considered an illegitimate child because the relationship is forbidden. According to the Quran, Allah says '[And] do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way' (Surah Al-Isra, verse: 32). Saudi participants would know that sexual activities outside of marriage are specifically prohibited in Islam. This is part of the rather serious view of morality displayed in Islam. Thus, they might have selected 'strongly unacceptable' instead of 'unacceptable' because they do not agree at all with this behaviour in Saudi society. In the literature on Turkish dramas, some studies have investigated the depiction of women having a child outside marriage. Extensive studies have found that Turkish dramas have encouraged relationships that are forbidden in Arabic and Islamic cultures, including the promotion of sexual activities between women and men who are not married (Alabasi 2019; Anaz 2014; Zahag & Sakrei 2019; Messadi and Naili 2019; Khan and Pembecioglu 2019; Rehan & Hassan Raza 2017; Iqbal, 2018; Zain 2015). In the same vein, the responses of the Saudi women in the current study show that they are also strongly opposed to forbidden relationships between women and men as represented in Turkish dramas for the reasons given above. The Saudi female participants of the pilot study interview had a neutral attitude to the theme of 'marital infidelity from one member of a couple'. However, the female Saudi participants in this study strongly did not accept this statement. The participants in the pilot study were conflicted regarding marital infidelity and justified their attitudes to reduce the tension within themselves about this issue. It could be that the participants of the study did not have a conflict or discrepancy regarding this issue because they chose 'strongly unacceptable' for the statement about 'marital infidelity'. Thus, they adamantly opposed 'marital infidelity'. Many studies have found that Turkish dramas portrayed different forms of marital infidelity which was as one of the problems of the dramas (Alabasi 2019; Basafar 2013; Salih 2016; Temraz 2016). Interestingly, Figure 1 indicates that Saudi participants who participated in the interview had similar results to the Saudi participants in the study with regard to the statements 'restricting religion for the older people', 'freedom from the Hijab' and 'presenting drinking alcohol'. Obviously, Saudi participants did not change their perceptions with these statements because they anticipate that Muslims know religious practices such as wearing a hijab for women, as well as consuming alcohol is forbidden in Islamic law. Funeral

praying is a religious practice in Islam and, as indicated, that practice is not limited to elderly people. However, Saudi participants most likely chose unacceptable for 'women attending funeral prayers' because they know that attending funeral prayers is forbidden for women in Islam. Sahih Al-Bukhari confirmed that Umm Atiyya رضي الله عنها [1] said '[We] were forbidden to accompany funeral procession but not strictly' (Az-Zubaidi 1996: 324). They can pray for the dead person without attending the funeral. As shown in Figure 1, female Saudi interviewees changed their perceptions from neutral to unacceptable with regard to 'women getting married without permission', 'dating between couples' and 'freedom in what women wear'. Female Saudi responses suggest that Saudi women still need the consent of their guardians when choosing a life partner. Surprisingly, Saudi participants in this study appear to agree with the taboo of marriage without permission. Simultaneously, they want to be independent of a man's dominance in life choices. For instance, female Saudis want to be in control of their education, travel and careers and this could put them in conflict with men in a society that is as characterised by male dominance (Alsheddi, Sharam and Talukder 2019). They must accept their 'guardians'' decisions, their guardian being a family member such as father, brother or son (Al-Khateeb 2008; Pharaon 2004; Deif 2008), only when it is related to marriage. Nevertheless, they most likely preferred freedom in their life choices without the dominant decision making of their husband who takes the role of a guardian. The issue of guardianship in marriage could also be one of the factors contributing to the phenomenon of Saudi females marrying at a later age as this is the recent trend prevailing in the society.

