

INDIVIDUAL TO SOCIETAL FIGURES:  
CONSTRUCTION OF CELEBRITY IDENTITY IN  
TURKISH MEDIA

A Master's Thesis

by  
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Bilkent University 2020



*To mom...*

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The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences  
of  
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

by

AYSIN ECE ACAR

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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COMMUNICATION AND DESIGN  
İHSAN DOĞRAMACI BİLKENT UNIVERSITY  
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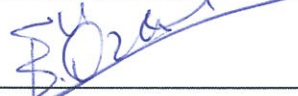
August 2020

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Assist. Prof. Dr. Colleen Kennedy-Karpas  
Supervisor

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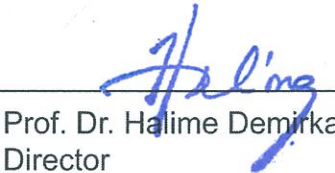
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## ABSTRACT

### INDIVIDUAL TO SOCIETAL FIGURES: CONSTRUCTION OF CELEBRITY IDENTITY IN TURKEY

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M.A., in Media and Visual Studies

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Celebrated individuals are everywhere in the consumerist societies in which technology is developing rapidly, and their impact as social phenomena on the societies, media, and consuming habits is significant. Although celebrities as individuals and celebrity culture have been the topic of media and cultural studies since the late 90s and there is a rich and growing body of literature in the field, there is almost no previous study tackling the issue in Turkey. This thesis investigates the notion of celebrity in Turkey and how the celebrity system functions, by examining three strong cases: Seda Sayan, Cem Yılmaz, and Acun Ilıcalı, and their individual identity construction processes. By adopting foundational theories with respect to the cultural specificities and differences, and examining the recurring patterns in three different cases, it aims to reveal how Turkish media situates celebrities within the broader framework of culture.

Keywords: Acun Ilıcalı, Celebrity Studies, Cem Yılmaz, Seda Sayan, Turkish Celebrities

## ÖZET

### BİREYLERDEN TOPLUMSAL FİGÜRLERE: TÜRKİYE’DE ÜNLÜ KİMLİĞİ İNŞASI

Acar, Aysin Ece

Yüksek Lisans, Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar

Danışman: Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Colleen Bevin Kennedy-Karpat

Ağustos 2020

Teknolojinin, ve dolayısıyla medyanın hızla geliştiği ve değiştiği tüketim toplumlarında ünlü bireyleri etrafımıza baktığımızda her yerde görebilmemiz mümkün. Sosyal ve kültürel fenomenler olarak ünlülerin toplum, medya ve tüketim alışkanlıkları üzerindeki önemli etkisi, 90’lı yıllardan itibaren medya ve kültürel araştırmaların konusu olmuştur. Her ne kadar zengin ve gün geçtikçe büyüyen bir literatüre sahip olsa da, Türkiye’de bu alanda yapılmış bir çalışma yoktur. Bu tez, Türkiye’de ünlülük kavramını ve ünlülük sistemin nasıl işlediğini, farklı sektörler ve yollar üzerinden kariyerlerini yürüten üç güçlü karakterin bireysel kimlik oluşturma süreçlerini inceleyerek araştırmaktadır. Tezin konusu için seçilen isimler, Seda Sayan, Cem Yılmaz ve Acun Ilıcalı, kendi alanlarında Türkiye’de ilk akla gelen isimler olmaları sebebiyle, sistemin nasıl işlediğini örneklendirmek için seçilmiştir. Çalışma, alanda ortaya atılmış temel teorileri, kültürel farklılık ve özgünlükleri göz önünde bulundurarak benimseyip, ünlü sisteminin yanı sıra, Türk medyasının nasıl işlediğini de incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Acun Ilıcalı, Cem Yılmaz, Seda Sayan, Şöhret Kültürü, Türk Medyası

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Celebrity is a phenomenon which has a long history and been transforming simultaneously with the developments in technology, media, and society. As social and cultural phenomena, celebrities have been subject of many researches, along with reciprocally influence our lives and consuming habits.

Considering the history of the notion of celebrity in Turkey, its origins go back to the golden years of film production, just like in other countries. The cinema in Turkey, which mostly meant European and American films until the 1950s, has changed its status “when an indigenous film industry funded by private capital and enterprise began to take shape on Yeşilçam Street in Beyoğlu, Istanbul” (Kaya Mutlu, 2010, p. 417). Cinema, which until then had been accepted as an elitist activity for the upper-middle and upper classes living only in big cities, became a popular entertainment with the increasing number of production companies in Yeşilçam Street and the domestic films produced there. Yeşilçam was considered as Turkey’s “‘little Hollywood’ with its own genres and star system, enjoyed its heyday between 1965 and 1975, with a yearly production of 200 to 300 films” (Kaya Mutlu, 2010, p. 417). It was a star-driven cinema and stars of the era such as Türkan Şoray, Filiz Akın,

Hülya Koçyiğit, Cüneyt Arkın, and Ediz Hun, had a significant role in movie going habits of society and on the films themselves, building strong fan bases that could demand changes in plot and casting. Since star image is an intertextual construct which combines on screen appearances, performed characters and off screen media materials such as biographies, interviews, photographs and personal news about the celebrities, along with the gossip about their personal lives, Yeşilçam provided an alternate space for the consumption of star images and created the fan culture in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Once Yeşilçam, which started to weaken with the introduction of television in our lives in the 1970s, lost its power with the start of private broadcasting in the 90s, celebrity culture in Turkey has transformed into a more television-oriented system.

Since its first telecast on 31 January, 1968, television has gained an indispensable place for Turkish celebrity and popular culture. Considering the fact that 94.3% of Turkish population have television in their homes and 86.7% still watch TV everyday, according to the state regulatory agency, Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu [Radio and Television Supreme Court] (RTÜK)'s report on 2018, it is clear that it preserves its significant place throughout the years. The same report shows that, Turkish drama series, which are called as *dizis*, are the most watched genre following the news in Turkey (RTÜK, 2018).

