

## **Mediatised culturalisation through television: second-generation Alevi Kurds in London**

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Satellite television has not only provided migrant communities with stronger ties to their home countries but has also enabled second-generation migrants in particular to know more about their country of origin beyond their family ties. The aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which Turkish television contributes towards the making of the transnational identity of the “twice minority” group of Alevi Kurds through what I call mediatised culturalisation. Drawing on seventeen in-depth interviews that I conducted with the second-generation members of the Alevi Kurdish community in London in 2016, I explore the role of Turkish television in contesting the boundaries of transnational social imaginaries of the second-generation viewers.

**Keywords:** transnational imagination, mediation, culturalisation, Turkish television, Alevi Kurds

### **Introduction**

Turkey is an ethnically and religiously diverse country. This paper examines a twice minority group the Alevi Kurds who originated from Turkey but are dispersed across Europe, particularly in Germany and the UK, as a result of migration. Alevis are a persecuted community who have been claiming cultural and religious rights since the 1990s in Turkey while Kurds are the second largest ethnic group in Turkey and have been in an armed conflict with the Turkish state since the late 1980s. The case of the Alevi Kurds is of particular importance as it stands at the core of political contest within and outside of Turkey around both the Kurdish and Alevi questions (Gezik and Gultekin, 2019).

Alevi Kurd migration to the UK began in the late 1980s for various reasons including discrimination, poverty and the expectation of better life chances (Cetin, 2016). The estimated number of Alevis living in the UK is 300,000, the majority of whom are ethnically Kurdish even though it is difficult to verify this as Alevis have not been recognised as a distinct religious group in the UK until recently. I have been

conducting ethnographic research on the Alevi Kurdish community in London since 2016 during which I have undertaken 57 in-depth interviews with community members and 17 with workers from Alevi television, along with participating in community events and gatherings. My analysis in this chapter is based on 17 interviews with second-generation Alevi Kurds whose ages vary between 19 and 37. Through these interviews my aim has been to explore the attitudes of second-generation Alevi Kurds towards the media, Alevi, Kurdish, Turkish and English, and to examine their interpretations of the programmes these media broadcast in response to their self-identifications in terms of each of these ethnic (Turkish, Kurdish, English) and ethno-religious (Alevi) categories. I have transcribed and thematically analysed the interviews with the second generation, hence the themes discussed in the third section of this chapter are deductive. I particularly focus on the second-generation Alevi Kurds' understanding of the Turkish media and the ways in which this constructs their transnational imagination as either part of Turkish culture or distanced from it.

This chapter has two aims. The first is to analyse how the second generation relate to their parents' home country through the media. Alevi Kurds are an ethnic minority in Turkey who have little representation in the mainstream Turkish media and hence the second-generation migrants in the UK when engaging with the Turkish media are much more likely to have access to mainstream Turkish rather than Alevi Kurdish culture. In the first section I introduce and situate the concept of mediatised culturalisation and relate it to migration in order to understand how second-generation Alevi Kurds in London engage with Turkish culture primarily through the media rather than through direct, first-hand personal experience. This is supported by an analysis of the interviews along three themes: language, gender and life styles, and Turkish political culture.

Whilst the cultural differences between Turkish and Alevi Kurdish culture are highly contestable as it is difficult to draw clear boundaries between the two cultures, the representations in the Turkish media and the systematic exclusion of particular identities such as Alevis, Armenians and Jews draw boundaries around what can appear as "Turkish" in the Turkish media. This brings us to the second aim of this chapter which is not to emphasise or highlight cultural differences as markers of each

culture but rather to unpack the notion of the Turkish migrant as an umbrella term and analyse the complexities of ethnic boundaries in the context of transnational migration.

