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Turkish TV Series
Present Window into Türkiye's Culture and Values Forging
Engagement with Foreign Audiences

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TV series as a soft power multiplier

In today's globalized world, television series functions as a soft power multiplier, presenting a window into foreign cultures, history, and social values affecting perceptions. TV series may support a country's soft power elements and cultural diplomacy by spotlighting its unique and attractive aspects. TV productions contribute to raising interest in foreign cultures, history, or social values and boost international image.

Political scientist Joseph Nye explains that soft power is a country's ability "to get what it wants through attraction rather than coercion"¹. Accordingly, forging new ties with people across the world, promoting a favorable image, telling the stories of a country, and correcting misconceptions are part of public diplomacy efforts aimed at strengthening soft power². Considering that TV series are exported to various parts of the world, they can create impact and deliver messages on a country's identity and values. Exporting TV productions becomes a soft power element as they enable reaching out to foreign audiences in various parts of the world and exposing them to the respected country's culture, language, and values to forge ties.

TV series offer a unique platform for promoting and disseminating countries' cultures on a global scale, as well as entertaining. Changing a country's image solely through TV series might not be possible, yet, in various cases, series substantially moves the needle in dispelling misconceptions about a country or presenting a favorable image, promoting culture, and creating engagement between people. However, it should be also noted that in some cases TV productions may present a biased stance against some cultures or people exploiting misconceptions. The audiences' attention regarding the biased stances showcased on the screens is essential to mitigate the undermining impact of false narratives.

The TV series industry enables countries to showcase their culture. People might be interested in seeing the places shown in their favorite series, leading to a boost in tourism or become more enthusiastic about learning the country's language. As a crucial component of the culture industry, TV series is a thriving sector and a major promoter of cultural exchange and Türkiye's soft power.

In the last two decades, Turkish TV series have drawn international attention, and their global popularity supports the country's aim of strengthening its soft power³. Turkish TV series provide a window into Turkish culture, raising interest in history, food, various cities, and many other aspects. The series increased foreign audiences' familiarity with Türkiye and its culture. This interest becomes a driving force for visiting the country, learning Turkish, or studying there.

Alongside Türkiye's economic and political progress, the TV series industry has achieved notable growth in recent years. As a result of its economic success and widespread popularity, the Turkish TV series industry has emerged as both an economic gateway and an important means of promoting intercultural connections. In fact, the soft power generated by Turkish TV series serves partly as a tool of cultural diplomacy, showcasing the cultural values, lifestyle, and historical richness of Turkish society across various regions.

¹ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p.5.

² Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 107.

³ "The Familiarizing Effect of Turkish TV Series on Turkish Language and Culture" Program Organized", Yunus Emre Institute, (June 7, 2024), <https://www.yee.org.tr/tr/node/16663>.

Turkish TV series: some figures

Turkish TV series, showcasing both the historical and modern aspects of Türkiye, have reached around 1 billion viewers in over 170 countries, achieving significant success⁴. The global demand for Turkish TV series has surged by 184% in the last three years alone⁵. This success story, which began in the Middle East and expanded to the Balkans and Central Asia, is now global, spanning France, Japan, Chile, Peru, and India. According to 2023 data, the Turkish TV series industry, which produces about 60 series per year, has risen to third place in terms of popularity and demand behind the United States and the United Kingdom⁶. Turkish TV industry now eyes exporting series to new markets such as China which has the world's largest population⁷.

Turkish TV series first gained popularity in the Middle East in the early 2000s. The popularity of Turkish TV series led to a boost in tourism in Türkiye as many Arab tourists showed great interest in exploring Türkiye and its fascinating cities, particularly Istanbul. Turkish TV series, including "Kurtlar Vadisi" (Valley of the Wolves), "Diriliş Ertuğrul" (Resurrection Ertuğrul), "Ezel" (Ezel), "Gümüş" (Silver), and "Aşk-ı Memnu" (Forbidden Love) became favorite shows in the region leading to a boom in tourist numbers coming from the region⁸. This popularity later spread to Latin America; some state officials from the region highlighted the appeal of the series in their countries⁹.

