HOW TURKEY'S CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS SEE THEIR TV DRAMA INDUSTRY: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH ACTORS, PRODUCERS, DIRECTORS, SCENARISTS AND DISTRIBUTORS

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ABSTRACT *Turkey's TV drama industry has made a quantum leap in the past decade and exported many of its dramas* (dizis) *to more than a hundred countries. Turkey has become the world's second-biggest TV drama exporter after the USA in 2016. The* dizi *industry's transnationalization is attributable to the tireless efforts and unique features of its associated creative industry. However, the industry has some deep problems. This paper seeks to shed light on the challenges that the Turkish TV drama industry faces. The author has conducted in-depth interviews with* Producers, Directors, Scenarists, Actors *and* Distributors. *Their replies reveal the basic characteristics and difficulties of the* dizi *industry and provide clues as to what needs to be done to sustain and build upon the Turkish TV drama industry's export success.*

KEY WORDS

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INTRODUCTION

The global audiovisual market is undergoing a great transformation driven by increasing globalization, liberalization, commercialization, and digitization. Much recent work in the field (Chan, 2011; Esser, 2017; Jensen & Jacobsen, 2017) draws attention to the expanding interconnectivity among peripheral markets and between the periphery and the center as an outcome of this transformation. Jensen and Jacobsen (2017) say that there is "a demand for good stories no matter where they are from" (p. 326). Asserting that "what succeeds in one market is likely to succeed in another", these scholars emphasize the idea that the world's audiovisual markets now all resemble one another. Thus, it would not be wrong to maintain that conventional trade-flow theories based on notions of cultural discount, geo-linguistics, and geo-cultural markets now seem to hold only to a certain degree. Esser (2017) notes that the term *transnational* now denotes "plurality" (p. 426). This is a plurality of a large number of TV program producers, commissioners, distributors, and buyers working across borders on a daily basis in complex, fluid webs of collaboration and interdependency. Some scholars like Hilmes (2008), however, dismiss such arguments claiming that nothing much has really changed: "From the beginning, television programs, styles, genres, and pleasures have drawn on a world repertoire of experience. The industry knows this, creative producers know this, and viewers know this: It is only scholars who largely choose to ignore it" (p. 101).

Recent evidence indicates that the dramas of a peripheral market, a case in point being the Turkish audiovisual market, currently have great appeal in global markets. In the second half of the 2000s, Turkish dramas were first exported to Arab countries and the Middle East and then to markets in the Balkans and Asia. In October 2016, it was announced that annual revenues from overseas sales of Turkish TV dramas amounted to USD 350 million. On that measure, Turkey had the world's fastest-growing TV drama industry and had overtaken Mexico and Brazil to become the world's second-biggest TV-drama exporter after the USA (Vivarelli, 2017). Although the industry lost steam in 2018, it continued to penetrate new markets. People in Latin American, African, and some European countries started to watch Turkish dramas. The remarkable diversity of viewers following *dizis*, in a way, confutes the arguments of scholars (Sinclair, 2009; Straubhaar, 2007) who assert that non-Anglophone TV drama rarely travels outside its geo-linguistic region. In March 2020, industry insiders said that stock Turkish TV dramas[1] were still doing quite well in markets around the world despite the Covid-19 pandemic (Interviews with MADD and Eccorights executives). In August 2020, it was reported that owing to pandemic-related lockdowns and restrictions, Turkish TV dramas have been achieving great success on many platforms and reaching viewers all over the world (Singh, 2020).

These dramas are frequently called *Turkish telenovelas* in Latin America, Spain, and other telenovela-consuming countries. Alzuru (in press) attributes this to the melodramatic features of Turkish TV dramas. The author of the present study as well as many scholars (Alzuru, in press; Aslan, 2019; Öztürkmen, 2019) who work on these dramas

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[1] Stock dramas are TV shows which are kept in stock and are thus regularly available for sale and distribution.

prefer to use the Turkish term *dizi*[2] for several reasons. Firstly, these dramas inherit some of their features from "Yeşilçam"[3] and borrow stories and characters from Ottoman and Anatolian folkloric culture, thereby making them unique. Secondly, production values tend to be higher than those of telenovelas (Alzuru, in press; Piñón, 2019, pp. 207-209; Yeşil, 2015, p. 53). Thirdly, outdoor shots are frequent and camera movements are usually more dynamic than is the case with telenovelas. Finally, as an outcome of the social and political conditions of their country of origin, *dizis* never have steamy love scenes. Lacking predetermined endings, *dizis* are aired on a once-a-week schedule and are produced and broadcast on a seasonal basis.

Recalling Smith (2018), authors Aslan (2019) and Alzuru (in press) categorize *dizis* as a hybrid genre that combine the characteristics of many different genres. Alzuru rationalizes this so-called hybrid generic form by claiming that episodes which last about 140-165 minutes necessitate structurally complex narratives: to keep viewers watching till the end of each episode, *dizis* are designed so as to offer them elements that are characteristic of many different genres. However, whether the intermingling of genres in *dizis* should be called "hybridization" (Smith, 2018) or "recombinants of two or more previous types" (McAllister, 1992), or "cross-genre mating" (Woodman, 2005) is a matter that deserves detailed analysis; some scholars like Lauerbach (2013) make a distinction between "constituent genres" and "sub-genres" in TV dramas (p. 136). To date, however, there has been hardly any research into *dizis* based on such hierarchical genre assumptions. Arguing that their evolution is still incomplete, Öztürkmen (2019) simply says that *dizis* are "a genre in progress".