### **Migration and mediatised culturalisation**

I have three interrelated key arguments in this section. Firstly I argue that the experiences of second-generation migrants with and through the media is overshadowed by the generic concept of “migrant” which primarily refers to the first generation. Secondly I argue that we need to discuss and research migrant communities who are also ethnic minorities in their homeland from a nuanced perspective. Hence we can say that the literature on media and migration has been developed in terms of two monolithic categories: ethnicity and the migrant. The aim of this section is to unpack these categories and suggest the notion of mediatised culturalisation in order to gain a nuanced understanding of the engagement of second-generation migrants with the media of their parent’s home country.

Relevant to this discussion is the work of Ray (2003, p. 22) who criticises the monolithic notion of Indianness and argues that there are different diasporic Indian communities across the globe as a result of the ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity of the country. The monolithic notion of Indianness in a transnational context has also been challenged in later studies (Athique and Hill, 2009). Ray’s case for India can be applied to other migrant communities. For instance, until recently the term “Turkish migrant” has been used as an umbrella category which disregards the ethnic and religious diversity within Turkey and its resonances abroad (Milikowski, 2001; Ogan, 2001; Aksoy and Robins, 2003; Bozdog, 2014), even though other studies suggested more nuanced accounts of migrants from Turkey (Kosnick, 2000, 2003, 2007). This also applies to the category of “Turkish-speaking migrants” (Robins and Aksoy, 2005) which obscures the cultural and political differences across different communities from Turkey. As the Kurdish media has become more visible and popular amongst Kurds from Turkey living in different countries, research on Kurdish audience in the diaspora has demonstrated the need to analyse the different uses of media and the different interpretations of their content by Kurdish audience (Hassanpour, 1998, 2003; Smets and Sinclair, 2014; Keles, 2015; Smets, 2016, 2018). These studies, however, primarily focus on the relationship between the Kurdish

media and the Kurdish audience, even though the diasporic Kurdish audience has been engaging with transnational Turkish television for over two decades. Hence these accounts, with the exception of Keles (2015), do not necessarily elaborate on how ethnic minorities of a home country connect and engage with the mainstream culture they left behind. This is not only problematic in terms of the invisibility of marginalised communities but also neglects the various ways in which audiences from different ethno-religious backgrounds use the media and interpret media content in constructing their identities and their transnational imaginations.

The second key argument of this section questions the assumption of studies on the media and migration which consider the communities' engagement with the media in a binary way as bi-lingual or bi-cultural despite their emphasis upon transnationalism or a global cultural flow (Chalaby, 2005). This binary framework is productive when considering those migrant communities who are not an ethnic minority in their home country, but for minorities who migrate to another country this "dual frame of reference" (Suarez-Orosco, 1989 cited in Reese, 2001, p. 455) of home country and host country should also include an ethnic minority dimension brought from the home country. I argue that the binary framework is not sufficient for understanding how a migrant ethnic minority will connect with the mainstream media of both their home and the host country as well as their own ethnic media which may be situated in the home and host country. Here I suggest a tripartite formulation of this relationship by looking at the migrants' engagement with the (1) ethnic media (in the home and host countries), (2) mainstream media of the home country and (3) mainstream media of the host country.

The third key argument centres on the way that the notion of migrant needs elaboration in terms of generational differences as these have an important impact upon the transnational experiences and imaginations of migrants. That is to say, the children of first-generation migrants have different levels and ways of transnational engagement with and through the media. In this regard, Diminescu's (2008) notion of the "connected migrant" helps us to situate migrants within the transnational flow of materials, ideas and people (Appadurai, 1997) instead of being isolated or "encapsulated" into (Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2018) their "ethnic enclaves" (Waldinger and Richter, 2002 cited in Matsaganis *et al.* 2011, p. 54). Diminescu criticises the idea

of a clear boundary between the home left behind and new country of settlement and emphasises the need to see the migrant as connected both to home and host countries. But does the notion of the “connected migrant” apply equally, and in the same way, to the first and second generations? Not only digital skills and literacy but also the migrant’s past and experiences play an important role in defining connectedness. For instance, second-generation migrants are more likely to be bi-lingual and better connected with both cultures, even though the direction and intensity of their connectedness can vary (Gillespie, 1995). Their involvement with institutions such as education in the host country and their friendship networks will also likely open up more channels for integration whereas their family background and transnational family networks will enable them to maintain their connectedness to their home culture. The media is an important cultural source for the transnational engagement of second-generation migrants, especially if they are born in the host country or migrated at an early age, as the media of their parent’s home country is likely to be the primary and everyday means by which they can engage with it. Despite the promising avenues of study indicated by this complexity, I argue that the second-generation migrants’ engagement with the media is both under studied and under theorised.

