

# An Investigation into Young People's Perceptions of Religious-Themed Media Programs

## Gençlerin Dini Temalı Medya Programlarına Yönelik Algılarının Araştırılması

Adem Al<sup>1</sup> 



### ABSTRACT

The number of broadcasts with religious content has increased considerably in both the traditional and new digital media in Turkey over the past two decades. With the momentum created by the presence of a conservative political party in power in particular, the number of TV channels and programs with religious content has increased considerably, and this rise has brought up a number of questions about the relationship between media and religion. Among those questions are whether these religious programs reflect the truths of religion, whether they are controlled by political figures, whether the religion in media is largely mediated, and whether it is represented by authorities on religion. This paper highlights the key points of an empirical doctoral dissertation that investigated broadcasts with religious content in Turkey through the perceptions of young audiences between the ages of 15-24 while benefitting from the perspectives of Stuart Hall (Hall, 1973). Based on Hall's views on encoding and decoding, the study will also answer the question of whether young people receive the intended messages from religious broadcasts in exactly the way they've been encoded or if they've decoded them in opposition to the dominant hegemonic code. This paper uses the terms religion, media, and the research to refer respectively to Islam, television and the new digital media, and Al's (2019) doctoral dissertation.

**Keywords:** Stuart Hall, encoding, decoding, media and religion, perception

### ÖZ

Türkiye'de son yirmi yılda hem geleneksel medyada hem de yeni/dijital medyada dini içerikli yayınların sayısı oldukça artmıştır. Özellikle iktidarda muhafazakar bir siyasi partinin olmasının yarattığı ivmeyle, dini içerikli TV kanal ve programların sayısı dikkate değer ölçüde artmış ve bu artış beraberinde medya ve din arasındaki ilişkiye dair çok sayıda soruyu gündeme getirmiştir. Bu sorular arasında, medyadaki dini programların dinin gerçeklerini yansıtmayı yansıtmadığı, bunların siyasi erkin denetimini altında olup olmadığı, medyadaki dinin araçsallaştırılıp araçsallaştırılmadığı ve medyadaki dinin din alanında uzman gerçek kişilerce temsil edilip edilmediği gibi konular bulunmaktadır. Bu makale, Stuart Hall (1973)'ün bakış açılarından yararlanarak Türkiye'deki dini içerikli yayınları 15-24 yaş arası genç izleyicilerin algıları üzerinden ampirik olarak inceleyen bir doktora tezinin kilit noktalarını vurgulamaktadır. Ayrıca, Hall'un kodlama ve kod-açıklama görüşlerinden yola çıkarak, gençlerin dini bir yayındaki kodlayıcının tercihi/amacı doğrultusunda kodlanan mesajları tam olarak kodlandıkları gibi mi yoksa baskın-hegemonik koda aykırı olarak mı alımladıkları sorusunu cevaplamaktadır. Bu makaledeki din, medya ve araştırma terimleri, sırasıyla İslam'ı, televizyon ve dijital medyayı ve doktora tezini (Al, 2019) ifade etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Stuart Hall, kodlama, kod-açıklama, medya ve din, alımlama

<sup>1</sup>Dr., Istanbul University, School of Foreign Languages, Istanbul, Türkiye

ORCID: A.A. 0000-0001-5119-1036

### Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:

Adem Al,  
Istanbul University, School of Foreign Languages,  
Istanbul, Türkiye  
E-mail: ademal@istanbul.edu.tr

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## Literature Review

On one hand, the way the media penetrates its messages into the lives of not only society but also each individual via its all elements, in particular through mass media is one of the most fundamental factors that change people's values, behaviors, ways of thinking, and perceptions. The media uses the cognitive, psychological, cultural, sociological, economic, and religious elements in the most effective way to shape all of society and every individual, to set an agenda, and to create new life styles, and it often achieves its goals (Çoban, 2013). On the other hand, the impact of having a politically conservative Islamic party in power for 20 years, as is seen in Turkey, has resulted in more and more of the media being monopolized and the number of religious issues and programs being notably increased in both traditional and the new digital media. This has led to the emergence of a densely semiotic religious presence in the media that is nourished by politics and the media attractions. At this point, the question of whether the perceptions of individuals and society actually coincide with the aims of the media has gained importance. Although studies on the relationship between media and religion have gained momentum in Turkey in recent years, the number of impact and reception studies is still inadequate.