There are numerous studies on *dizis* which explore the impact of Turkish TV dramas. Several authors (Aslan, 2019; Balaban, 2015; Berg, 2020; Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Larochelle, in press; Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013;) claim that these dramas counteract prevailing prejudices about Turks and Turkey. According to Karlıdağ and Bulut (2014), the impact of *dizis* is so "enormous" that fans tour the localities of their favorite dramas and buy clothes, accessories, and food items that appear onscreen (p. 88). Many studies concerning *dizis* (Çetin, 2014; Işık, 2013; O'Neil, 2013) involve content/textual analyses, and a few studies (Rappas et al., 2018) look into *dizis'* production processes. Some studies (Alankuş & Yanardağlıoğlu, 2016; Algan, 2020; Alzuru, in press; Ateşalp, 2016; Bulut, 2016; Yeşil, 2015; Yörük, 2018) concentrate on the opinions of Turkey's creative industry members. Algan (2020) writes on the tactics the industry comes up with to combat challenges posed by the transnationalization of *dizis*. Yeşil (2015) confutes the cultural proximity thesis and attributes the transnationalization of *dizis* to the political-economic factors of the mid-late 2000s. Alzuru (in press) compares the capacity of the *dizi* industry with the telenovela industry in general. Bulut (2016, p. 82) and Ateşalp (2016, pp. 25-26) draw attention to activist campaigns targeting the adverse working and problematical retirement conditions with which *dizi* industry members must contend. They cite examples from campaigns in which industry members sought to reduce episodes to 45 minutes each,

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[2] *Dizi* is derived from *dizmek*, a verb that means "line up", "arrange in a row or series".
[3] A metonym for the Turkish cinema industry. See Arslan (2011).

to fix working hours to eight, and to be entitled to more favorable retirement benefits.[4] Referring to issues such as insufficiently-organized labor and problems with rights allocation, Yörük (2018) draws attention to the problem of the precariousness of *dizi* scriptwriters (pp. 813-820).

A characteristic of all of the studies mentioned above is that each selectively touches upon one or more "separate" problems of the *dizi* industry according to the particular aims of the researchers involved. As the main concern of the present study is to shed light on "what needs to be done to sustain and build upon the *dizi* industry's export success", the problems and shortcomings of the industry as a "whole" become important.

For this purpose, the author consulted the opinions of *dizi* industry members who have witnessed and/or are witnessing developments first-hand. To evaluate the present situation and to elicit respondents' opinions on the main concern of the study, the author's research explores such questions as "What are the structural problems of the *dizi* industry?", "Did recent political economic developments in Turkey lead to additional difficulties for the *dizi* industry?", "Have policymakers resolved any industry problems mentioned in previous studies?", "What are the strengths of *dizis*?", and "What are the challenges that the Turkish TV drama industry faces abroad?".

FROM TRT'S QUALITY DRAMAS TO INDEPENDENT PRODUCERS' INTERNATIONALLY-WATCHED *DIZIS*

After a decade of experimental broadcasting, Turkey's government embraced the UK's public-service broadcasting model and established the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) in 1964. At the outset, TRT (most of whose producers had undergone BBC training) focused on providing informative/educational content, churning out hundreds of programs. In the 1970s, there was a shift to entertainment and TRT began buying American shows such as *Star Trek* produced in 1972, *McMillan & Wife* of 1971, and *The Six Million Dollar Man* of 1974.

Although TRT's autonomy was politically fraught and its viability was made problematic by economics, its general directors took the initiative in producing home-grown entertainment in the early years. İsmail Cem encouraged productions based on Turkish literary works that were filmed by well-established Turkish film directors (Çankaya, 2015, p. 144). In most of these endeavors, TRT was the sole producer. Actors, scenarists, and directors were all recruited from Yeşilçam's ranks. As economic and political unrest increased in Turkey from 1975 onwards, TV shows began playing a more important role in people's lives (Ateşalp, 2016; Çankaya, 2015; Erus, 2007; Tanrıöver, 2015). By the 1980s, however, Turkish viewers had become so thoroughly enamored of American and Turkish TV shows that one evening's offerings made up a large part of the next day's public discourse. In 1985, a year before the launch of its second channel, TRT began soliciting

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[4] These scholars attribute the problematic retirement conditions to members' being freelancers. According to current Turkish governing social security and general health insurance (Statute 5510), they have to wait for retirement and to pay insurance premiums for considerably longer than other members of the workforce do.

independently-produced programs in order to keep pace with viewers' demand for Turkish content. This was an important decision for Turkey's TV drama industry as it encouraged film and video producers–and also former TRT employees–to establish independent companies (Çelenk, 1998, p. 78).

Another important development came with a new law designed to attract foreign investment. According to Pekman (2001), this law encouraged multinational companies to begin playing a major role in audiovisual production by acquiring partnership interests in Turkish filmmaking and advertising companies (pp. 214-215); according to Ateşalp (2016), multinationals' advent helped improve technical standards and production quality. However, it was deregulation and the establishment of privately-owned channels in the late 1980s that most profoundly transformed the Turkish TV drama industry. By the early 1990s, Turkey had nine national private channels vying with TRT and each other for content with which to fill the huge surge in broadcasting time. At first, the newcomers were fond of broadcasting American (and very infrequently Brazilian and Mexican) programs.