Therefore, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of how, for migrant communities, cultural identities and transnational imaginations are formed, re-formed, shaped, and contested through the media, I propose the concept of mediatised culturalisation. I use the term culturalisation in a similar way to acculturation although the two are not completely identical. According to Redfield *et al.* (1936, p. 149), acculturation is a change of original culture patterns following continuous and first-hand contact with individuals who come from different cultural backgrounds. Later discussions also bring the dimensions of resistance and rejection into the definition of acculturation (Sam, 2006, p. 11). However, the reason why I suggest culturalisation instead of acculturation lies in the fact that I refer to a mediated experience rather than the first-hand experience suggested by acculturation. It is also difficult to address the idea of “changes of original culture patterns” implied by the concept of acculturation by solely focusing on the media; but learning about and negotiating particular cultural values and notions through the media is more tangible. There is also the questionable notion of “originality” that is presumed by the various definitions of acculturation (Redfield *et al.*, 1936) and that attribute an authenticity to the particular cultural traits

of different communities which draws boundaries between them and implies a shift from one culture to the other. It is highly contestable and even dangerous to define a cultural attitude as “Turkish”, “Kurdish” or “Somalian” that essentialises it to a particular culture.

Teske and Nelson (1974) argue that acculturation is a “dynamic process” of exchange rather than an end result. Similarly I consider culturalisation as dynamic and situational rather than a personally transformative process (with an end result) as emphasised by the psychological connotations of acculturation. Hence culturalisation acknowledges the individual reservations or critical distances which might emerge in mediated engagements with the parents’ home country and it is essential to understand the mediated nature of the second-generation’s experience of it. Rather than drawing on their own first-hand experiences of their parents’ home country, the second generation primarily relates to it through the memories and narratives of their parents, and through objects and the media on an everyday basis. That is why the culturalisation concerning the home left behind by their parents is a mediated experience. As a concept, culturalisation takes into account the distance between being born into a culture and the secondary and mediated encounters with it.

Mediatized culturalisation, therefore, refers to a process where the second generation learns about, and engages with, their parents’ home country and their culture through the media. This can occur in different ways depending on: (1) the first generation’s transnational engagement with the home country; (2) the availability and the uses of the home country media sources such as satellite TV or online devices; (3) the ethno-religious background of the migrant community (e.g. whether they are a minority group in their home country as well); and (4) the second generation’s transnational engagement with their parents’ home country (frequency of visits, interest, friendship networks and so on). Further, mediated culturalisation is not only about learning and engaging with the culture, it is also about structures of feeling (Williams, 1977), transnational affect (Wise and Velayutham, 2017; Leurs, 2014), enculturated feelings, emotions and attitudes. For instance, my second-generation interviewees’ engagement with the Turkish media not only provides a ground for comfort and security but is also a source of anxiety and worry due to their ethno-religious minority background. As much as the familiarity established through language and the consumption of TV

entertainment such as dramas and reality shows is comforting, the political agenda that they come to know through the news media is challenging and disengaging for the second generation. In this regard mediated culturalisation is also about resentment, reservations and distance towards the home culture.

We now turn to looking at the process of mediated culturalisation in terms of three areas: language, gender and life styles, and Turkish political culture.

### **Culturalisation through the Turkish media**

#### *Language*

Most of my interviewees says that television is an important medium for hearing spoken Turkish, both for themselves (in learning the language) and for their parents (including learning the language for those who first language is Kurdish), although it works differently for the two groups. Although Turkish television has improved the interviewees' Turkish speaking skills, it has been more central to their parents' everyday life and has served as an obstruction to their parents' engagement with British culture.