Beyond domestic audiences, these dizi have also gained a global reputation with unique narratives, musical scores and use of space and they have been identified by Fatima Bhutto as one of the most significant new formats in global media, among the “new kings of the world in Bhutto’s own terms (2019). Turkey started to export *dizis*,

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<sup>1</sup> The star fandom in Yeşilçam era is evident in the ‘fan letters’ published in film magazines. See Dilek Kaya’s (2010) study which investigates the para-social relationship between Yeşilçam stars and their fans by analyzing the fan letters: Dilek Kaya Mutlu (2010) Between Tradition and Modernity: Yeşilçam Melodrama, its Stars, and their Audiences, Middle Eastern Studies, 46:3, 417-431, DOI 10.1080/00263200902907169

which were produced and broadcasted locally until 2000, to foreign countries in 2001 and since then, they have reached more than 400 million viewers in “more than 75 different countries in the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America (Başaran, Kantaracı & Özyurt, 2017, p. 713). In 2017, Turkey became the second larger exporter of television series behind the United States.<sup>2</sup> In addition to its impact on tourism, the spread of culture and relations between countries,<sup>3</sup> with the popularization of *dizis* abroad, the leading actors have also become recognized globally and have a star status outside the borders of Turkey. The director of Calinos Holding, Fırat Gülgen, the firm that exports about 80% of Turkish series abroad claims that Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ is known as the Turkish Brad Pitt, especially in Middle Eastern countries, and goes so far as to say that “you can sell Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ's picture on a paper as a *dizi* in Middle East” (Arslan, 2012). Tuba Büyüküstün, Songül Öden, Murat Yıldırım, Beren Saat, Hazal Kaya and Kenan İmirzalıoğlu are just a few of the stars whose reputations have crossed the borders of the country with the export of *dizis*. American rapper Cardi B.'s obsession over *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* [The Magnificent Century] (2011-2014) can be shown as one of the latest examples of the popularity of Turkish *dizis* abroad. Her tweets commenting on episodes and characters, her love for the leading female character Hürrem Sultan and discussions she went on for defending her in social media went viral on Twitter Turkey and made Turkish *dizis* more visible for her audience segment, too.<sup>4</sup>

Considering aforementioned history of celebrity system in Turkey, it is visible that after Yeşilçam, it was shaped within the framework of television and it helped Turkish media to become a global market exporting celebrities. With the recent

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<sup>2</sup> Supplementary data are available on this news article. (<https://haymillian.com/turkish-delight-how-turkey-has-become-the-second-biggest-tv-exporter-in-the-world/>)

<sup>3</sup> According to Yanardağoglu and Karam (2013), tourism demand to Turkey increased considerably after the broadcast of *dizis* for Middle Eastern countries. With the Greek subtitles to *dizis*, the number of Turkish language courses in Greece has increased from one to ten: (Mihalakopoulos, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> See the news article on Cardi B.'s The Magnificent Century obsession: (<https://www.globalvillagespace.com/which-turkish-series-does-rapper-cardi-b-love/>)

technological developments, use of social media and increasing number of local micro-celebrities is an important indication that its expanding to different media. Considering the fact that Turkey is number five in leading countries based on Instagram audience size as of April 2020 with 42 million users,<sup>5</sup> it is clear that social media, especially Instagram is a growing market which produce its own celebrities and help celebrities to maintain their fame.

Considering the local influencers who are in cooperation with foreign brands and attending global events such as Danla Bilic and Duygu Özasan,<sup>6</sup> it is evident that the effect of social media on Turkish celebrity culture will continue to increase in the future. However, despite all these rapid developments, the fact that the ratio of households owning at least one of the smart phones, laptops or computer products in their home is 75% while it is 94.3% for traditional TV sets, and the rate of those who say that the new technology does not change their television watching habits is 66%, shows that television is still an indispensable medium for the Turkish celebrity culture (RTÜK, 2018).

This thesis proposes a nationally targeted study of celebrities, by examining three individuals to detect recurring themes and concepts in their identity construction practices, which reveal the preferences of Turkish media and society on celebrifying certain people. For the purposes of this thesis, Seda Sayan, Cem Yılmaz, and Acun Ilıcalı's place in Turkish popular culture, and how they achieve their time-defying, powerful celebrity will be examined closely. Since celebrity is highly intertextual by nature and requires different methodologies to read effectively, the methodology chosen for this study is case study combined with close reading and discourse

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<sup>5</sup> See the statistics of leading countries based of Instagram audience size (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/578364/countries-with-most-instagram-users/>)

<sup>6</sup> Duygu Özasan's Instagram account: (<https://www.instagram.com/duyguozaslan/?hl=tr>)  
Danla Bilic's Instagram account: (<https://www.instagram.com/danlabilic/?hl=tr>)

analysis. The main reason behind choosing the names, apart from the fact that each of them represents a certain genre, is that to see common features they share to create a pattern which explains how celebrity functions in Turkey.

In Chapter 2, the key aspects from the existing literature on celebrity culture will be provided. Firstly, the history of the phenomenon will be examined to provide a broad definition of the term ‘celebrity’. After the definition, celebrities will be placed in the broader social spheres of culture and society, and will be explained as commodities, industries, and cultural phenomena with their relationship with the consumers. Afterwards, the cultural intermediaries which play significant role in both constructing and maintaining the celebrity, will be examined. Finally, in order to provide a better understanding of the transformation of celebrity culture in the last few decades, the place of television and its consequence, ordinariness, will be examined in the branding process.

In Chapter 3, Seda Sayan’s strategies in constructing her celebrity across different media will be examined closely. Placing particular emphasis on her daytime talk shows and her TV personality, her way of managing her public image throughout her career will be investigated. To achieve the aim of explaining what makes her exceptional in the context of Turkish popular culture, along with the shows and interviews include biographical information, her talk shows and her media coverage will be examined in detail. By providing a television broadcasting history of Turkey and the genre specificities, this chapter also aims to explain the industry dynamics which are inextricably linked to the celebrity construction practices.

In Chapter 4, by investigating Cem Yılmaz’s career trajectory, how the comedy industry functions in Turkey, and what makes Yılmaz exceptional in this context will be examined through the extraordinary range of media he performs. In order to



understand his celebrity as a whole, his path to fame, from the caricaturist years to his stand-up performances, and to his filmic universe will be traced by providing an understanding of his step-by-step media strategy. To achieve the aim of analyzing his value as a celebrity in Turkish culture, along with the examination of his position in Turkish comedy, his signature practices through his major shows and films will be analyzed, by providing a background information on Turkish comedy and film history.

Chapter 5 will be examining Acun Ilıcalı as a businessman, and a tabloid personality, as well as being one of the most successful television personalities in Turkey. His way of navigating his celebrity and success between these often not appear together personas, and his public visibility will be examined to understand his strategies in constructing and maintaining his image. By examining his shows and media coverage, this chapter aims to analyze how Ilıcalı became a popular culture figure from being a businessman, and before that, a reporter.

## 2.1. An Introduction to Celebrity Discourse

In a society where human value is measured by public visibility and the one's existence is associated with being seen by the public, it is not surprising that nowadays the public is full of celebrated individuals (Redmond, 2016, p. 79). Although the meaning and context of the term are transforming day by day simultaneously with the developments in technology and media, celebrity is a phenomenon with a long history. Stating that there was always a “heroic human mold” for us to worship and acquire fame, Daniel Boorstin (1961) claims that this phenomenon has started with the Greek Gods, then continued with folkloric heroes, the Hollywood stars, and finally, the contemporary celebrity. While Boorstin believes that it was there from the very beginning, Inglis (2016), for example, believes that the notion of celebrity as we presently understood is a 250-year-old phenomenon which dates to the industrialization of London sometime after 1750. (Boorstin, 1961;

Inglis, 2016).