However, Turkish viewers also demanded homegrown dramas and this nourished growth in independent production. By 1997, İstanbul had more than fifty independent production companies, with varying technical qualifications (Çelenk, 1998, p. 109). As Ateşalp (2016) points out, during 2000-2007, nearly 600 domestic dramas were produced by 179 private producers (p. 19). Unsurprisingly, most privately-owned channels, whose income largely depended on ads, ordered more prime-time *dizis*. Some channels, like ATV and Kanal D, even established their own production companies. This give-and-take naturally accelerated the pace of *dizi* turnover: those that fell behind in ratings were quickly replaced with new ones. Meanwhile, a single episode's evening airtime ballooned to three hours because broadcasting rules permitted up to twelve minutes of ads an hour.

Themes and Genres

In order to appeal to viewers, *dizis* incorporate features characteristic of many different genres, allowing viewers to experience the suspense of a thriller, the sparkle of a comedy, and the gravity of a drama as the story of a single *dizi* episode unfolds. Scriptwriters employ certain themes in the formulation of their main and secondary plots. One consequence of this was an early slew of *dizis* centered around the idea of "neighborhood": examples like *İkinci Bahar* [*Second Spring*] of 1998, *Yeditepe İstanbul* [*İstanbul of Seven Hills*] of 2001 all focus on the lives of small-time shopkeepers and the goings-on in somewhat out-of-the-way İstanbul neighborhoods. In most of these programs, the emphasis is on family ties and friendship dished up with a good helping of morality.

"Romance" is another theme that *dizi* scriptwriters are fond of. In fact, there is no *dizi* that does not have a romantic plot or subplot, probably because *dizis* are mostly watched by women (Çelenk, 2015, p. 152; Deloitte, 2014, p. 16). Romance-heavy *dizis* were among the first to be shipped abroad in the second half of the 2000s. Notable among these early export successes were *Binbir Gece* [*1001 Nights*] produced in 2006, *Gümüş* [*Noor*] of 2005, *Aşk-ı Memnu* [*Forbidden Love*] of 2008, *Fatmagül* of 2010, *Kara Para Aşk* [*Black Money Love*]

of *2014, Kara Sevda* [*Endless Love*] of 2015, and *İstanbullu Gelin* [*Bride of İstanbul*] of 2017. Such *dizis* successfully compete on many international platforms.

"Comedy" is generally employed in *dizis'* subplots. When it does rise to the level of main theme, the *dizi* typically becomes a situation comedy, the exportability of which is very limited because humor is so heavily dependent on local agendas. There are however many romcom *dizis* and examples of them–notably *Kiraz Mevsimi* [*Cherry Season*] produced in 2014, *No. 309* [*Number 309*] of 2016 *and Erkenci Kuş* [*Daydreamer*] of 2018–have been exported and done well in countries like Spain, France, and Italy.

A few *dizis* such as *Ezel* produced in 2009, *Çukur* [*The Pit*] of 2017, *Kurtlar Vadisi* [*Valley of Wolves*] running from 2003 to 2016, and *Babil* [*Babel*] of 2020 conform to the "crime drama" trope, with family relationships being tightly woven into them and a melodramatic structure driving the plot forward. Some *dizis* are set in "exceptional" periods of Turkish history: in *Hatırla Sevgili* [*Remember Darling*] produced in 2006 and *Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman ki* [*Time Goes By*] of 2010 for example, narratives unfold against a background of political events in Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, while *Vatanım Sensin* [*Wounded Love*] produced in 2016 takes place during the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923). The most successful of period dramas have been those that are set in the Ottoman imperial era. *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* [*The Magnificent Century*] produced in 2011 was not only hugely popular in Turkey but was also exported to more than 100 countries. Although its sequel *Muhteşem Yüzyıl: Kösem* [*The Magnificent Century: Kösem*] of 2015 did at least as well if not better, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* drew vociferous condemnation from conservative circles in Turkey for such reasons as "indecency inappropriate for family viewing" and "misrepresentation of historical figures". Public broadcaster TRT responded by ordering period-drama *dizis* with more "appropriate" scripts, resulting in the production of *Bir zamanlar Osmanlı: Kıyam* [*Once Upon a Time in the Ottoman Empire: Rebellion*] produced in 2012 and *Diriliş Ertuğrul* [*Resurrection: Ertuğrul*] of 2015. Some pro-government channels like ATV did likewise by ordering *dizis* such as *Kuruluş: Osman* [*Founder: Osman*] of 2019.

"Counterterrorism" provides the background for a few *dizis* like *Savaşçı* [*Warrior*] produced in 2017 and *Söz* [*The Oath*] of 2017. "Medical drama" is a relative newcomer to the *dizi* industry and the few instances so far have been transplanted adaptations: *Doktorlar* [*Doctors*] of 2006 was a remake of America's *Grey's Anatomy*, while the more recent *Mucize Doktor* [*Miraculous Doctor*] produced in 2019 is a remake of South Korea's *Good Doctor*. The transformation of the well-known *Grey's Anatomy* story into a Turkish *dizi* was successful enough for *Doktorlar* to attract attention in a number of other countries.