Turkish TV series as an example of successful cultural diplomacy

Turkish TV series are a great example of successful cultural diplomacy, as they help Türkiye establish a cordial dialogue with the rest of the world. Public institutions and organizations in this field, particularly the Directorate of Communications of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, are actively taking steps. The Turkish TV series and cinema sector is regarded as one of the most critical components of Türkiye's soft power, and the Turkish institutions engaged in culture, tourism and diplomacy see it as a natural partner. To this end, leading figures in the industry, communication faculties, non-governmental organizations, and experts frequently collaborate with it.

⁴“Sinema Genel Müdürü Birol Güven: Daha Çok Film ve Dizi Çekerek İhrac Etmeyi Hedefliyoruz,” NTV, (March 16, 2024) <https://www.ntv.com.tr/n-life/kultur-ve-sanat/sinema-genel-muduru-birol-guven-daha-cok-film-ve-dizi-cekerek-ihrac-etmeyi-hedefliyoruz.PVoxaw0LWUuqmOBDkYg3kw>.

⁵“The Third-largest Exporter of Television Is Not Who You Might Expect”, *The Economist*, (February 15, 2024) <https://www.economist.com/culture/2024/02/15/the-third-largest-exporter-of-television-is-not-who-you-might-expect>.

⁶“The Third-largest Exporter of Television Is Not Who You Might Expect”, *The Economist*, (February 15, 2024) <https://www.economist.com/culture/2024/02/15/the-third-largest-exporter-of-television-is-not-who-you-might-expect>.

⁷“170 Ülkeye İhrac Edilen Türk Dizilerinin Yeni Hedefi Dünyanın En Kalabalık Ülkesi Çin”, Anadolu Ajansı, (March 20, 2024) <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/kultur/170-ulkeye-ihrac-edilen-turk-dizilerinin-yeni-hedefi-dunyanin-en-kalabalik-ulkesi-cin/3169292>.

⁸“Turkish TV Series Inspire Arab Tourists to Vacation in Turkey”, Daily Sabah, July 6, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/tourism/2017/07/06/turkish-tv-series-inspire-arab-tourists-to-vacation-in-turkey>.

⁹“Maduro visits set of Resurrection: Ertuğrul, invites producer for a joint project in Venezuela”, Daily Sabah, July 11, 2018), <https://www.dailysabah.com/arts-culture/2018/07/11/maduro-visits-set-of-resurrection-ertugrul-invites-producer-for-a-joint-project-in-venezuela>.

For instance, the "Turkish TV Series as a Public Diplomacy Tool" workshop held for the first time in 2019 and various panels are tangible examples of this collaboration¹⁰. These events discuss how Turkish TV series can increase the potential for understanding and cooperation between different cultures; how they can be used to communicate cultural values and social issues to international audiences; and what role Turkish TV series can play in foreign policy and public diplomacy.

Other steps are being taken to support Türkiye's existing initiatives to improve the effectiveness of Turkish TV series as a public diplomacy tool. First and foremost, the global distribution networks of Turkish TV series are expanded through collaboration with digital platforms with the aim of reaching a global audience. Not only does Türkiye supply content to foreign platforms, but it also creates local platforms that can adapt to digital transformation while upholding the values and principles of the country.

Türkiye's public broadcaster TRT launched in 2023 digital streaming platform "Tabii" aiming to meet the global demand for Turkish series, offering rich content including genres of comedy, drama, fiction, action, and history. The international digital platform that embraces the slogan "The That Stories Bond Us" aims to inspire the whole world with the transformative power of stories. The platform that promises to be accessible anytime, anywhere, is available in languages of Turkish, English, Spanish, Arabic and Urdu. It has reached over 4 million subscribers and produced more than 30 original productions last year¹¹. In a recent move, the digital platform collaborated with Türkiye's flag carrier Turkish Airlines, and 12 original pieces of content from the platform were added to the in-flight entertainment system with subtitle and dubbing options¹². Passengers flying with Turkish Airlines from across the globe enjoy Turkish productions and gets a glimpse of Türkiye.

Furthermore, media events and festivals are organized to increase the international exposure of Turkish TV series. Special screenings and promotional events for Turkish TV series are held at international television and film festivals. More sales agreements with foreign markets are signed as a result of these events every year. Foreign journalists, critics, and media representatives are invited to visit Turkish TV series sets to gain a deeper understanding of Turkish TV series.