With the industrialization and the mass-production practices that it brought with it, celebrated individuals have increased in quantity and therefore the celebrity phenomenon started to be studied more in media and cultural studies fields.

According to Gamson (2015), although the term ‘celebrity’ in its modern meanings began to be used in the nineteenth century, the study of the phenomenon started with the rise of ‘mass-produced’ culture, especially in the early twentieth century with the emergence of industrialized Hollywood star system. The popularization of film studios and consequently the motion pictures paved the way for the serial production of celebrities in the 1930s (Gamson, 2015, p. 274). The Hollywood star system was emerged as focusing entirely on the fictional screen characters since the earliest films did not market their casts and actors other than the roles they play. Graeme Turner (2014) believes that the change of these practices in 1910s led to the change of celebrity culture: with the advent of movie stars, audience became curious about the lives of celebrities off screen and it has become an ancillary information that can be used in social environments, hence the desire to access these informations has increased over time (Turner, 2014, pp. 13-14). Both Gamson (2015) and Rojek (2012) believe that, although the share of Hollywood movie studios in both American and international celebrities is still big, “celebrity has become less centralized, and the logic of celebrity has taken hold within a wider range of social spheres” (Gamson, 2015, p. 276). Considering the notion of stardom, as many scholars such as Chris Rojek and Graeme Turner states that, it is not a privilege to the Hollywood actors, but every industry has its own ‘star’ personalities: “charities have their star givers; schools and universities have their star academics; professional musicians and sports teams have players and superstars; and businesses have star managers” (Rojek, 2012, pp. 8-9). In such a context, the celebrity system is now observable in all areas and levels of societies.

So, what exactly is a celebrity? Considering the definitions made up until today, as

Turner states that, “Daniel Boorstin is responsible for one of the most widely quoted aphorisms about celebrity: ‘the celebrity is a person who is well-known for their well knownness’” (Boorstin, 1971, p. 58 as cited in Turner, 2014, p. 4-5). According to him, celebrity was produced to satisfy societies’ exaggerated perceptions of excellence. The most important factor that distinguishes the pre-modern, heroic human molds mentioned by Boorstin from celebrities is the fact that celebrities did not possess this power by accomplishing incredible things, but by bringing their characters and personalities to the forefront in the social arena (Turner, 2014, p. 4-5). Ellis Cashmore (2006) claims that Boorstin’s aphorism is no longer a tautological joke; “it eventually became a reasonable explanation of why someone or other was fêted” (Cashmore, 2006, p. 3-4). The celebrities are, as Italian sociologist Francesco Alberoni (1972) put it, “powerless elites”, “or more accurately, an elite with high status and visibility but limited institutional power – commanding a high level of interest unrelated to the consequences of their activity” (Gamson, 2015, p. 274).

The research and theories in the field, instead of focusing on individual celebrities, has tend to work from a broader perspective which considers the celebrity as a social and cultural phenomenon, and focused on the ways of its construction and maintenance with the emphasis of public visibility (Gamson, 2015, p. 274). While research on celebrity often focuses on its social and cultural repercussions, and even in this area there may be varying definitions of the term, Rojek's classification of the category “celebrity” into three different subtypes has come to the forefront: ascribed, achieved, and attributed celebrity. According to him, ‘ascribed celebrity’ is an individual whose fame comes from their lineage, such as a member of a royal family, while ‘achieved celebrity’, is the celebrity whose fame directly depends on exceptional success or talent in a particular field, as is the case for athletes. The fame and power that David Beckham or Messi possesses, according to this theory, depends on their talent and achievements in football. ‘Attributed celebrity’, on the other hand, is the term used for people whose fame is dependent on media representations such

as scandals, gossip or tabloid features. Kardashian family or Paris Hilton are contemporary examples from the US culture (Kellner, 2016, p. 114). This categorization, which places the talent at the center to indicate and identify the distinction between them, naturally creates hierarchy. Some scholars like Olivier Driessens (2016) believe that the distinction between these categories is not as sharp as Rojek describes and claim that “‘Achieved celebrities’ are to some extent also ‘attributed celebrities,’ while obviously many ‘attributed celebrities’ also have their talents – to begin with, the ability to keep up their performance as celebrities” (Driessens, p. 377). In a sense, having celebrity status and maintaining it is an achievement in its own right. Celebrity takes more than a moment to emerge; although it is possible to detect the precise moment at which media and society take an interest in the activities and existence of an individual, the process of sustaining and, ideally, growing that interest is the key process of celebrity. It's harder than ever to distinguish celebrities using distinct categories in an era where screen technologies are transforming themselves and their users every day. Being able to navigate this high-pressure, increasingly self-directed media environment has become an achievement in itself. According to Gamson (2011), the notion of contemporary celebrity based on two fundamental narratives that often contradict one another. The first narrative attributes recognition and celebrity to ability, achievement, or personal qualities that will gain people's interest and admiration; the other holds that celebrity status is fabricated by a team of publicists, public relations specialists, and investors, framing celebrities as artificially constructed products of (and for) mass media. In the ability-centric model, the celebrity is extraordinary, certainly more powerful than non-celebrities if only in certain, commonly identifiable area(s); in the fabrication model, celebrities are simply luckier and better-marketed versions of ourselves. “In the first, their elevated social status is justified; in the second, arbitrary. In the first, they are to be revered or vicariously consumed; in the second, to be disdained or consumed as objects of identification” (Gamson, 2011, p. 1063).

The field's change of focus from achievement-based celebrity to media-driven fame is inherent to contemporary celebrity culture. The active component of celebrity creation is emphasized in the recently coined verb 'celebrify', which might be defined as "to exalt; praise widely; make famous; invest common or inferior person or thing with great importance", although it has never been formally defined (Cashmore, 2006, p. 7). Why people celebrify certain people, and not others, is then, the central question of the discourse. Since the celebrity is a process defined by continually shifting dynamics, as Cashmore puts it, "it didn't pop out of a vacuum: there were conditions, triggering episodes and deep causes" (Cashmore, 2006, p. 2). According to him, examples of these conditions are the widespread use of the media in the 1980s and the corresponding changes in the authority and leadership systems (Cashmore, 2006, p. 2).

Since the reasons for fame can depend on many different dynamics, who gets attention, as Gamson puts it "tells us much about the core values, or ideological contradictions, of the society giving the attention" (Gamson, 2015, p. 275). In a sense, cultures define themselves by granting value to certain people and making them more precious than they actually are. Gamson (1994), Cashmore (2006), and Redmond (2006) all believe that media and society are areas of self-expression that include the display of individual talents as well as the collective forces of marketing, promotion, advertising, and economic markets. The embodied state of a society's ideological, economic and social structure is projected on its screens. Societies identify and introduce themselves through famous individuals, who reflect what a society values, what is desirable to consume, and what people are uncomfortable with.