New Digital Platforms

By the second half of the 2010s, production companies also began making *dizis* for newly-emerging non-linear digital platforms like BluTV, PuhuTV, and Netflix. Produced by Kanal D, Turkey's first streamed *dizi Masum* [*Innocent*] produced in 2017 was launched on BluTV. Ay Production produced first *Phi-Fi* in 2017 and then *Şahsiyet* [*Persona*] in 2018 for PuhuTV. *Dizis* originally produced for TV have also begun showing up on digital platforms.

Behzat Ç: An Ankara Detective Story of 2010 was sold in 2019 first to Netflix and then to BluTV. Recalling Esser (2017), the proliferation of distribution platforms heightened "competition for viewer-binding serial content" in Turkey (p. 425). Seeking new content with which to bind its viewer and making use of "drama fantasy" (a rarity in Turkish TV shows), Netflix produced *Hakan: Muhafız* [*The Protector*] in 2018 and *Atiye* in 2020. Besides new content, these new platforms are likewise spawning new production models involving relatively shorter episodes and bolder scenarios.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study takes "the presence of *dizis* in international markets" as its principal research variable while also shedding light on the challenges the industry faces abroad. The study presents the opinions of creative professionals who have witnessed and are witnessing developments first-hand. The first part of the study reflects their ideas about the basic features of the *dizi* industry and the present condition of the *dizi* market in Turkey; the second considers the presence of *dizis* in international markets. The first part of the study also provides key information that will help readers follow the ideas generated by creative professionals and will be used in the second part. The author concludes the study with suggestions about what needs to be done to sustain and build upon the Turkish TV drama industry's export success in light of the opinions that have been elicited. At this point, it is important to state that, recalling Mc Chesney (2000), the author prefers a political-economy assessment of the findings of the study in order to move beyond description to explanation.

Based on the foregoing literature review, a research strategy was formulated to find answers to the six questions presented below. The first three provide the framework for the first part of the study, which considers the basic features of the *dizi* industry and the present condition of the *dizi* market in Turkey:

RQ 1: How do creative professionals regard the *dizi* industry's current state in Turkey?
RQ 2: What do creative professionals see as *dizis'* strengths?
RQ 3: What aspects of the *dizi* industry do creative professionals criticize the most?

The last three questions provide the framework for the second part of the study, which considers the presence of *dizis* in international markets:

RQ 4: How do creative professionals regard the *dizi* industry's current state abroad?
RQ 5: What challenges confront the exportation of *dizis*?
RQ 6: What needs to be done to sustain and build upon the Turkish TV drama industry's export success?

METHOD

Research setting and sampling

The study was conducted in İstanbul where the *dizi* industry is based. The researcher identified four different categories of *dizi* workers to collect data from: *Producers*, *Directors*, *Scenarists*, and *Actors*. A quick review of professional backgrounds revealed that some individuals could be assigned to more than one category, so the researcher first asked each respondent to specify which category they most identified with and then classified their interview accordingly. For each category, three interviews were conducted with individuals who have or have had professional connections with leading production companies such as Ay Production,[5] MinT Production[6] and Tims Production[7] (Deloitte, 2014, p. 24). Based on their 2013-2014 revenues, these were among the top ten production companies.[8] Only one respondent self-identified as a freelance producer. The first round of interviews took place on 10 January 2020 and the last on 19 March 2020.

After completing the first round, it was observed that additional interviews needed to be conducted with another category of respondents– "Distributors"–in order to get more information about the international marketing of *dizis*. For this purpose, the author decided to communicate with distributors who attended the world's largest TV content marketing fair MIPCOM 2019 (Yılmaz, 2019). Emails were sent to companies like Calinos Entertainment,[9] Global Agency,[10] Intermedia,[11] MADD Entertainment,[12] and Ecchorights.[13] Ecchorights and MADD Entertainment accepted the author's invitation. Thus, two more in-depth interviews with the executives of these distributors were conducted between 20 and 26 March 2020. This round also made it possible to elicit information about international buyers' habits before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

INTERVIEWING

Following scholars like Kvale and Brinkmann (2018, p. 52) and Chenail (2011, p. 257), the researcher first conducted a pilot interview to determine the main aspects of the topics under consideration. Based on the results of the pilot interview, a finalized set of topics was identified for each category. Although the final question was always about what needed to be done to sustain and build upon the *dizi* industry's export success, the researcher preferred a semi-structured qualitative interviewing approach. Kendall (2014) defined semi-structured interviews as "having a planned list of questions but allowing

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[5] Ay Production was founded by Kerem Çatay in 2005.

[6] MinT Production was founded by Birol Güven in 1996. It is unrelated to London-based Mint Productions.

[7] Tims Production was founded by Timur Savcı in 2006.

[8] According to Deloitte's report (2014), the revenues of Ay Production, MinT Production, and Tims Production respectively were as follows: 44 million dollars; 28, 5 million dollars and 29, 6 million dollars. These companies produce a maximum of six *dizis* each year (p. 24).

[9] Calinos Entertainment was founded in Los Angeles in 1997; it opened an office in İstanbul in 2001.

[10] Global Agency started selling *dizis* in 2008. It acquired the Australian company World Wide Entertainment in 2012.

[11] Intermedia was founded in 1992, initially to serve the domestic market and subsequently began exporting *dizis*.

[12] MADD Entertainment (Med Production – Ay Production Drama Distribution) is a joint venture of two leading Turkish production companies that was established in 2018.