Satellite has been there [in the house] since the beginning. This is because my dad does not speak English. He always watched Turkish TV. Perhaps if he did not get the satellite, he would have improved his English. Because he had had to... But because that Turkish TV was available all the time, he never watched British TV. (Sevda, female, 29, insurance broker)

I think my mum used to watch English TV in the first house we had. That's why she was a bit more confident. She could do lots of things herself. But as they've got Turkish TV, it isolated them more from British culture or the British community. I think it was hugely beneficial for my sister, she was stuck to that television like glue. And her Turkish is amazing because of Turkish television. Anything she has learned she learned from that TV. Because she didn't pick up a book, so you can see that they can become quite intelligent just from TV education (*laughing*). (Tulin, female, 30, political advisor)

The second generation regards the Turkish media as an obstacle to gaining knowledge about British culture and to improving the English language skills of their parents, although it can be a benefit to themselves. Interestingly, this argument resonates with

early discussions about assimilation and integration where engagement with the home country's media is regarded as having a negative impact upon the migrants' integration.

All my interviewees self-identify as Alevi Kurdish even though they emphasised that their definition of self-belonging is situational:

[Britishness] comes after Alevi Kurdish. I don't think I ever said to myself, yeah I'm British. I say I'm born and raised here. But when they ask me, I'm Alevi Kurdish. I do say I am British, it is always my nationality I say is British. My ethnicity always Alevi Kurdish. It just depends what they are asking me. There is a difference, yeah. (Duru, 24, accountant)

Of course I see myself as Alevi Kurdish. Actually it depends... Sometimes I say I am from London, I am British, I am from Britain but I generally say Alevi derim... I wouldn't normally say that I am British. But while filling a form, if I can't be bothered to write Alevi, I write British... When it comes to legal documents and stuff. But if somebody asks me I am Alevi Kurdish... (Elif, female, 23, undergraduate student)

Despite self-identifying as Kurdish, they have ranked Kurdish as their third language in terms of the ability and frequency of speaking it, whereas they rate English as the first, followed by Turkish. This ranking also applies to the order of languages spoken at home. The second generation argues that they speak better Turkish than their parents do thanks to being regular viewers of Turkish television since their early childhood. This has been reinforced by their parents' choices of installing a satellite dish at the earliest opportunity despite the high cost back in the 1990s. Milikowski (2001) also notes that Turkish television provided the second-generation migrants in the Netherlands with a good command of language and fluency. While the Turkish media is still an important source for learning better Turkish, it also serves a barrier for those who speak Kurdish. No doubt, this is not independent of the learned attitudes to these two languages which is framed by the ongoing discrimination against Kurds in Turkey. In the context of the media, the variety of dialects in Kurdish and their imbalanced representation in the Kurdish media appears to be the most important obstacle for viewing Kurdish media for my interviewees. The limited number of entertainment programmes available in the Kurdish media and its political

association with the Kurdish movement are also mentioned as other obstacles for the second-generation viewers.

Their consumption of Turkish media provides the second generation with an everyday engagement with the Turkish language beyond the family realm and expand their linguistic knowledge and skills. This can be regarded a primary base for further engagement with the Turkish culture represented on media and facilitates a deeper understanding of Turkish media culture and beyond.