## 2.2. Celebrity as a Commodity

Considering the celebrity studies, although there have been many different approaches and definitions, there is a common view that almost all theorists agree on the phenomenon of celebrity: celebrity is a commodity. Celebrity culture, by its nature, is driven by consumerism by transforming individuals into saleable products. Through commodification, celebrities become raw materials to be processed, produced, packaged, and promoted for the consumer (Cashmore, 2006; Dyer, 1986). Since the mid 1950s, advertising has changed the meaning of consumerism by using products as indicators of social value. In such a context, having a specific product became an indicator of the social status and value (Cashmore, 2006, p. 68). Almost every product marketed to us is introduced by a famous face, making it possible to see their 'great' faces and bodies on not only the entertainment products they are involved but all kinds of merchandise that our minds can take from underwear to electronic equipment, from makeup to sportswear. Since "celebrities are developed to make money" (Turner, 2014, p. 4), they are both products and promotional tools sought by many industries.

As the aforementioned theorists have argued, consumer culture has changed the way consumer goods are perceived in human life. In the past 30 years, products that were previously seen as a luxury are now perceived by many as necessities. Self-development, self-fulfillment, and self-presentation are driven by consumer goods. As Cashmore puts it, "for all the fantasy and escapist tendencies it radiates, celebrity culture's most basic imperative is material: it encourages consumption at every level of society" (Cashmore, 2006, p. 269). In many ways, in the past 30 years, exposure of the self in the public has been increased and normalized. The entertainment industry and advertising also expanded their offerings, presenting their consumers a wide range of famed individuals in keeping with the continuous expansion of media into new technological platforms, understanding personal preferences as a primary value for the sector has affected public awareness. As consumers began to see more clearly that their choices affect the media and the products offered to them, according

to Cashmore, celebrity culture as we know it began to take shape. Although the marketing and advertising have an impact on our choices, in particular, we are the ones who make the choice. From this point of view, we buy products that are compatible with our understanding of self or identity and express ourselves through these products. Buying a product make the self-actualization and the process of becoming the one's dream state much more manageable (Cashmore, 2006). People buy in order to present what they want to become, their dream state. For this reason, the link between consumption and celebrities has been maintained since Hollywood studios started to be established. The most prominent examples of this are the construction of cinemas in shopping malls or near stores and the use of movie screens as showcases (Stacey, 1994, p. 182).

According to Stacey, the inevitable link between celebrities and consumption has been affected by the identification and recognition of similarities and differences. In this context, buying something that a celebrity has or promotes makes the consumer feels like getting closer to the star and their glory (Stacey, 1994, pp. 127-128). The concept of social media influencers—or micro-celebrities—is one of the most prominent examples of this link. By carrying out the pictures they share and the content they produce under the sponsorship of the brands, they direct their followers who identify with them to purchase those goods. Their influence on the consumer habits is evident in the scrolling posts, which have become widespread nowadays especially in Instagram stories, enable users to find and buy the product they see and like on the celebrity they follow immediately by scrolling the page in influencers' Instagram stories. They are constantly used by the brands to promote their products and they have an impact factor depending on the number of their followers, the views in their posts and 'scrolling' audiences. Most of them eventually have their own brand to produce their own goods for their 'followers'. The identification with celebrities is not prominent only in having products, but also 'possessing' the experiences similar to the celebrated individuals. Going where celebrities go and

doing what they do allow the ordinary people to identify themselves with them. It is possible to see that experience is also being sold and marketed in many areas along with the products. Living close to the celebrities is being promoted to ordinary people as an opportunity to not only feel close, but also be physically close to the celebrity and her glory.

Since celebrity endorsement is frequently used by advertisers in Turkey, as in other countries, the commodification of celebrity brands of selected products will be analyzed for the purposes of this study.

### 2.3. Celebrity as an Industry

By the mid-twentieth century, as the studio system was fading, the celebrity-making practice was expanding rapidly through linked professions. As Gamson explains it, celebrity creation has become an industry in its own right, “made up of highly developed and institutionally linked professions and subindustries such as public relations, entertainment law, celebrity journalism and photography, grooming and training, managing and agenting and novelty sales” (Gamson, 1994, p. 65).

Rein et al. claim that, “the celebrity industry is supported by seven contributing ‘sub-industries’” (Rein et al., 1997, pp.42-58, as cited in Turner, 2010, p. 199), all of which devoted to celebrity industry by offering ways of developing and promoting the celebrities. The ‘entertainment industry’ is one of the leading ones of these sub-industries which includes theaters, music and dance halls, sports fields and film studios and it is followed by the ‘communication industry’ which includes newspapers, magazines, radios, televisions, and films. The entertainment and communication industries are controlled by publishers, public relations firms, advertising agencies, marketing research companies, which in turn make up the ‘publicity industry’. The ‘representation industry’ includes celebrities themselves,



plus representatives, personal managers, and promoters. The 'appearance industry' crafts the image of celebrities through cosmetics, hairdressers, stylists, and other image consultants. The 'coaching industry' is responsible for the professional performances of these public figures and includes music, dance, speech, and modeling teachers. The last of these sub-industries is the 'endorsement industry,' which includes manufacturers and marketers of all kinds of merchandise that can promote or be promoted by a celebrity (Rein et al., 1997, pp. 42-58, as cited in Turner, 2010, p. 199). This thesis employs this conception of supporting sub-industries in both construction and sustenance of the celebrity value. As mentioned before, celebrity is not only the moment of creation but a process covers both before and after of that precise moment. In such a context, this perspective of sub-industries is not only useful in defining the factors playing role in creation, but also in understanding celebrity as an industry.

David Marshall introduces another dimension to this. In *Celebrity and Power* (1997), he assumes that different industries differ not only in the production of celebrities but also in terms of the meanings attributed to those celebrities. He details his assumption through the case studies of Tom Cruise, Oprah Winfrey and the New Kids on the Block to the organizational systems of the music, cinema and television industries, and the publicity and broadcasting regimes. According to Marshall, there are significant differences in semiotic and discursive regimes for celebrities in different industrial environments. According to him, celebrities are not only produced by different systems, but the meanings they produce also privilege different discourses. According to Marshall's work, film stars are structured through discourses of individuality, while television personalities construct their reputation through familiarity, and authenticity informs the meaning of music stars. In a way, Marshall helps us see the meanings and differences that are valuable to the consumer community in every industry within the media culture (Marshall, 1997; Turner, 2014).

Celebrities operate with the advertising industry and almost *as* an advertising industry, since they themselves carry certain market value. According to Marshall, “celebrity value is often a study of the power of celebrity (...) Thus celebrities for more than 50 years have been subjected to a ranking system” (Marshall, 2016, p. 155). Over the past few decades, the advent of celebrity metrics has helped to systematize and make observable what used to be the informal and imperfect art of assessing celebrity value. The Q-score or Q-rating system and other datasets aim to define a celebrity's degree of trust and impact among the population as a whole, beyond their assumed fan base(s). In Turkey, Celebrity Güven Endeksi [The Celebrity Trust Index] which is an index resulted from MediaCat magazine's big scale surveys of television audiences is also used for measuring the degree of trust and impact on the population by celebrities, providing the brands and producers the data for the advertising strategies.