[13] Eccho Rights is a global rights management company whose head office is in Stockholm. Eccho Rights Turkey was founded in 2009.

room for dialogue and follow-up questions" (p.133). The researcher avoided asking leading questions and gave respondents a chance to clarify any points they might make. Similar to what Dowling et al. (2016) asserted, the researcher sought to draw out the "interpretations and experiences" of the industry members through these semi-structured interviews (p. 680), which were usually conducted in respondents' workplaces but also in settings such as cafés. Recalling Liu (2018, p. 4) and Driscoll (2011, p. 165), these face-to-face interviews also gave the researcher non-verbal clues about the interviewees' feelings. Audio recordings were made of all fourteen interviews, each of which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

Transcription and analysis

Interviews were transcribed and checked against recordings for accuracy. Each interview was labeled using a category name and number ("Director 1", "Actor 3", etc.). About 138 pages (71760 words) of interview data were collected. The researcher first created meaningful data units appropriate to the research questions by comparing and contrasting the elements of all the interviews. The second step involved classifying and ordering these units under specific headings. Using the descriptive method, the researcher sought to give typical examples from each category under each heading as answers to each research question.

FINDINGS

The Current State of the Dizi Industry

Asked to characterize the current state of the *dizi* industry, Turkish creative professionals' responses focused mainly on "cutthroat competition" and "onerous economic conditions"**.**

Cutthroat Competition

Although every respondent noted the competitiveness of the *dizi* industry, none actually complained about it: everyone accepted it as a fact of life and some even expressed the belief that such competition was keeping the industry dynamic. Respondents seemed to have resolved the long working hours problem mentioned in previous studies like Bulut (2016), Ateşalp, (2016) and Yörük (2018).

Producer 1:
Dizis with good production values and interesting storylines survive; those that aren't watched get cancelled even after the second episode. The rapid pace of dizi production keeps us on our toes. For my current show, I'm working with three directors and four scriptwriters and we have two production and postproduction teams working alternately. We have largely resolved the working conditions problem, at least the big production companies have.

Onerous economic conditions

Turkey's economic indicators began to deteriorate in 2016. In 2018, the country went through a currency and debt crisis. It was said that this crisis was caused by an excessive current account deficit and foreign-currency debt in combination with the ruling Justice

and Development Party's increasing authoritarianism and President Erdoğan's unorthodox ideas about interest-rate policy (Daragahi, 2018; Pitel, 2018). By end-2018, the Turkish economy was in recession. In 2019, an already high level of systemic unemployment was made even worse by job losses (European Commission, 2020). Respondents said that the onerous economic conditions affected the *dizi* industry just like every other sector in Turkey. As their production costs soared, *dizi* production companies were unable to finance their projects. Some explained how they are trying to cope with economic difficulties; a few said that everything will be even worse after the epidemic passes unless essential measures are taken.

Producer 2:
Economic crisis had increased production costs and advertisers had downsized their purchasing budgets. We finance projects mainly in Turkey, but to do that, we need high ratings. Just about anything we can export is pure profit, but if a dizi is cancelled after a couple of episodes, it becomes total rubbish because international customers never buy fewer than 26 episodes. With the pandemic financing will get worse.

Scriptwriter 3:
Because of the deteriorating economic conditions of 2019, we started writing more "production-friendly" scenarios: if a character owns a jet we don't show him boarding the aircraft but have him tell someone to get it ready. Sometimes we happen upon music that'll suit a scene perfectly but we don't use it because we can't afford the rights.

Dizi features that strengthen the industry

When we asked *dizi* industry workers about their sector's strengths, their first response was overwhelmingly "creative scenarios"; coming in close second was the quality of *dizis'* "preproduction, production, and postproduction stages". A great majority mentioned "musical and visual diversity" while some cited "character-development" and "star performers".

Creative scenarios

Every respondent said dynamically-structured, creative scenarios were the source of the industry's success.

Scriptwriter 3:
The protracted length of individual dizi episodes has somehow triggered "creativity". Coming up with such long episodes was a big problem in the beginning because it demanded such long working hours. We write about a hundred pages a week. Eventually we learned how to deal with this and nowadays writing is a group effort. Nevertheless, the crucial problem is keeping the viewers watching till the end of the episode and, more importantly, to make sure they are eager to see the next one. Scenarios have got to be "animated". Stories have got to be original. We use surprise to manage and control viewers' reactions. We don't write many episodes in advance: we usually keep at most three or four episodes in reserve.

Scriptwriter 1:
We usually start with the current season's story arc; we also know how each character will evolve. However, things can change after a broadcast because we follow viewers' reactions on the Internet and through their e-mails etc. A good way for a story to hold onto viewers is to surprise them. So, a dizi is never about just one genre: an episode may have aspects of a romantic comedy, but it might suddenly turn into a thriller or a tragedy or something else.

Producer 1:
Turkish viewers want "tempo" in dizis. They don't want to watch actors eyeing each other silently for minutes on end. Such shows are quickly eliminated. Ten years ago, we were leading viewers: they watched whatever we gave them; nowadays viewers are leading us: they're demanding and looking for "originality".

Director 2:
We're lucky because we can create very different shows with very interesting storylines. It's hosted 35 different civilizations; it is the crossover between East and the West; one side is the Muslim world, the other side is indexed to the Western world. We have a marvelously intellectual generation that can produce many captivating scenarios from these resources.

Preproduction, production, and postproduction quality

Creative professionals also emphasized the "quality of preproduction, production and postproduction stages" as one of the strongest aspects of *dizis*.

