Summary

Parasocial Interaction with The Characters in TV serials: A study on marriage satisfaction, psychological symptoms and other socio-demographic variables

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The interaction between media characters and viewers was first defined in 1956 by Horton and Wohl as "parasocial interaction". The term refers to the one-way symbolic relationship between viewers and media characters. It generally occurs between the viewer and his favorite character (Cohen, 1999). Parasocial interaction involves cognitive and behavioral participation, too. Thinking about serial characters and events, going through what is heard and seen, trying to guess what will happen next are examples of cognitive participation, while discussing serial characters, events and what will happen next with other people is known as behavioral participation (Rubin & Perse, 1987). On the other hand, the end of the parasocial relationship between viewers and media characters when the program ends or their favorite character leaves is known as "parasocial separation". Even though the end of a parasocial relationship is not as saddening as the end of a relationship with a close friend, it still causes considerable sorrow for viewers (Cohen 2003, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

It is well-known that TV serials are particularly popular with women. In a study conducted with female participants (Segrin & Nabi, 2002), it was found that women who spend most of their free time watching soap operas or romantic films think more about relationships and marriage. In addition, studies that examined the effects of soaps and love films on romantic relationships or marriage (Jones & Nelson, 1996; Illouz, 1998) emphasize that parasocial interaction established with the characters in TV serials increase individuals' expectations from marriage and cause them to develop idealistic beliefs about romantic relationships.

This study aims to examine the relationship between parasocial interaction and marriage satisfaction and psychological symptoms in Turkish culture where traditional and modern values and attitudes coexist by obtaining data about women's TV serial viewing rates. Additionally, the study also focuses on the relationships between parasocial interaction and demographic variables such as age, education and socio-economic status (SES).

Method

Participants

The sample included 1232 women who had been married for at least a year and were residing in one of the 5 big cities representing different geographical regions (Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Samsun and Diyarbakır). Age range was 18-65 years, and mean age was 39.09 ($SD = 9.53$). Mean marriage duration was 15.83 years ($SD = 1.84$), and mean number of children was 2. Income range of families was 500 and 10.000 Turkish Lira (TL) and mean income was 2993 TL ($SD = 2196$).

Measures

Demographic Information Form. This form gathers demographic information about participants such as age, education level, monthly income, marriage duration and number of children; as well as daily hours of TV viewing, Turkish and foreign serial preferences, number of Turkish and foreign serials watched weekly, how much they enjoy them, and their best-loved serials and characters. In addition to these, there are several questions about parasocial interaction that are coded between 1 (completely disagree) and 5 (completely agree) (e.g. the wish to experience positive events from serials in real life, wishing for a husband similar to the one in the serial, etc.). These 4 questions are then added to comprise a scale named "romantic effect". Individuals are also asked to mark their marriage happiness on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. The score shows "marriage happiness".

Parasocial Interaction Scale (PIS). PIS was originally designed by Rubin, Perse and Powell (1985) to identify the level of the parasocial interaction be-

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tween best-loved news reporters and viewers. Later, Rubin and Perse (1987) adapted the scale to measure parasocial interaction with best-loved soap opera characters. It was also adapted to Turkish culture by Arda (2006) and includes a total of 14 items. Of these, 6 were taken from the scale developed by Rubin, Pers and Powell (1985) and 8 from the scale by Rubin and Perse (1987). Participant responses to each item range from 1(completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). There is enough evidence on the validity and reliability of the scale (Arda, 2006). Its Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient is .93.

Parasocial Breakup Scale (PBS). PBS was developed by Cohen (2003) to explore viewer reactions when their best-loved TV character leaves a program. It was adapted to Turkish by Arda (2006). Participant responses to each item range from 1 (completely disagree) and 5 (completely agree). The scale was found to be valid and reliable (Arda, 2006). Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the scale is .87.

Cognitive and Behavioral Involvement Scale. Developed by Rubin and Perse (1987), the scale has 7 items and was adapted to Turkish by Arda (2006). Participants are asked how frequently they engage in several activities when they are not watching serials. Each item ranges between 1 (never) and 5 (very frequently). It is evaluated in two sub-dimensions: Cognitive Involvement and Behavioral Involvement. In this study, 4 items drawn by observation were added to the scale by the researchers. As a result, it included 11 items, 5 of which measure cognitive involvement and 6 measure behavioral involvement. In this study, Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the scale is .90.