What makes Turkish TV series popular?

What makes Turkish TV series popular among a wide range of audiences? The series displays the country's historical, cultural, and social aspects; depicts stories that are relatable, showcases the beauty of various cities. Turkish TV series helped several industries grow and significantly contributed to export income. These contributions are felt most strongly in the tourism industry. The promotion of Türkiye worldwide has been significantly influenced by Turkish television

¹⁰"Kamu Diplomasisi Aracı Olarak Türk Dizileri Çalıştayı düzenlendi", Directorate of Communications, (March 13, 2019) https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/yerel_basin/detay/kamu-diplomasisi-araci-olarak-turk-dizileri-calistayi-duzenlendi.

¹¹Aişe Hümevra Akgün, "TRT Genel Müdürü Prof. Dr. Mehmet Zahid Sobacı: Tabii, Sadece TRT Projesi Değil, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin Bir Projesidir", Anadolu Agency, (May 11, 2024) <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/kultur/trt-genel-muduru-prof-dr-mehmet-zahid-sobaci-tabii-sadece-trt-projesi-degil-turkiye-cumhuriyetinin-bir-projesidir/3216343>.

¹²"Turkish Airlines to Showcase Content Produced by TRT's 'Tabii'", Daily Sabah, (September 1, 2024) <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/tech/turkish-airlines-to-showcase-content-produced-by-trts-tabii>.

series, which have established a brand for cities such as Istanbul and other filming locations. Thanks to the influence of the TV series in global media, these places rose to the spotlight and became recognized for their natural beauty and cultural wealth. Particularly, the picturesque scenes from Istanbul and the breathtaking Bosphorus prompt audiences to visit the city. Turkish TV series strengthens the city branding of Istanbul as many series showcases the beauty of the city. Cultural and historical sites are promoted via series.

City branding through TV series

As an evolving discipline, city branding focuses on uncovering pillars regarding what makes a city distinctive in the world¹³. A city's historical legacy, its culture, socioeconomic and innovative aspects, as well as its residents' aspirations constitute a city's identity¹⁴. In city branding it is essential to reflect the identity and authentic story of a city to resonate with residents and attract tourists and investors. As unique aspects of cities' cultural and historical values are underscored in TV series in a repeated manner, the number of tourists surges. Furthermore, audiences would like to explore the places where their favorite series are shot and travel to the country. As Associated Press reports, devoted fans of Turkish series from countries ranging from Finland to Argentina travel to Türkiye to see the sets of their favorite shows and landmarks of Istanbul¹⁵. As high numbers of fans show interest in the series and Turkish culture, Bozdağ Film Studios, a vast complex in Istanbul, invites guests to explore locations where Ottoman-era blockbusters "Resurrection: Ertuğrul" and "Foundation: Osman" were shot¹⁶. Bozdağ Film Studios, the third largest film set in the world, enables visitors to experience the history and culture of the period through diverse activities such as wearing traditional Turkish costumes, horse riding or watching the equestrian dance performance¹⁷. These recent steps indicate that Turkish TV series add up to Türkiye's public diplomacy and place branding efforts.

Turkish TV series created social and cultural impact as they have garnered a large fan base, introduced the Turkish lifestyle, tastes and values to diverse regions and led to their adoption. This has had a broad impact, influencing many areas of life from fashion trends to interior design, thereby enhancing cultural interaction across the region. Turkish TV series make substantial contributions to cultural diplomacy by globally promoting Turkish designs, textiles, furniture, cuisine, food products, and technology. These series establish a cultural network that allows Turkish brands to access new markets across a broad geography, ranging from South America to Japan.

¹³ "Insights & Strategies: City Branding", Place Brand Observer, <https://placebrandobserver.com/city-branding-explained/>.

¹⁴ "Insights & Strategies: City Branding", Place Brand Observer, <https://placebrandobserver.com/city-branding-explained/>.

¹⁵ Robert Badendieck, "Booming Turkish TV drama industry captures hearts and minds worldwide and boosts tourism", Associated Press, (July 13, 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-tv-drama-series-istanbul-tourism-dizi-d9b908cad575755e1118312cbb0187ad>.