These celebrity ranking systems, as Alison Hearn and Stephanie Schoenhoff's research (2016) reveals, “also provide a standard celebrity “currency,” allowing marketers and agents to compare and trade-in celebrities more easily” (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016, p. 200). Although we speak of measurable value, as Misha Kavka (2016) points out, the economic value and social value of a celebrity are not the same. Kavka gives the Kardashian family, and Kim Kardashian alone as the world's highest-paid reality TV star in 2010, as the example since once considering the social value, in his words “Kim Kardashian's celebrity persona has very low social value and often figures as an exemplar of “what's wrong with celebrity today” (i.e., celebrities are talentless, famous for being famous, self-obsessed, etc.)”(Kavka, 2016, p. 304).

By considering celebrity as both a commodity and an industry in its own right, this thesis aims to examine the celebrities not only as individuals but also cultural phenomena with both market and social value. Since celebrity is a both an industry

and a product that has cultural, symbolic, social, and economic value, it is crucial to understand the strong relation of celebrities with their consumers, which in this case is synonymous with their audience. According to Turner, the extent of a celebrity's presence in the media indicates not only the capacities of the global media, but also the strength of the relationship between popular culture consumers and celebrities (Turner, 2014, p. 100).

#### 2.4. Audience/Fan/Consumer

As mentioned, some theorists claim that consuming celebrity is a way of self-justification and consumers are encouraged to declare their value by spending money on goods that they believe will help them resemble or become someone else, usually, the celebrities. To be like the people who create and reflect our social perception of greatness, to resemble them and to make a connection means for several consumers to complement the self (Cashmore, 2006, p. 13). In such a context, the consumer is the one who originates the meaning of goods and in celebrity culture, the consumer is the audience which was perceived by early scholars as passive observers managed by the media, not as self-directed managers of their own media use and motivations. According to Gamson, this view has been forced to change by both theory and research since the early 1980s. The 'uses and gratifications' approach aimed at changing the perception of the passive audience by putting the audience and interests at the center of media research. Such extremes are avoided by a more recent set of challenges as laid out in the work of Stuart Hall, David Marley, and the Birmingham School. "These approaches emphasize the 'interaction between active audience and active media', 'the structuring role of the text and the constructive role of the viewer in negotiating meaning'" (Gamson, 1994, p. 200). Since the consumer is essential in the celebrity system, the relationship between celebrity and their audience is one of the most frequently studied areas of the field. According to Alberoni, while each member of the public knows the star, the star does not know any individual and

perceive the public as a collectivity. He believes that the relationship between the star and public lacks an element that would label “mutuality” (Alberoni, 2010, p. 66) is called “para-social relationship” which is the term introduced by psychologists Horton and Wohl (1956) in the 1950s. The one-way interaction between the audience and celebrities does not diminish its strength and influence. Many fan groups believe that their interaction with celebrities is as valid and meaningful as any other social interaction in their daily lives. According to Cashmore, even the most indifferent audiences seem to interact with celebrities in some way and this has become inevitable in today's conditions. The name given to this cumulative situation is “intimacy at a distance,” a phrase coined by Horton and Wohl, who also introduced “para-social interaction” in the 1950s (Cashmore, 2006, p. 80).

Emergence of the reality television and the social media platforms have altered the para-social interaction by putting audience in touch with the celebrities and providing them the control over the content they receive by commenting, supporting, and voting for competitions via SMS. Since the market needs to supply the consumers what they demand as in every industry, some tools to measure audience interest have been invented throughout history in order to be in touch and reflect it (Gamson, 1994, p. 115). Gamson claims that, before the audience measurement systems for radio and television emerged in 1930s, the consumer market was simply too big to keep in mind. As communications technology has changed and expanded, so have the tools that measure the interest of the audience. In the late 1940s, the A. C. Nielsen company developed a meter that attached to the radio to automatically record what plays when the set is turned on. Nielsen later adapted this technology to television units, which provided data to advertisers for selectively targeting television and radio viewers. By the 1960s, survey data like this began to be analyzed by computers, and data companies started to work collaboratively with advertising companies. Considering the first audience meters, only a household's monitoring and listening habits could be measured, with little insight about how individuals within

that household might have differing habits. This changed in 1986 when Nielsen developed its “People meter,” a device that is attached to the televisions of families of different socio-economic classes selected from a large database. Each member of the family has a button on the remote control and when the TV is turned on, people in the room press their buttons, and when they leave the room, they turn their buttons off again. The device records which channels are watched by whom and uses an integrated telephone connection to contact the host of the companies every morning and transmits the information (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016, p. 199).

In Turkish media and entertainment industry, several different tools are used to measure user interest along with rating systems and people-meter. Nielsen rating system was used for audience measurements in Turkey from 1989 to 2012 March, when the measurement universe has been reshaped with the re-determined criteria. Turkey agreed with TNS for rating measurements in 2012 and began using Comtel system,<sup>7</sup> which is developed by TNS in the collection of monitoring data, the editing and production processes. This new integrated system, with the aim of ensuring that the published monitoring estimates accurately represent the total population, subject the most recently reported panel to a rim-weighting procedure to correct for minor demographic differences. Along with the rating systems, Turkish state agency for monitoring and regulating radio and television broadcast, Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu [Radio and Television Supreme Council] (RTÜK)’s annual reports on television watching habits provide very important sources for content producers by classifying the audience according to socio-economic background, age, gender and educational characteristics. With this report, instead of treating the audience as a whole, it is possible to create clearer target audiences by grouping them on the basis of specific features, which make audience preferences clearer. Apart from this, media follow-up analyses by Medya Takip Merkezi (Media Monitoring Center) and Celebrity Trust Index are also used to determine who consumers prefer to watch and

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<sup>7</sup> For more about the Comtel system in Turkey see: (<https://www.tvreklamajansi.com/turkiyede-reyting-olcum-sistemi/>)

talk about. The parallelism between the names included in these lists and the results of television ratings supports the existence of a successful image management and the intertextual continuity of the celebrity persona. Given the case studies of this thesis, Cem Yılmaz, Seda Sayan and Acun Ilıcalı, all three have an invariable domination in these lists. The lists showing how these names are followed by the audience on different platforms also reveal the specific target audiences of the celebrities who are the subject of the thesis. The fact that they have been able to maintain the audience interest and trust over the years, therefore, makes the preferences of the Turkish audience visible. Each one of the cases has different target segments which they act to appeal respect, love and trust from, and analyzing these divided targets successfully helps them to analyze masses' preferences better which in turn makes them more acceptable for the public.