The present research focuses on how religious-themed media programs are received by young people between the ages of 15-24 in order to clarify the position of religious production in the media both at present and in the future. The period of youth is a turbulent time by nature during which young individuals frown upon authority, question authority-building social phenomena like religion and morality, criticize the religious and moral values they had previously acquired, and try to create a value map that is unique to themselves. During this period, they also encounter more informal educational tools, especially media, compared to formal educational ones (Nazıroğlu, 2015, p. 192). According to Uçar's research on 753 adolescent high school students regarding the factors with the greatest influence on them, 48.7% of the participants stated this to be their friends, with only 8.9% stating the media to be the most influential factor. When considering how important the media is as a factor in young people's relationships with their friends, the media can be said to have an undeniably direct effect on youths (Uçar, 2016, p. 55). İlhan's (2010, p. 259) study on an audience ranging in from 15-24 years of age showed this audience to perceive TV series in different ways based on the conditions in their family, their social environment, their school environment, and their socio-economic level. Güneş (2018, p. 204) stated increases in individuals' qualities and characteristics such as age and income, education, and cultural levels to decrease the negative impact that media has on them, in accordance with studies on media's societal impact.

As for religious broadcasts, 2.8% of high school students were found to watch religious programs as their first choice (Uçar, 2016, p. 65). According to Turan's (2007b, p. 227) study, the percentages of those who watch religious programs as their first choice are 10.3% in the 20-35 age group, 11.1% in the 36-55 age group, and 22.2% in the 56+ age group. This result reveals the frequency of watching religious programs to increase as people get older.

In addition, 79.7% of the participants stated the religious programs on television to have positively affected their feelings and behaviors, while 20.3% stated being negatively affected or unaffected by such broadcasts (p. 231). Gürses and İrk (2018, p. 126) analyzed the extent to which the Internet developed individuals with regard to religion. According to their findings, 48% of the participants stated the Internet to have influenced their religious life adversely, 40% stated it to have not affected their religious life at all, and 12% stated it to have benefitted their religious life.

The current research also takes Hall's (1973) model of encoding/decoding as its basis for investigating how young audiences aged 15-24 receive the messages in religious-themed broadcasts. Unlike the Frankfurt School, which criticized the culture industry over popular culture and argued audiences to be passive, the representatives of the Birmingham School describe audiences as active and express how audiences interpret popular cultural products on their own. According to Hall, the recipient of the messages and meanings is not a passive screen onto which the original meaning is reflected accurately and transparently, for roles are often changed, and people who speak, listen, write, or read are always active participants in an interactive and bilateral process (Hall, 2017, p. 20).

According to Hall (1973), the moment of producing a television message (encoding) is related to the moment it is consumed/received (decoded). However, Hall also states encoding to not be a level of communication that guarantees decoding despite its constructive effect on decoding. In other words, the intent professionals have regarding the level of encoding a message and how a television viewer interprets the message at the time of decoding are not always identical. Therefore, Hall suggests three possible positions regarding the levels of decoding. The first possible position is called the dominant (hegemonic) code, in which the television viewer decodes a message exactly how the professionals encoded it. In other words, no inconsistency occurs between the encoder's intended message and the viewer's interpretation of it. The second position is called the negotiated code and is composed of the adaptive and oppositional elements of decoding. While the dominantly defined and professionally signified message in the second position is likely to be understood at a sufficient level and its legitimacy to be mostly accepted, various factors created by the local conditions in which the viewer lives also influence the decoding process. The third position of decoding is called the oppositional code, in which the viewer decodes the message in opposition to the dominant (hegemonic) code and distorts the integrity of the preferred meaning (Hall, 1973; Hall, 2006, pp. 170–172). Hall's model of encoding/decoding has been used in studies on different television genres such as news and magazine programs, soap operas, and mafia TV series (Morley, 1980; Livingstone, 1990; Demir, 2007; Çetinbaş, 2012). Accordingly, this research aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) Do young people's perceptions of media and religion differ according to their demographic characteristics?
- 2) Is the religion in the media represented by religious authorities?