### *Dramas, gender and life styles*

My interviewees mentioned that they follow some of the Turkish series such as *Ezel* (2009-2011), *Kurtlar Vadisi* (2003-2016), *Kuzey Guney* (2011-2013), *Eskiya Dunyaya Hukumdar Olmaz* (2015-ongoing), *Aski Memnu* (2008-2010), *Fatmagul'un Sucu Ne* (2010-2012), *Sila* (2006-2008) and some reality shows such as *Kismetse Olur* (2015-2017) and *Evleneceksen Gel* (2015-2017):

I watch a lot of Turkish series. For instance, I used to watch, *Ezel*. *Kurtlar Vadisi*, for my dad, I have to watch that. There was this *Asmali Konak*, *Yaprak Dokumu*... There was another one called, *Muhtesem Yuzyil*. That was a really good one. (Ahmet, male, 31, solicitor)

Some of these dramas such as *Sila* depict family life and gender relations from a patriarchal and conservative perspective. While interpreting those series, the interviewees distinguish between the representations they see on Turkish media and the actual lives of Turkish people:

I don't think that the series are a true replication [of real life]. For instance they show Mardin but that's not really how Mardin is or Istanbul is. I dunno. I just watch it for the sake of it. Obviously we get entertained by them, the main characters becoming a couple, [we want them] to be couples quickly or something... But I also find it quite hilarious because it is not... Turkey is not like that... Young girls may think it as such. For instance *Sila*, she was a rich family's daughter but she was adopted. She goes back to Mardin. It portrays the wrong image to people, maybe to my age girls or the younger... (Elif, female, 23, undergraduate student)

However, whilst my interviewees do not take Turkish drama at face value and certainly recognise it as fiction, nevertheless it does offer them a portrayal of the lives of Turkish people with which they can identify. The dramas are not a point of reference for understanding or learning about Turkish culture, rather they are an important point of reference for fantasising about life in Turkey:

We don't identify with the woman we see on English TV, we identify with Sila and Fatmagul. We see ourselves being her not like... Say Angelina Jolie... (...) You fantasise about to be that girl [you see on Turkish dramas] because English dramas never as glamorous as the Turkish. They are real life and it is grey. Turkish ones are very colourful. There's a lot going on, the girls have pyjama parties [in those dramas]... The life styles seem so much more appealing. You think of yourself in this world. (...) There is always this idea, oh I want to be there, I want to be that girl... Somehow you start to fantasise about that life style. (Berrin, female, 29, receptionist)

Watching these dramas gives you an idea about the life beyond the village [of the parents] and the "white Turkey", not the Kurdish Turkey. It encourages you to want to see certain places. You know where these dizis are set and then you become more curious. The more you go and explore the more you like it. You become more attached. (Berrin, female, 29, receptionist)

Turkish dramas open up a transnational social space for fantasy for the second generation as they find the Turkish life styles they see on television more appealing than their English counterparts. The first-generation migrants in the UK come from a rural background (Cetin, 2016 and by and large their first urban experiences have taken place in cities where they settled in the UK but their transnational connections with Turkey are mostly based on the villages and the holiday towns that they visit during the summer. Turkish dramas enable the second generation to become curious and know more about other parts of Turkey and thus the dramas facilitate transnational spatial experiences beyond the family origin for the second-generation viewers.

#### *Turkish news and political culture*

My interviewees are very critical of the news on Turkish television which distances them from Turkish politics. They do not trust the media as they find the themes in the

news coverage and the style of the coverage sensational, exaggerated and biased. Even though they mention that they follow the news occasionally, they are not as engaged with the news channels or programmes as they are with TV entertainment.

For instance after the recent suicide bombing in Ankara<sup>1</sup>, some [TV channels] said that there were 100 casualties... You cannot believe them. I think they were messing around with the numbers. Because I think there were more casualties. They don't care about these things, they only care about getting their stories across. (Duru, female, 24, accountant)

I feel like they [news stories] are exaggerated. Majority of the time. I feel like they are trying to manipulate people's feelings against it. Actually, I don't think that they exaggerate the whole event. Just they wanna jumble up with emotions and feelings (Oyku, female, 23, undergraduate student)

I think they [TV channels] all have an agenda in making the news. They are very biased. They would make news about the people [politicians] they support. I don't think that they are independent. There is also much repetition in the news. (Turan, male, 35, customer service assistant)