Producer 3:
We produce dizis at almost the same pace they appear on TV. Production usually completes only 72 hours before an episode airs. We're very fast and have become masters of the preproduction, production, and postproduction stages: we can complete post within three days max. Many foreign companies now prefer Turkey for their projects' postproduction. Disney's an example.

Musical and Visual Diversity

"Musical and visual diversity" were also mentioned as strong aspects of *dizis* that deserve praise.

Director 1:
Every dizi has its own repertoire of theme music, which is usually composed specifically for that show. Music helps by cuing the attention of the viewer. Another thing is our inventory of real locations rather than constructed sets, even for interior shots. These can range from seaside palaces on the Bosphorus to village cottages in Adana.

Character development and stars

A number of professionals cited "character development" as an important element of *dizis*. *Director 3,* expressed it saying "characters in dizis aren't clear-cut, set-in-stone puppets: they are flesh-and-blood people who evolve as the story moves forward." While most producers and directors said that having a "star" in the cast did not always contribute much to ratings, every distributor said that having one made it easier to market a show abroad.

Producer 1:
There was a time when we used to headline well-known stars when marketing a show; nowadays, it's more effective to introduce a dizi by putting up clips and teasers on social media. Of course, this only works if the content and acting are genuinely good.

Most-criticized issues

"Problems encountered during the design stage", "RTÜK (Radio and Television Supreme Council) practices", "the new ratings panel system" and "problems with rights allocation" were the issues Turkish creative professionals criticized the most.

Problems encountered during the design stage

Some said the industry suffered especially from problems during the design stage.

Producer 3:
Our real problems are in designing a project. We don't budget time for developing a project or capital for the design stage: we just feel our way forward. In our industry, it's usually scriptwriters approaching producers, whereas creator-producers should be the ones designing and generating projects, finding scriptwriters, making cast and location arrangements, and so on. Broadcasters are gatekeepers and they make deals; their contributions are limited. That's largely because they don't employ commissioning editors.

Some attributed design-stage problems to a lack of creativity.

Director 2:
The problem isn't time. I know of many shows that had more than a year or two for the design stage. The main problem is that they're not nourished by Turkish–or indeed anyone's–literature and have no general appeal. This is related to a lack of creativity.

The regulator's practices

Turkey's Radio and Television Supreme Council was founded in 1994 as an autonomous and impartial public legal authority charged with the regulation and supervision of radio, television, and on-demand media services. However, the council's approach and rulings are decidedly political and its structure is far from being impartial (Yıldız, 2003; Işık, 2007). Although the body's main concern is ostensibly to regulate and develop healthy relationships among media-industry actors, RTÜK seems to be most known for the frequent and sometimes stiff penalties that it imposes on TV and radio channels. Unsurprisingly, every respondent criticized RTÜK practices and said they chafed under the council's restrictions, which they see as a real threat to creativity.

Producer 2:
RTÜK punishes channels with heavy fines. There are rules but they're not clear yet. What's "Turkish family structure"? What does "appropriateness" mean? Unavoidably, we omit anything we think RTÜK might find controversial. Some themes like homosexuality aren't touched at all.

Director 2:
I've observed a change in the "content" and "form" of dizis in the last decade: they're getting more and more impoverished. But this isn't just because of political pressure. I believe it's largely due to the length of dizi episodes and also to "RTÜK paranoia".

New viewer ratings panel system

Since December 2011, TNS has been monitoring Turkish TV channel ratings and audience shares. Initially, AGB Nielsen created a panel system consisting of 2,200

households in which education level was the main determinant; it then defined a sample consisting of five categories[14] with a particular percentage assigned to each group.[15] In 2012, the new company, TNS, increased the number of households to 4,200 and changed the sampling definition by adding a new category[16] and introducing a new percentage-assignment method.[17] TNS also added income level as a determining factor (Kuyucu, 2020). TNS's inclusion of this new category to the panel system is heavily criticized by all distributors and by many creative professionals. While it is accepted that production teams must ultimately take home-market cultural preferences and tastes into account in order to capture the ratings of non-urban households, in order to appeal to viewers in other countries' markets, producers need to target educated people living in big cities whose tastes have largely come to resemble those of "Western" cultures (Zincirkıran, 2016).

Producer 3:
In 2012, the demographic groups represented on the ratings panel changed and the relative weights of every group shifted. Education used to count for more than income; now it's the reverse. Lower socioeconomic groups have trebled in weight, and rural preferences dominate. We've moved away from international tastes in other words. This should be changed.

Problems with rights allocation

Although d*izi,* cinema film, and similar copyrights are protected in Turkey by Statute 5846, a law governing intellectual properties and works of art, some scholars (Yörük, 2018, p. 819) say that in practice, many scriptwriters simply hand over their rights to producers when they enter contracts with them. In a similar way, respondents of this study (mostly scriptwriters and actors) voiced problems with how rights are allocated. Some interpreted the problem of rights allocation as a result of weak labor organizations and poor union rights.[18] Actor 1 mentioned this, saying "Broadcasters share profits from foreign sales mainly with producers. Stars get a cut but scriptwriters rarely do. If we had a strong labor organization behind us, we would maintain our rights." It should be noted also that some producers are dissatisfied with the copyright conditions offered by new digital platforms. Producer 3 expressed the issue saying "If you work with the new digital platforms, you give the show along with all its property rights. So, you are becoming a contractor-producer, not a producer."