Additionally, the Saudi females' responses in the study were negative regarding 'dating between couples' and 'freedom in what women wear' while in the pilot study interviews the responses tended to be neutral. The difference in responses between the pilot study and the current large study could be due to the moderate religious views of the females in the pilot study concerning religious, social and cultural values of Saudi society. Even though Saudi society is currently undergoing significant metamorphosis, particularly with regard to Saudi women's issues, female Saudi responses remained conservative about dating and freedom in what women should wear to hide their modesty. However, it is noteworthy that marriage without guardianship and dating, along with other taboos, including personal freedom, which are a part of Saudi culture are depicted differently in Turkish cultures (Kharroub and Weaver 2014; Kharroub 2016). This further signifies the social identity perspective, according to which individual identities are created through their membership in diverse groups, both within national boundaries and beyond. Thus, the study suggests that female Saudi responses in the pilot study interview were firmly positioned in the grey area, which means they had ambiguous attitudes about women getting married without permission, dating between a woman and man outside of the marriage framework and more freedom regarding what women should wear. The results from the survey of this study indicated that the Saudi female's unacceptance of these statements could be due to a strong identification with the Saudi culture. This finding contributes to the body of knowledge because it investigates the impact of Turkish dramas have on the dimensions of guardianship, finery and dating.

**The Third Group Category**

Figure (1), shows that the Saudi female participants considered some statements to be neither acceptable nor unacceptable; they were impartial about them. Their responses indicated neutral perceptions about values such as 'friendship between couples', 'non restricted traditional roles of women as mothers and wives' and 'fighting for love'. Figure (1) reveals

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[1] God please her.

that the Saudi female participants from the pilot study interview and the current study have similar attitudes and perceptions regarding 'friendship' and 'traditional roles of women'. In principle, they could have had trouble when it came to determining their attitudes. In terms of 'friendships', there is ambiguity between their responses on dating, which they termed unacceptable, and developing friendships between opposite sexes. Based on the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), the participants appear to display a sense of conflict when comparing their perceptions with the culture of Turkish dramas. In order to reduce this potential conflict, they would potentially attempt to justify their perception. In this situation, it could be assumed that Saudis consider dating between a woman and a man as being prohibited. However, the responses also suggest that friendship between couples is gaining approval because of changing norms and more openness to other cultures. Female Saudi participants also maintain their natural perception about 'traditional roles of women'. Perhaps, the agenda of media messages has been to consistently depict traditional stereotypes of gender roles such as women cleaning and cooking while men work outside. As Sharrer, (2012: 91) states: '[M]ale characters are more likely to be explicitly presented on television as having a job outside than female characters. However, female Saudi participants could be opposed to this traditional image; it is highly possible that the participants believe that the role of Saudi women is not limited to being a mother or a wife. This result coincides with the responses of Saudi female participants who accepted the Western image of women. Perhaps, they justify their responses because they have been living in a global era that is shifting the roles of women in society. Saudi respondents in the current study did not choose acceptable or unacceptable in response to 'fighting for love'. Conceivably, the Saudi female participants had a particular dilemma determining their overall attitude. In the pilot study interview, participants had positive attitudes about 'fighting for love'. However, participants in this study selected 'neutral' which suggests that they do not have a clear opinion about this issue. They could believe that the portrayal of fighting for love in dramas is acceptable, based on the value of love and romance, as one would do anything to protect their lover. Many previous studies have demonstrated that 'fighting for love' is a strongly acceptable value for audiences of Turkish dramas; it is a fundamental element of a romantic storyline (Alabasi 2019; Salih 2017; Aljammazi and Asli 2017; Iqpal 2018; Mahmood 2015). However, the Saudi participants could not accept this value because they assumed that drama presents an exaggerated image of 'fighting for love', which does not reflect reality.

**Conclusion**

The study concluded different significant findings, Saudi female viewers of Turkish drama had three different perceptions and attitudes as acceptable, unacceptable and neutral. The findings reveal that Saudi females accepted only two of social-cultural values from Turkish dramas Unexpectedly, the result indicates that the majority of socio-cultural values were rejected by Saudi females such as having a child outside of marriage, a forbidden relationship between a woman and man, marital infidelity from one member of a couple, limited religion for older people, freedom from the Hijab, presenting drinking alcohol, women attending funeral prayers, women getting married without permission, dating between couples, freedom in what women wear). While the Saudi female participants had a neutral perception with three of socio-cultural values (friendship between couples, non-restricted regarding traditional roles of women as mothers and wives, fighting for love). Considering the attractiveness of Turkish dramas in the MENA region, it is recommended that future studies should conduct qualitatively studies on the impact of Turkish drama series in order to create a deep understanding of the socio-cultural values in the content of Turkish dramas that could reflect on perceptions of Saudis.

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