Marital Life Scale (MLS). Tezer (1986) developed this 10-item, 5-point Likert scale to measure people's general satisfaction level from marriage. High scores from the scale show high marriage satisfaction (Tezer, 1994). In this study, Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the scale was found .90.

The Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI). Designed by Derogatis (1992) to survey various psychological symptoms, this is a self-evaluation scale scored between 0-4. It has a total of 53 items. The higher the total score, the more the symptoms. BSI was adapted to Turkey through three different studies by Şahin and Durak (1994). As a result, the scale consists of the following five factors: "anxiety", "depression", "negative self", "somatization" and "anger/aggression". In this study, Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the scale is .97.

Results

Results about TV Viewing Habits

The study also explored women's TV viewing time, the number and type of serials they watch, their best-loved serials, how much they like TV serials, and the characters they like. Of the participants, 48.8% watched TV 1-2 hours on average daily, 37.4% 3-4 hours, and 12.3% 5-6 hours. Those who watched 1-2 Turkish serials weekly comprised 49.5% of the sample, while those who watched 3-4 weekly were 33.2%. The majority (65.1%) stated that they never watched foreign serials.

Analyses of Demographic Variables

Of the demographic variables examined in the study, education level was categorized into "elementary education", "high school" and "university", and age into "18-35" and "36-65". In order to study the effects of these two on the other dependent variables, 3x2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used with education level and age (18-35 years, 36-65 years). The analyses showed that there are main effects of Wilks' Lambda values with respect to education (Wilks' λ = .92, sd = 2318, F = 6.68, $p < .001$, η^2 = .039) and age (Wilks' λ = .97, sd = 2318, F = 5.03, $p < .001$, η^2 = .029). With respect to education, there were main effects on PIS total score ($F_{2,1165}$ = 13.79, $p < .001$, η^2 = .023), PBS total score ($F_{2,1165}$ = 17.74, $p < .001$, η^2 = .030), Cognitive and Behavioral Involvement total score ($F_{2,1165}$ = 14.92, $p < .001$, η^2 =.025), Marriage Satisfaction total score ($F_{2,1165}$ = 13.54, $p < .001$, η^2 = .023), BSI total score ($F_{2,1165}$ = 23.76, $p < .001$, η^2 = .039), Romantic Effect total score ($F_{2,1165}$ = 12.90, $p < .001$, η^2 = .022). On the other hand, age was only observed to affect marriage Happiness ($F_{1,1165}$ = 10.92, $p < .001$, η^2 = .009). According to this, the marriage happiness scores of women aged between 18-35 years (M = 3.93, SD = .92) were significantly higher then those aged between 36-60 (M = 3.77, SD = .99).

Individuals with elementary education had significantly higher parasocial interaction, parasocial break up and psychological symptom (BSI) scores than both high school and university graduates, but lower marriage satisfaction scores than them. In addition, elementary and high school graduates had higher cognitive behavioral involvement and romantic effect scores than university graduates. Another demographic variable examined in the study was the income level of the family. This variable was taken as an indicator of socioeconomic status (SES) in the study and those with an income between 500-1950 TL were classified as "low SES", those between 2000-3000 TL as "middle SES", and those with an income of 3001 TL and more were classified as "high SES". The parasocial interaction and parasocial break-

up scores of women from the low socioeconomic status were significantly higher than those from the high socioeconomic status. Also, it was noted that high SES women had higher marriage satisfaction scores than low SES women. From the perspective of psychological symptom scores, low SES women scored higher than both middle and high SES women. On the other hand, the middle SES group has significantly higher romantic effect scores than the high SES group.

In this study, stepwise hierarchical regression analysis was performed in order to establish the variables that predict parasocial interaction. The regression equation was as follows: Firstly, demographic variables such as age, education level, family income, marriage duration, number of children; secondly, TV viewing duration, level of liking Turkish serials, the number of Turkish serials watched and romantic effect; thirdly, marriage satisfaction total score and marriage happiness level; fourthly, BSI sub-scales (anxiety, depression, negative-self, somatization, hostility). A total of six variables were predictors of parasocial interaction. The first one was "education level", followed by "romantic effect". These two account for 28% of the total variance. The third predictor was "number of Turkish serials watched" with a 2% contribution to the variance, followed by "the level of liking Turkish serials". These variables explain 31% of the total variance together with the earlier variables. With the fifth predictor, marriage happiness, and the sixth one, depression, the total variance explained rises to 33%. An examination of Beta values in addition to all these suggests that the highest values belong to "romantic effect" (β = .408) and "depression" (β = .162).