Daily news programmes, I just think they are like a joke. They talk nonsense [in the programmes]... They show street fights and all the trivial stuff... And then you watch English news... It is all these like, important matters which effect our country [UK], whereas Turkey... Unless there is something very important, news are like a joke and I find it completely pointless. But since, what's happened in Turkey, since the 15th of July [of coup attempt], I could say there is proper news. But still as much as they like to show it. We don't know to what extent it is really going on. We could only just take their word for it. (Elif, female, 23, undergraduate student)

I argue that the distrust on Turkish media primarily stems from the ethno-religious identity of my interviewees. They state that they do not feel as though they belong to Turkey as their community has been persecuted or subjected to different forms of violence, have been unable to speak their language and unable to practice their religious rituals safely and openly. The news programmes reinforce this feeling of being discriminated against and

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<sup>1</sup> An ISIS suicide bomber has killed 103 people who were gathering for a peace demonstration in 10 October 2015 in Ankara.

misrepresented and they think that the Turkish media contributes a great deal to the exclusionary and nationalist characteristic of Turkish political culture:

From what I heard from one [of the alternative TV channel], the current dictator has the control over majority of the channels. So, probably the channels we watch are those which are the least controlled by [the government]... I think he owns one of the channels, is it ATV? I wouldn't trust any news on ATV. I still wouldn't trust the others.  
(Duru, 24, accountant)

My findings about the critical approach of the second generation to the Turkish news media resonates with Keles' (2015) findings about the Kurdish diaspora in Germany and Sweden. Furthermore, in the case of the news, the Turkish media reinforces the feelings of ontological insecurity (Leurs, 2014) as my interviewees explicitly mention their feelings of discomfort, anxiety and unsettlement about Turkey. It is important to note that while Leurs (2014) defines these feelings for the Somalian refugees who experience the migration in the first hand and who hold these feelings towards the host country, I argue that transnational ontological insecurity defines the feelings towards the home country for the second-generation migrants. The second-generation Alevi Kurds hold and reproduce these negative feelings through their engagement with the Turkish media. Hence Turkish news facilitates a variety of negative feelings and emotions about the home country in a transnational social realm.

Watching Turkish news and following Turkish news media re-situate the second generation as members of an invisible, excluded and misrepresented community in their transnational imagination. In this regard their sense of identity and exclusion is defined by their readings of Turkish news media rather than being first-hand experiences such as those of their parents. This is not to say that the Turkish media is the only source for this but it encapsulates their parents' and other circulated cultural narratives about being members of a persecuted community. Hence the second generation's cultural experience of exclusion in the Turkish context is mediated through the Turkish media.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to emphasise that my interviewees do not take what they see on television at face value. In this regard, mediatised culturalisation does not mean that being exposed to Turkish television makes the second generation more “Turkish” or assimilates them into Turkish culture. Instead the second generation draw on their own resources, first-hand experiences and critical accounts about the Turkish media in order to evaluate the verisimilitude of what they see on television. On the other hand, their critical distance to Turkish political culture and political discourses on the Turkish media does not mean that they draw a strong boundary between the culture and the language. Despite the fact that their parents’, particularly their mothers speak to them in Kurdish, their language skills in Turkish is far more developed than their parents and here Kurdish and Turkish television plays an important part in improving their Turkish. The second generation considers this an advantage, however they think that satellite dishes has acted as a barrier to their parents getting to know British television.

The concept of mediatised culturalisation helps us to contextualise the mediated nature of the second generation’s engagement with their parents’ home country, particularly for the communities who were part of an ethnic minority in their home country. It is also important to note that the media is not the only source of acquainting the second generation with their parents’ home culture, as transnational ties continue through visits to the home country and engagement with friends and other family members living there. However, the media enable an everyday engagement and opens up a shared popular culture to the second generation of transnational communities. In this regard, it is crucial to look at how this engagement occurs and how it infiltrates into the transnational imagination, sense of belonging and self-definitions of the second generation. This chapter provides an insight into this question by examining the second-generation Alevi Kurds’ interpretations.

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