- 3) Is the religion in the media under the control of political authorities?
- 4) Do young people receive the messages intended from a religious broadcast in exactly the way they were encoded, or do young people decode them in opposition to the dominant (hegemonic) code?
- 5) Do young people find films, TV series, and animated cartoons containing religious content to be useful as sources of knowledge?
- 6) Does the consumption of religious broadcasts weaken young people's religious faith and alienate them from religion?
- 7) Does having confidence that the content of a broadcast is religious reduce young people's levels of media literacy?

## Method

The universe of the research involves all young people aged 15-24 living in Turkey's Istanbul Province. The data were collected from 970 participants randomly chosen from 30 out of Istanbul's 39 districts. The five-point Likert-type Scale of Audience Perceptions of Media and Religion (Al, 2019, 2020) was conducted using the paper-based method in face-to-face communications. The scale has twenty-three statements and six dimensions (i.e., Media Ministers and Representation, Politics and Religion, Alienation from Religion, Perception toward Religious Productions, Decoding in Opposition, and Religious Media Literacy). The data were statistically analyzed using SPSS software version 21.

## Findings

### Answer to Question 1

The results of the research have revealed young people's perceptions of the relationship between media and religion to significantly differ according to their demographic characteristics. Men's perception level ( $\bar{X} = 3.42$ ) of the relationship between media and religion was found to be significantly higher compared to that of women ( $\bar{X} = 3.33$ ;  $t = -2.144$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In addition, young people's perception levels regarding the relationship between media and religion increase along increases in their education levels, parents' education levels, and average monthly family income. Young people's gender and educational level, parents' education level, and average monthly family income clearly determine their perception of the relationship between media and religion. As can be understood from this, economic welfare level is a key factor in how youths perceive the relationship between media and religion, especially when considering that families will be able to offer a better education and sociocultural life to their children as their economic levels improve. Likewise, those living in Beşiktaş, the highest ranking district not just in Istanbul but also in Turkey in terms of the Social Life Index and Economic Conditions Index (Şeker et al., 2018), were found to have significantly higher perception levels ( $\bar{X} = 3.95$ ) regarding the relationship between media and religion compared to those living in Fatih and Güngören ( $\bar{X} = 3.11$  and  $\bar{X} = 3.37$ ,

respectively;  $F_{(29, 940)} = 1.787$ ;  $p < .01$ ), which are less affluent districts than Beşiktaş. In addition to these findings, young people's perception levels regarding the religious programs in the media also significantly differ according to the geographical region where their parents are from. Young people's perceptions toward the relationship between media and religion can be said to significantly vary based on the differences in socioeconomic development levels, sociocultural life, and political preferences (i.e., secular or conservative) among Turkey's seven geographical regions. For example, young people whose parents come from regions mostly defined by left-wing political views and that offer relatively secular living and better socioeconomic and sociocultural conditions have statistically significantly higher perception levels regarding the relationship between media and religion. Lastly, the perception levels of young people who have never received religious education before ( $\bar{X} = 3.79$ ) were found to be significantly higher compared to those who have previously received religious education ( $\bar{X} = 3.29$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

### **Answer to Question 2**

The research findings show young people to be of the opinion that religion in the media is not represented by religious authorities. In the context of the representation of religion in the media and the mediation of religion, young people aged 15-24 generally believe not all broadcasts with religious content to represent the real religion and the broadcasts of religious content to have deviated from the essence of religion, and anyone, whether involved in religion or not, to be able to talk on religious-themed broadcasts. They also believe the representatives of religion in the media to be gradually turning viewers against religion and those speaking in religious programs as experts on religion to have a negative influence on young people's attitudes toward religion. This is because those speaking in the name of religion in the media have started talking about entertainment, enticements, and sensational issues rather than the real doctrines and functions of religion, such as being a rightful neighbor and never violating others' rights. Another reason for such thoughts is that very thorough and complicated religious issues that are irrelevant to ordinary people and that should be discussed in academic seminars have been brought to news reports and discussion programs just to get higher ratings.