## 2.5. Publicity, Tabloid, and Gossip in Celebrity Culture

As Chris Rojek states that, “celebrity culture revolves around rumour and hearsay as much as facts and professional reporting” (Rojek, 2012, p. 7). Gossip has been around since the dawn of the history and celebrities, in a way, grant the freedom to talk about others without feeling responsible or guilty; the sense of intimacy at a distance that is inherent to celebrity status creates a paradox in relationship norms. According to Turner, celebrities are as integrated into our daily life as a family member or a neighbor, while communication about them is appealingly free of immediate responsibility and ethical concerns since it is para-social (Turner, 2014, p. 128). As audiences started to want more information about the real lives of screen personas, the market increased the supply according to this demand. Once celebrity gossip achieved front-page status, the information industry embraced a new mode of journalism which often fails to consider its impacts on the people it covers. This irresponsible attitude became more noticeable in the 2005 phone-hacking scandal, when the media was revealed to be widely abusing its power by hacking private

communications among celebrities and royal family members to find newsworthy materials (Turner, 2014, p. 83). The domination of celebrity gossip in the mass magazine market also shifted the content of television news, which started to focus more on “extraordinary stories” rather than simply telling the truth. This process is called “tabloidization,” a process that many understand as “sacrific[ing] information for entertainment, accuracy for sensation, and to employ tactics of representation which entrap and exploit its subjects” (Turner, 2014, p. 84). According to Kellner, “As corporate journalism became increasingly tabloidized, the line between news and information and entertainment blurred” (Kellner, 2016, p. 114).

Turner discusses tabloidization from three different angles. From an ethical point of view, it would not be wrong to see the tabloid press as hunters and predators chasing scandal with an unrestricted hunger. However, from the reader's point of view, he also emphasizes that, as usual, every supply has a demand, and scandals have consumers. Although there are more consumers interested in scandal than in the ordinary news, he states that even these consumers are bound by ethical limits and gives the phone-hacking scandal as an example. Finally, Turner adds that from a more industry-oriented perspective, tabloids are the fastest way to reach the public and are therefore irresistible in their commercial power. The tabloids are in that sense a double-edged sword, “at one point threatening the professional survival of the celebrities they expose, and at another point contracting to provide them with unparalleled personal visibility” (Turner, 2014, p. 83-84).

Although there could be many different factors in tabloidization of the news, in Turkey’s case, the depolitization of society caused by an unstable democracy was the reason at the beginning. After the third military coup in 1980, all political activities and organizations were ended with a major censoring process which also restricted the freedom of speech in Turkey. In an environment where the public was discouraged from discussing politics and encouraged to focus more on popular

culture, the news started to be dominated by sensational celebrity stories. This tabloidization of news which started in 1980s and increased with the commercial television in 1990s, has been an issue for researchers in Turkey. For instance, in a study conducted in 2002, in which the main news bulletins of the four commercial channels, Star TV, ATV, Show TV and Kanal D, along with TRT were recorded and analyzed during a random week, 97 of 529 news articles examined in total were on popular culture, 182 of them was on politics and 90 was on crime. In Show TV, while there were only 17 news stories covering politics, 40 were covering the popular culture and celebrities (Gencel Bek, 2004, p. 376). Today, considering the fact that Turkey comes a close second after China for journalist imprisonments with 47 people,<sup>8</sup> there is still no room for journalists to make news about politics without fear. Although in the current political environment the popular culture is still a usable material for the news, the emergence of social media as a platform to follow the lives of celebrities more closely and the increasing number of gossip shows are areas where one can read tabloid press more closely.

This thesis, by examining the media coverage of the celebrities in question, aims to analyze their tabloid value and how this affects their visibility. For instance, in Acun Ilıcalı's case, the fact that he has a controversial private life has a great impact on his media visibility and makes him among the most talked-about celebrities. Just like Ilıcalı, Seda Sayan's early life and sensational relationships, especially with Mahsun Kırmızıgül have influenced her public visibility and supported her on the way of constructing her 'Kadırgalı' persona which indicates the ghetto she grew up in. Similarly, relationships with the winners of the beauty pageants have made Cem Yılmaz a place in the media besides his films and shows.

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<sup>8</sup> For the statistics on journalist imprisonments see: (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/12/12/the-countries-imprisoning-the-most-journalists-in-2019-infographic/#6e8f033613d6>)



The celebrities who constitute the subject of the thesis have preserved their positions in the sector thanks to their success in managing all these rumors, scandals and their tabloid aspects.

## 2.7. Cultural Intermediaries: PR Specialists, Managers, and Assistants

As can be understood from what has been examined so far, celebrities have a certain level of power, influence and authority depending on their public image; therefore this image should be carefully controlled and managed. Both Alberoni and Gamson believe that celebrity is a product of an entertainment industry whose public image is consciously planned and staged to the finest detail (Alberoni, 2010; Gamson, 1994). In the 1950s, the system of fame, which changed with the influence of television, transformed celebrities from screen characters into individuals who are capable of demonstrating the distance between them with their own images. Independent publishers, image managers, and assistants have perhaps reached the strongest position in the image management process with the developments in screen technologies.

Celebrities, in order to manage their brands and strengthen their public image, need advice as in other industries. While some celebrities go it alone, most of the time the process involves professional, third-party opinions. Turner claims that, from the celebrity's perspective, "ideally, this third party has a long-term interest in the celebrity's commercial success. After all, their income is linked to their effective management (and protection) of the celebrity's personal and commercial interests" (Turner, 2010, p. 194). The term 'cultural intermediaries' is used to designate these third party laborers. Neil Gabler gives a detailed account of the history of these laborers in *Gossip, Power, and the Culture of Celebrity* (1995): Initially known as a press agent, these cultural intermediaries had a role in history dating back to the 1920s and 1930s. Their emergence as a profession was made

possible thanks to the expanding publicity potential of a broader print press. Their task was initially to place customers in the gossip columns for a fee. “Widely despised, they constituted ‘an unsavory and forlorn group of men’, according to Gabler, but were nevertheless ‘the ants that moved the mountain. For without them, there was no celebrity, no gossip, no mass culture, really’” (Gabler, 1995, p. 249, as cited in Turner, 2014, p. 46). The general task of the **agent** in the celebrity and entertainment industry is to find the appropriate job for his clients, adjust the terms of this job, give advice on the job and, in some specific cases, arrange publicity. Successful agents often work with a large number of celebrities. From this perspective, the agents are not interested in the development phase of the product while the **manager**, who works with fewer customers, plays a much greater strategic role in celebrity life by having a very comprehensive job description that involves regulating their clients’ whole life: responding to e-mails, buying and selling, taking care of their children, and even choosing household employees (Turner, 2014, p. 47).