¹⁶ Betül Tilmaç, "Bozdağ Film Plateaus: Where Turkish History Comes Alive", Daily Sabah, (September 3, 2024) <https://www.dailysabah.com/arts/bozdag-film-plateaus-where-turkish-history-comes-alive/news>.

¹⁷ Betül Tilmaç, "Bozdağ Film Plateaus: Where Turkish History Comes Alive", Daily Sabah, (September 3, 2024) <https://www.dailysabah.com/arts/bozdag-film-plateaus-where-turkish-history-comes-alive/news>.

The converging effect of Turkish TV series on Turkish language learning

Additionally, the global success of Turkish TV series drives a growing interest in learning the Turkish language in the countries where they are aired. This contributes to the increase of Türkiye's cultural influence in the international arena, as well as the reach of Turkish culture to a wider audience. Türkiye's Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) has responsibility for promoting the Turkish language and culture in the world through its cultural centers based in more than 60 countries. YEE provides face-to-face and online courses to people who are eager to learn Turkish¹⁸. TV series fans who develop interest in Turkish culture also start learning the language in the YEE's cultural centers in their countries as well. Research on the converging effect of Turkish TV series on Turkish language learning highlights the series' significant role in inspiring people to learn the language¹⁹. Aside from displaying the cultural aspects of the country, TV series contribute to the efforts of people who are eager to learn the language.

Thanks to strong cooperation between the government and the private sector, the impact and reach of Turkish TV series in the international arena are increasing daily. This strategy aims to enhance the visibility of Turkish brands in global markets and to share Türkiye's cultural richness with the world in a more profound manner.

The impact of citizens as global non-governmental actors

Turkish TV series also reflect the impact of citizens as global non-governmental actors and employ postmodern marketing strategies. The events held by the civil actors in the TV series to meet their fans abroad play a significant role in promoting various aspects of Türkiye. Public diplomacy institutions hold some of these gatherings to contribute to international public relations activities. For instance, in Italy, Turkish TV series sparked great interest and appreciation in recent years²⁰. With their warm stories, profound character development, and remarkable production quality, TV series have attracted Italian audiences and amassed a large fan base. Turkish TV series gained popularity among Italian audiences because of their compelling emotional narratives, the actors' success, the emphasis placed on exterior shots, the promotion of Istanbul as a tourist destination, the persistence of Mediterranean culture in the stories, and the flow and mystery at the end of each episode that captivates the audience. Italian tourists, who are influenced by the TV series, visit the country through tourism companies to see where the scenes are filmed. This popularity stimulates cultural exchange and improves Turkish-Italian cultural relations.

The success of Turkish TV series in enriching public diplomacy

The success of Turkish TV series, a part of social life in countries where global productions are daily consumes, cannot be measured solely in terms of export figures. Turkish TV series' success implies that Türkiye's values, cultural and historical aspects resonate with the global

¹⁸Murathan Yıldırım, "Turkish Language Flourishes Worldwide with YEE Projects", Daily Sabah, (March 1, 2024), <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkiye/turkish-language-flourishes-worldwide-with-yee-projects/news>.

¹⁹"The Familiarizing Effect of Turkish TV Series on Turkish Language and Culture" Program Organized", Yunus Emre Institute, (June 7, 2024), <https://www.yee.org.tr/tr/node/16663>.

²⁰"İtalya'yı 'Terra Amara' İsmiyle Kasıp Kavuran Dizisi 'Bir Zamanlar Çukurova' Büyük Finali Yayınlandı", Sabah, (June 11, 2024), <https://www.sabah.com.tr/galeri/magazin/italyayi-terra-amara-ismiyle-kasip-kavuran-dizisi-bir-zamanlar-cukurova-buyuk-finale-yaklasiyor>.

audience and enrich public diplomacy. This success has to do with an intention to ensure that endemic values are shared with the international community and added to the world's cultural heritage by establishing bidirectional cultural processes in opposition to the current global, unidirectional cultural power. Among the most important methods of telling this story is Turkish TV series that have been admired in many places abroad, have formed a unique fan base, have been followed with interest by the audience and the people, characters, and culture mentioned and thus aroused curiosity and that bring the recognition, credibility, and warmth of the Turkish brand to the whole world.

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