### **Answer to Question 3**

The findings of the research show young people between the ages of 15-24 to strongly believe the religious discourses in the media to be under the hegemony of a political will. In the context of the politicization of religion in the media, young people are of the opinion that the people involved in religious broadcasts as experts have been politicizing religion, that political will controls the religious discourse in the media, and that the political power's expectations influence broadcasts with religious content.

#### **Answer to Question 4**

The research findings show that young people decode the messages in religious broadcasts in opposition to the dominant (hegemonic) code. This result reveals young people in the 15-24 age group to not perceive every piece of religious information or message in the media as information possessing absolute truth and to believe the religious content in the media to not enhance their religious awareness. When considering that 84.6% of the research sample consists of young people who have previously received formal or informal religious education and a significant portion (23.8%) of them are young people who have been fed from more than one religious source in the past, the fact that they decode religious messages in alternative ways that completely differ from the encoded message indicates that the current relationship between media and religion is problematic. In particular, the fact that young people who have never received any religious education (15.4%) also receive the message in opposition to what is intended indicates a need to question structure and mission of the media in relation to the representation of religion as well as the expertise of those who determine, prepare, and present religious content. More importantly, this also signifies that the relationship or interaction between media and religion should be transformed with regard to its quality and representation because inaccurately and incompletely representing religiosity in the process of encoding and transmitting results in what was previously encoded being completely rejected. Consequently, these results are congruent with Hall's (1973) views on how televisual programs are received.

#### **Answer to Question 5**

The research findings indicate young people to not find films, TV series, and animated cartoons of religious content useful and such religious broadcasts in the media to have swerved from the aim of informing the audience. However, when considering the results of the study as a whole and 84.6% of the study sample to consist of young people who have received formal or informal religious education in the past, to interpret this result as youths being opposed to religious productions does not seem reasonable. On the contrary, the negative perception young people have toward religious productions should not be interpreted as arising from the essence or presentation of religion through the media but to actually stem from the false consciousness that is present in the transmission of religion in the media, in the aims of the dominant ideology prevailing in the media, in the economic concerns of the media industry, and in the political interference regarding the transmission of religion in the media. As has been stated in the media and religion studies (Turan, 2007a), other points to consider are how the representation of religion in TV series, films, and animations predominantly takes the form of placing religious figures in non-religious settings that are incompatible with their *raison d'être*; how religious figures are reflected negatively in terms of personality, social relationship, and status; and how the values and symbols of religion are distorted. Accordingly, religious productions that do not appeal to the religious beliefs and lives of people and do not coincide with the position of religion in social life will naturally

be found to be useless by a conscious audience who wishes to be nourished with the essence of truth-based religion. In addition, this particular research finding can also be interpreted as religious consumers being different from media consumers with respect to young people; namely, using mass media (notably following visual and new media) and religious life are two separate issues for young people.

### **Answer to Question 6**

According to the research findings, the perception levels of young people who believe that religious consumption through either traditional media or new digital media creates a blindness of faith or weakens their religious faith show an average score of  $\bar{X} = 2.40 \pm 1.04$ . This indicates that young people in the 15-24 age group have the opinion that religious broadcasts in the media neither diminish their religious commitment nor weaken their previous religious beliefs and that religion as transmitted in the media does not desensitize them to religion. These results can be interpreted to mean that, although the inaccuracies and deficiencies of religiously themed broadcasts in the media regarding the dimension of Media Ministers and Representation do adversely affect the attitudes of young people toward religion, this negative effect is not yet so impactful that it will result in them gaining blindness of faith. On the other hand, young people can also be said to not experience blindness of faith because they can access all kinds of information very quickly and easily using mass communication technologies frequently and effectively. As a result, they do not just believe in the information they get from the media without questioning it. As previously mentioned, the finding regarding how young people decode the messages of religious broadcasts in opposition to those encoded by the media professionals also supports this view. In other words, because young people are aware of disinformation and false/inaccurate religious representation in religious productions, such broadcasts do not cause them to become blind to their beliefs. Therefore, this research finding should not be interpreted as saying that religious productions in the media or any other broadcast of religious content completely reflect the truth.