While the celebrity is presented and recognized individually as the most glamorous face of this industry, “the public face they present is a product of public relations and media specialists” (Rojek, 2012, p. 14-15). According to Rojek, although image control is influenced by many systems such as family, culture, school, and belief, he argues that the most advanced of these management networks is the public relations industry. He claims that without understanding the fundamentals of this industry, it is impossible to understand how celebrity culture is established and functioning today (Rojek, 2012, p. 15). Rojek, in his *Fame Attack: The Inflation of Celebrity and Its Consequences* (2012), provides a history of public relations to understand the dynamics of the celebrity industry and says that the first name that comes to mind when talking about public relations and propaganda is Edward Bernays, known as the father of public relations. “He developed techniques to use what he called ‘associational values and dramatic incidents’ to dramatize communication and elevate and position ‘opinion leaders’” (Bernays, 1928, p. 154, as cited in Rojek,

2012, p. 16). The purpose of this system is to change consumer culture by molding the public consumption of celebrity. According to Rojek, “The PR-Media hub is the most advanced version of the factory system of celebrity production” (Rojek, 2012, p. 24), and is the arm of the machine that works to improve the public image and visibility of celebrities. It is also the unit that manages which campaigns celebrities will take part in, which projects they will support, and which stance they should take in politics and business. He states that “the PR-Media hub positions celebrities on the horizon of public life to persuade us to consume products and provide coaching in boutique lifestyle choices bearing upon questions of health, diet, welfare, public responsibility, personal bearing, and environmental care” (Rojek, 2012, p. 25). From this perspective, celebrities are not born but made to make money. The main aim of managing the image of celebrity is to have high ‘impact factor’ ratings which refers to the place occupied by brands and commodities in society, and it can be quantitatively measured (Rojek, 2012, p. 27). For visibility in the media, it is possible to look at many places such as television, films with press columns and advertisements. The high impact factor makes celebrities attractive for other businesses as well. In such a public environment, as Cashmore puts it, “publicists, agents, managers, and the gamut of other personnel exploiting, working for or attending to the needs of the entertainers became self-taught guardians of images” (Cashmore, 2006, p. 60-61).

## 2.8. Reality Television, Ordinarity, and the Illusion of Intimacy

It is a topic that almost all theorists agree with in the field of celebrity studies, that “while fame has existed for centuries, celebrity is inextricably linked to media. Thus, as media changes, so does celebrity” (Marwick, 2016, p. 333). Each medium creates its own celebrity, and consequently, with each newly formed medium, the public faces it carries multiply and their recognition begins to increase. In this context, the media develops and multiplies celebrity culture with every development. Throughout

history, as Giles points out, the media and celebrity industries “co-exist in ‘a kind of twisted symbiosis’” (Giles, 2000, p. 26) and considering the changes and developments in media technologies, one of the milestones in celebrity culture is television. Since the second half of the 20th century, television has altered our lives fundamentally not only as entertainment but also a mode of experience, changing our thoughts and behaviors, our communication with people, and our consumption habits. It has also led to fundamental changes in celebrity culture. Cashmore goes far enough to take it for granted that “celebrity culture wouldn’t have been possible without television” (Cashmore, 2006, p. 38).

To begin with, the domestic intimacy of television and its technological base which allows simultaneity of transmission and reception changed traditional concepts of stardom. John Ellis, James Bennett and David Marshall have argued that television celebrities are characterized by an ‘aura of familiarity’ (Marshall, 1997), rather than the ‘aura of distance’ that was understood to build around film stars (Ellis, 1982). Even though they are two-dimensional images on a screen, audiences perceive intimacy with celebrities because they are in our living rooms (Cashmore, 2006, p. 38). According to Turner, with the television culture, “the meaning of celebrity itself begins to mutate: from being an elite and magical condition to being an almost reasonable expectation from everyday life” (Turner, 2014, p. 94).

The rise of reality television has frequently been taken as at least a symptom of transformation in televisual celebrity over the past 25 years (Bennett, 2010, Spigel, 2004; Turner, 2010; Kavka, 2016). Since the late 1990s, television has found ways to produce its own medium-specific celebrities rather than using celebrities of other industries, and “increasingly, they have done this by using ‘ordinary’ people, with no special abilities and achievements, as the ‘talent’ in their programs” (Turner, 2010). Given the worldwide reach of television formats, many programs in this format have met with wild commercial success. Turner offers the *Big*

*Brother*, *Survivor* and *Idol* formats as examples of the most widely adopted formats internationally. In Turkey, adaptations of all three of these juggernauts are produced by Acun Medya, and each one has a massive audience and a distinct set of stars and personalities. The goal of these programs is to establish a successful programming plan for advertisers, and have a strong relationship with television's construction of 'the real' in the sense that "everyday life is at its most valid and real when it is visible on TV" (Turner, 2014, p. 68). The biggest effect of reality television formats on celebrity perception is that the characters produced by the programs are not introduced as flawless, wonderful, and larger than life as in earlier celebrity systems. These formats offer the audience a promise to witness everyday life, and what they see looks like the daily behavior of their roommates or family members. Of course, it is important to accept that even 'reality' or, as it is increasingly called, 'unscripted' television involves a high level of performance; we cannot know how, for example, Kim Kardashian acts when the cameras are not around. However, this does not diminish the attractiveness of reality TV programs. The idea of watching 'real-life' rather than a fictional role draws the audience into the program and satisfies voyeuristic desires.

Considering the impact of reality television on celebrity culture, it made it possible for the ordinary people to become famous and also shook the hierarchy created by the Hollywood stardom system. While ordinariness is considered to be a damaging factor for the image of Hollywood stars, it has the opposite effect on television, especially for reality television celebrities. In order for the viewer to adopt the characters and identify themselves, the elimination of extraordinariness and glamour was very effective (Cashmore, 2006, p. 189; Gamson, 2011, p. 1065). Frances Bonner (2003) argues that there are some limitations to ordinariness of television personalities. According to her, such people have a certain limit of ordinariness, and these limits feed the hierarchical structure. According to this theory, which argues that there should be a hierarchy even among the ordinary people selected for

television celebrity, these reality television participants are still exceptional in certain ways: “television seeks those who can ‘project a personality on television’ and therefore some ‘are more usefully ordinary than others’” (Bonner, 2003, p. 53, as cited in Turner, 2014, p. 89). Couldry argues that the real hierarchical distinction is between two types of people: “media people and ordinary people that are visible in the media” (Couldry in Turner, 2014, p. 89) and according to him, the most important aspect of celebrity is the transformation from ordinary to a media person.

In Turkish television, the reality television genre is dominated by Acun Ilıcalı, who can be considered as a ‘celebrity making machine’ by manufacturing ordinary faces who have the commercial potential and making them celebrities. He ensures the intimacy and familiarity with his audience by establishing his celebrity persona around the framework of ordinariness provided by the genre and medium. Similarly, Seda Sayan has benefited from the opportunities of intimacy and familiarity offered by television as a medium, and has managed to become one of the most trustworthy celebrities by shaping her character around these concepts.