The current state of dizis abroad

When asked about the current state of *dizis* abroad, all creative workers said they are pleased by the shows' worldwide appeal.

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[14] Category A (100% highly educated and hold at least a bachelor's degree from a university), Category B (60% highly educated; the remainder highschool and equivalent graduates), Category C1 (60% highschool or equivalent graduates; the remainder hold a bachelor's degree), Category C2 (20% highschool or equivalent graduates; the remainder have primary or middle school diplomas), Category D (70% primary school diplomas; the remainder are school dropouts).
[15] The allocation of categories was 4% Category A, 9% Category B, 25% Category C1, 32% Category C2, and 30% Category D.
[16] Category E consists of 95% primary-school graduates or dropouts. This category is especially representative of rural audiences.
[17] The new apportionment of categories is 4% Category A, 9% Category B, 22% Category C1, 29% Category C2, 28% Category D, 9% Category E.
[18] There are eight *dizi* industry unions in Turkey but they have hardly any collective bargaining power because of their very limited membership (Karaca & Hoş, 2019).

Penetrating markets

Many offered reasons for the global popularity of *dizis* and stated that they were looking for new markets.

Producer 1:
Global viewers are attracted by dizis' new landscapes, their patriarchal society with strong mothers, their melodramatic content, their high production values, and their fast-paced scenarios. But different things appeal to different audiences: some viewers–the Balkans for example–have similar cultural backgrounds; some are interested in seeing Turkish society practicing Islam in a relatively modern way; for some, it's historical and natural settings; for others it's because Turkish society represents an "exotic" culture, which some are even observing with an "orientalist" mindset.

Distributor 1:
We're distributing dizis to over 150 countries in the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, Latin America, and Africa. Most of these viewers want colorful melodramas; they want love, revenge, and Cinderella stories like Kara Sevda. Some European countries such as Italy and Spain want romantic comedies. With the world in lockdown because of the pandemic, we continue to market dizis.

Distributor 2:
People in more than 150 countries want to watch dizis. We've marketed many shows to Sweden as well. The new digital platforms are also aware of this demand: one reason they come into Turkey is to order new Turkish dramas.

Challenges in exportation of dizis

"Conflicting demands" and "insufficient management of success" were seen as the most common challenging issues among Turkish creative professionals.

Conflicting demands

Some producers and distributors noted that the expectations of international customers are no longer matching those of Turkish broadcasters. The international buyers want dramatic *dizis,* whereas Turkish viewers want to see more action. They found these conflicting demands rather challenging.

Producer 2:
We're up against a wall lately because what Turkish viewers expect of a dizi no longer matches what international buyers want: what they want from us is telenovelas. Our older dizis like Kara Sevda, Aşk-ı Memnu, and Gümüş were more like telenovelas. But RTÜK is more repressive lately: it can see anything as threatening "Turkish family structure". Moreover, Turkish viewers want to see more action: that's why Çukur and Babil get such good ratings.

Insufficient management of success

Many Turkish creative professionals believe that *dizis*' success is not being managed well by policymakers.

Actor 2:
After 30 years, we've become one of the world's leading TV drama exporters: our shows are being watched in more than 150 countries. This success is not being managed well. Owing to rising production costs, we can't produce as we wish. Nor have we been getting the support we need. But they let us produce

dizis during the Covid-19 pandemic after just a six-month hiatus even while other sectors continued to be locked down.

What needs to be done

There was a consensus among industry professionals about what needs to be done to sustain and build upon the Turkish TV drama industry's export success. Their responses fall into two categories: "What policymakers should do" and "What creative professionals must do".

What policymakers should do

At the head of the first category's list comes "regulatory framework revision". All of the respondents want the long-waited amendment of *"*Turkey's copyright law" to be completed with the inclusion of elaborated, up-to-date provisions addressing present-day issues. They also want to start benefitting again from the "government incentives" that they used to receive when producing *dizis*.

Producer 1:
Seven or eight years ago, the economics ministry published a communiqué about foreign-currency-earning sectors that qualify for these incentives: our industry is one of them. We used to receive incentives, but along with the economic crisis, authorities have become more miserly. Another thing is that it should be easier to get permits to use public spaces as settings for filming.

All respondents agree that RTÜK should define its "rules of content" more explicitly. They also want the "ratings system panel" revised in favor of more educated viewers. Distributor 1 mentioned it saying, "If we want to penetrate new markets, the relative weight of "AB" viewers needs to be increased."

What creative professionals must do

At the head of the second category's list was "development of language and creative skills". Most industry members say their second-language skills are insufficient to follow international viewer feedback or to develop international co-productions. In addition to their language skills, they also want to expand their creative skills. Scriptwriter 3 expressed this desire, saying "We've got lots of subjects that can be turned into world-beating dizis. All we need is brainstorming to create successful projects. Workshops should be organized with broadcasters, producers, directors, and scriptwriters taking part in them."

Most professionals emphasized the importance of giving preference to "partnerships" in *dizis*' production and distribution stages.

Producer 3:
We think co-production is useful for international sales. We have co-production knowhow and we're getting involved in new shows almost every day. For example, Şahsiyet is going to be produced with the Mexicans. We sold them the story, but we're also investing in the project. We'll be distributing in Latin America and many other countries. We believe partnerships like this will stimulate the dizi industry and add to our export success.