### **Answer to Question 7**

According to the research findings, young people in the 15-24 age group believe that having confidence in the religious content of a broadcast reduces the level of media literacy. In other words, believing the content of a broadcast to be religious weakens the audiences' critical point of view and decreases their tendency to make evaluations. In addition, young people perceive audiences to not use their skills to analyze what the intended media message is in a program when they identify religion as portrayed in the media with the true religion. This result also even parallels another result of the research. Although young people who have received religious education before are normally thought to have more awareness of the truth regarding any religious content in the media, their perception levels for the overall Scale of Audience Perceptions of Media and Religion and for the dimension of Religious Media

Literacy were found to be significantly lower compared to those of young people who have received no prior religious education. This result can be interpreted in two ways: 1) Religious education in Turkish formal and informal institutions is inadequate and problematic, and/or 2) providing education on religious media literacy both in secondary and higher education institutions in Turkey is essential.

## Conclusion

With the impact of a conservative political preference in Turkey over the past two decades, the amount of religious content and the number of religious-themed programs in the media have risen, and this has brought about a variety of questions pertaining to the relationship between media and religion. Namely, a religious message in the media contains multiple indicators or signs, which either makes the message pertaining to the essence of religion invisible or reduces religious discourses or signs to a subordinate, secondary position compared to the signs of the media. In the process of transitioning from a religion based on rituals performed in real life to a digital semiotic religion with digital rituals, what is at stake is not the relocation of religion to the new digital media but rather the devaluation and deconstruction of religion through the discourses and indicators of media and political culture in the new digital media.

The results of the present study show young people's demographic characteristics influence how they decode or receive religious programs in the media. For example, their perceptions of the relationship between media and religion significantly increase as their education levels, parents' education levels, and/or average monthly family income increases. This suggests that media owners, producers, and religious authorities as well as researchers should consider viewers' demographic characteristics when they are making or analyzing religious-themed media programs.

According to the results of the study, young people additionally are of the opinion that political authorities interfere with the religious discourses and broadcasts in the media. When considering that religion and politics are two separate fields, this result suggests that politics should remain uninvolved with religious media broadcasts and that the clergy, media ministers, religious scholars (notably those popular in the media on certain religious occasions), and religious institutions should also refrain from politics.

Although young people have the perception that religious broadcasts do not make them blind with regard to their faith or religion, the perception levels ( $\bar{X} = 2.40 \pm 1.04$ ) of dissenting voices are high enough that they should not be underestimated. This signals that the media, particularly the new digital media, may both be putting the audiences of religious-themed broadcasts (especially the pious groups) into an illusion of spirituality and creating the illusion that they are being informed about religion. This is because the participants of the current research believe being confident about the content of a broadcast being religious reduces that person's level of media literacy. More importantly, the vast majority of the participants



(84.6%) had previously received religious education, and their perception levels regarding the relationship between media and religion were found to be significantly lower compared to those who had not received any religious education. In other words, young people's disinclination toward performing religious rituals for the time being appears to not occur so frequently as to form a blindness in faith. However, the audience has been exposed to the transmission of religion in a theatrical way filled with the signs of the media and has clearly unconsciously experienced a gradual disinclination toward religion due to being unaware of such illusions. Therefore, more empirical reception studies should be conducted not only on young people but also on other age groups in order to ascertain the degree to which religious avoidance stems from mediated religiosity that gives people temporary spiritual relief and to examine the precursors and conditions accelerating this trend before it turns into a blindness of faith.

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