Discussion

The analyses revealed that women particularly preferred to watch Turkish serials, with low viewing rates for foreign serials. The literature showed that the similarity is an important factor for the development of the parasocial interaction with media characters. Therefore, foreign serials with their individualistic values may be less preferred by Turkish people as the collectivist values reflected in them may lead to less perceived similarity. Considering demographic variables, the literature holds findings about gender and age. As gender was beyond the scope of this study, it will not be mentioned here. In the present study, age was found to be positively related to parasocial interaction, parasocial breakup and cognitive-behavioral involvement. In other studies, it is stated that elderly individuals have longer TV viewing times as they have reduced social interaction opportunities and are therefore lonelier and more prone to establish parasocial interaction (Levy, 1979; Pearlman, Gerson, & Spinner,

1978). The analysis of variance also showed that elementary school graduate women have a significantly higher parasocial interaction, cognitive-behavioral involvement and parasocial breakup scores than women in other education groups. This study show that housewives, those without jobs and students most frequently watched Turkish serials. In contrast, more educated individuals seem to first watch the news and only then Turkish serials. Women with low education level tend not to work and thus spend more time at home. This undoubtedly affects their TV viewing time and the strength of their parasocial ties.

In our study, the monthly income of the family was taken as the SES variable which was divided into three groups: "low SES", "middle SES" and "high SES". The analysis of variance indicated that women from the low SES group had higher parasocial interaction and parasocial separation scores than high SES women. In addition to demographic variables, the association between parasocial interaction and marriage satisfaction and marriage happiness were also examined. Although there are previous studies on the relationships between parasocial interaction and romantic relationships (Greenwood & Long, 2011; Arslan & Sunal, 2012; Rehkoff, 2009), this is the first time marriage satisfaction is treated in this way in Turkey. When the findings are examined, it can be seen that perceived romantic effect and marriage happiness are predicting parasocial interaction. In the literature, there are findings that romantic TV programs and emotional expectations are among the most important predictors of parasocial interaction (Rehkoff, 2009). In other words, regularly watching programs with a romantic theme increases individuals' expectations from their own romantic relationships (Osborn, 2007). Arslan and Sunal (2012) studied university students in a romantic relationship and found that after women watch TV serials, they have increased expectations from their partners. Derrick et al. (2008) states that parasocial relationships may be increasing real-life expectations. For instance, a woman who sees a man that regularly spoils his spouse in a TV show may develop the same expectations from her partner (romantic effect). If these expectations remain unmet, the woman may feel neglected and not loved enough (reduction in marriage satisfaction/happiness). In light of this finding, it may be argued that marriage and romantic relationships have a crucial role in the Turkish culture particularly for women, and that women socialize in line with these cultural teachings. Therefore, woman in the Turkish culture may be making meaning of their relationships both by watching TV serials and by making parasocial ties with TV characters.

In this study, particularly depression seems to predict parasocial interaction and parasocial break-up scores. Also, positive and significant correlations exist

between all sub-dimensions (anxiety, depression, somatization, negative self and hostility) and BIS total score and parasocial interaction, cognitive-behavioral involvement and parasocial break-up scores. In other words, increased psychological symptoms means increased parasocial interaction. For example, depressed women were found to spend more time watching TV and more time watching soap operas (Dittmar, 1994). In another study on hopelessness, which is one of the most important components of depression (Beck et al., 1974), individuals' hopelessness scores seemed to predict parasocial interaction (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005).

In sum, the regression analysis revealed that women's education, perceived romantic effect from serials, the number of Turkish serials, the level of liking them, marriage happiness and depression symptoms were the variables that predicted parasocial interaction. In other words, it maybe claimed that poorly educated and depressed women who are not happy in their marriage and are regular viewers and fans of Turkish serials are more likely to develop parasocial interaction. Turkish women may also be watching more serials and establishing more parasocial interaction due to other reasons (low self perception, low life satisfaction, problems in interpersonal relationships, psychological symptoms) or due to low marriage happiness. Women may be running away from the negativities in their lives (unhappiness, interpersonal problems, psychological symptoms) and creating a false refuge in TV serials, too. All these findings actually show how parasocial interaction may be related to many and complex variables.