DISCUSSION

Twenty years ago, there was scarcely any mention of Turkish TV dramas in international markets: nowadays *dizis* make a strong showing at trade fairs around the world; with the advent of new streaming platforms, they are being watched in over 150 countries. International *dizi* sales generate significant foreign currency earnings for the Turkish economy and they are even said to boost the country's tourist arrivals. All of which begs the question of how Turkish dramas have become so popular even in countries that are often linguistically and culturally remote. Recent research (Esser, 2017; Jensen & Jacobsen, 2017) suggests that this situation is not peculiar to *dizis*: nowadays peripheral industries are often as well-positioned to satisfy international customers as are well-known, long-established central industries. These are obviously hopeful developments for the *dizi* industry.

The first part of this study looked at some basic features of the *dizi* industry and the current condition of the *dizi* market in Turkey. One finding is that the industry's existing production and business model is still largely dependent on a show's home-market performance. Another is that international partnerships have been increasing over the last five years: interviews reveal many successful co-production projects. We are also seeing partnerships among distributors and producers. Nearly all respondents were excited about newly-emerging digital platforms and many expressed the view that streaming platforms represent a production model alternative. There is also a belief that these platforms' orders for new *dizis* will help shows travel even further afield.

Creative professionals offered many examples of *dizis'* strengths. Scriptwriters pointed to the shows' "dynamic structures" and "creative storylines" and to the use of more than one genre within a *dizi* as a means of holding viewers' interest; they noted also that they write only three or four episodes ahead so that they can use viewers' reactions as input for surprising viewers in subsequent episodes. Most producers, directors, and actors reported being satisfied with *dizis'* "creative scenarios", "evolving, flesh-and-blood characters", and "surprise" endings. Like Danish TV dramas (Esser, 2017, p. 423), *dizis* are often praised for their "musical and visual diversity". Most industry professionals said they are proud of *dizis'* preproduction, production, and postproduction quality. However, they point to the many structural problems that beset the *dizi* industry too: Most said for example that they felt personally offended by the way rights are being shared. Some blamed poor labor organization for this. Everyone criticized "the new ratings panel system". Some found the design stage of *dizi* projects rather weak but said this could be improved through the efforts of creative professionals. So, it would be difficult to maintain that many industry problems pointed to by previous studies have been resolved.

The second part of the study reveals two main things: firstly, that, although *dizis* are penetrating many markets and have reached more than 150 countries, the sustainability of *dizis'* international market presence faces additional challenges apart from the above-mentioned structural problems; secondly, that these challenges urgently need to be addressed too. For instance, the mismatch between domestic and international

customers' expectations and demands is a significant problem. Furthermore, buyers' perceptions of *dizis* as "Turkish telenovelas" pose threats that might hobble the industry's future creativity and development in different genres. This part of the study also turns up some new findings that are not to be observed in previous ones. Contrary to Yeşil (2016), most creative members claimed that "success is not being managed well" by the authorities; neither did any of the participants make reference to any "new-Turkey discourse" emphasizing the country's economic growth and development (p. 51). This difference, however, could be due to the rollback in government-provided support mechanisms as a result of the deterioration in Turkey's economy since 2017. Nearly all respondents referred to RTÜK's rules and practices as a "threat to their creativity". They are almost certainly referring to RTÜK's new content "guidelines" as laid out in "Regulation on the principles and procedures for promoting family and child-friendly productions and *dizis*" (RTÜK, 2018), whose provisions are considered to be long on ambiguity but short on specifics by industry members. In fact, the ruling party reiterated its protectionist and conservative tone (article no: 596) in *The Eleventh Development Plan of Turkey: 2019-2023* saying that "media tools will be used in a way to strengthen family ties" (Office of the President, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Turkey's *dizi* industry made a tremendous entrance into the world's TV drama scene; however, in order to sustain and build upon this success, there are certain things both professionals and policymakers need to do. The author has attempted to present these things based on typical examples obtained through interviews. He explains them in the context of political economic developments in Turkey. Although creative professionals express hope that improvements in the regulatory framework will be forthcoming and although they believe that new production models which facilitate domestic and international co-productions and partnerships will help the *dizi* industry to build on its export success, the reality is that the most recent content regulation published by RTÜK looks like being a real threat to the d*izi* industry because TV drama is a product of a creative process and mandated/reined-in creativity cannot thrive.

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KAKO TURSKI KREATIVNI PROFESIONALCI VIDE INDUSTRIJU TELEVIZIJSKIH DRAMA: INTERVJUI S GLUMCIMA, PRODUCENTIMA, REDATELJIMA, SCENARISTIMA I DISTRIBUTERIMA

Ayşen Gül

SAŽETAK *Turska televizijska industrija naglo se razvila u posljednjem desetljeću i povećala izvoz televizijskih drama* (dizis) *u više od stotinu država. Turska je 2016. godine postala drugi najveći izvoznik televizijskih drama u svijetu nakon Sjedinjenih Američkih Država. Transnacionalizacija industrije televizijskih drama,* dizi, *rezultat je rada i karakteristika kreativne industrije. Međutim, ta industrija ima i neke ozbiljne probleme. Ovaj rad nastoji objasniti izazove s kojima se sreće turska televizijska industrija kroz intervjue s glumcima, producentima, redateljima, scenaristima i distributerima, te dati preporuke za uspjeh izvoza turskih televizijskih proizvoda.*

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