## 2.9. Brands and Branding

Celebrity is a marketing tool, a commodity, and an industry that is strictly dependent on media technologies. It is therefore not a stretch to claim that a celebrity is a brand in their own right. According to Turner, “once achieved, of course, celebrity can spin-off into many related sub-industries through endorsements, merchandising and so on. Individuals can become brands in their own right, with enormous commercial potential” (Turner, 2010, p. 197). As in all other industries, the branding process primarily focuses on analyzing demands. After the demands are analyzed, a process of creating a significant public image begins and this process works to gain full reputation and potential profit (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016, p. 202). According to Marshall, in our world of endless distribution, covered by millions of cameras all around us, the ability to produce and control our image poses a risk. As we have

already mentioned in the communication of traditional celebrities independent of their managers, such representation increases the likelihood of public disclosure, and thus the possibility of scandal (Marshall, 2016, p. 509). While creating a celebrity brand for sale, public image is everything. Considering the ‘image’, one can claim that it is one of the most commonly commented subjects and dynamics of the construction of a celebrity brand. Richard Dyer, in *Stars* (1998) claims that, “Boorstin and Marcuse do not examine the content of star images. Indeed, their argument rests upon the idea that there is no content to star images, only surface differences of appearance” (Dyer & MacDonald, 1998, p. 14). In contrast, Dyer claims that the differences in appearance not only arise due to the visual medium but also from the context of their roles, the promotional factors playing role in shaping a public persona and the complexity of the ‘personality’ (Dyer, 1998). Later, in *Heavenly Bodies* (2003) Dyer highlighted this idea once more in the celebrity context, claiming that everything available about stars and celebrities contributes to the star phenomenon. A celebrity's image consists of interviews, biographies, press coverage, gossip pages, programs, tweets, their films and series, or whatever media they make professionally as well as their very ‘personal’ lives (Dyer, 2003).

The existing literature on celebrity culture adopts a broad perspective which considers the celebrity as not only an individual who is celebrated by masses, but also a concept which has strong connections with media, culture, economics, and politics. Current celebrity literature tends to see celebrities as both commodities, and industries which are in coordination with sub-industries and other industries such as entertainment, communication, and publicity industries. What emerged from the evaluation of the literature is that media and audience play a crucial part in creating and maintaining the celebrity status over time. The inextricable link between media, medium, audience and celebrity is the essence of the constructing and engaging and durable celebrity persona.

Although there is a rich and growing literature on celebrity culture, in Turkey, there is almost no study tackling the issue. Considering the power of media industry in Turkey, this thesis aims to have a leading study for further studies and analyze the functioning of celebrity system in Turkey by employing the reviewed theories and perspectives. By examining three significant celebrities in Turkish media, the study also aims to investigate how media and society works in Turkey.



## CHAPTER 3

### SULTAN OF THE MORNINGS: SEDA SAYAN AND DAYTIME TV TALK SHOWS IN TURKEY

In 2011, daytime talk show host Seda Sayan, known across Turkey as “Sultan of the mornings,” used her television platform to issue a harsh rebuke to producer Erol Köse, who had taken to Twitter to insult her:

You try to humiliate me by being uneducated and uncultured while praising your own doctoral degree. You're trying to humiliate me with my background and education. I have gained many years of experience on these television screens that you wouldn't have been able to access even if you finished 5 universities. I am a shanty child, I came from the ghetto, I came from poverty. I will die for them (for those poor people). You should die for them! You should die for all the poor living in slums! (2011).

She may not have been aware that this moment on ‘*Beyazın Seda’sı*’, recorded for the broadcast of December 14, would become a cult text—the video uploaded to YouTube has been viewed more than four million times,<sup>9</sup> with subtitle options in 7 languages, and even became a subject for kinetic typography projects—yet this speech carries many clues about her carefully built public persona, which has transformed her into a popular culture icon. Since the beginning of her career as a singer in the 1980s, Sayan has become one of the most significant media phenomena ever seen in Turkey. Her climb out of poverty to media dominance left behind many strong opponents, and the story of her success contains essential factors in the Turkish celebrity system.

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<sup>9</sup> See the video: (<https://youtu.be/cR7Es4hDOSI>)

Sayan, whose career has spanned 3 coups, 25 governments and 10 prime ministers, has used her celebrity to lead various initiatives such managing women movements, publishing magazines, administering clubs along with being a singer, actor, and a famous talk show host. This chapter aims to examine Seda Sayan as a celebrity brand and how she constructed and narrated her public persona throughout the years. To achieve this aim, her early career, her biography, her talk-show host persona and the contents of her shows will be analyzed. Since in constructing her trustworthy celebrity persona depends highly on her television appearance, the place of television and TV talk shows in her celebrity status will be examined as well. The central claim of the chapter is that Sayan constructed her celebrity persona around the aura of familiarity, the illusion of intimacy, and the public trust with the help of the format of her show and television as a medium. By commodifying her own and others' biographies and by using the discourses of pain and suffering, she created a persona which most of her audiences consider as a friend or even a family member. As David Marshall states in his *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (1997) that, "television works at constructing the familiar, and the talk-show host is an example par excellence of the form of familiarized subjectivity that constructs for its audience" (Marshall, 1997, p. 132). Sayan, similarly, works on constructing her celebrity persona around the familiar in order to maintain her status.

### 3.1. Early Career

Turkish daytime talk show queen, Seda Sayan (born Aysel Gürsaçer), was born on December 30, 1962 in the outskirts of Istanbul. Born in a poor environment where a family of six people lived in a single room, she had a tough childhood which she mentions a lot. Aysel, who was a victim of domestic violence, just like her mother, by her alcoholic father, distressed by her suffering, escaped from home at the age of 15 and started to work at a very young age. The stage life of Aysel, who had to earn money by selling illegal products such as make-up and irons that were banned in the

country at that time because her father was not working, started too early due to lack of money (“Çocukken kaçak mal sattım”, 2009). Her first stage experience was in 1974, after one of her teachers asked her to sing in his son’s circumcision ceremony. After this first experience, she started to perform in weddings, birthdays, circumcision ceremonies and some cheap bars at nights. Since it was not legal for the ones under 18 to be on stages in Turkey, in order to perform in bigger venues which apply this rule, she had her date of birth changed via a court decision in 1978 to 4 January 1959 (“Seda yaşını büyütmüş”, 2004). Working at night to support her family affected her school negatively and Aysel was expelled from school due to absenteeism in the same year. While she was performing in night clubs, manager Bahattin Eserdemir, who was a big name at that time in spotting talent, discovered her and with his recommendations, she started to perform on famous night clubs under the name of Aysel Gül. Her debut album titled *Yandı Pilav Tavası* [Rice Pan Burned] was released in 1979 when she was 18 but the album did not meet the expected success. Aysel started to perform in Stardust, which was the most famous night club of Turkey around that time, owned by Turgut Akyüz and they changed her stage name to Seda Sayın. Although Turgut Akyüz was married, tabloids were full of him being in a relationship with young and beautiful Aysel. In fact, she was shown to cause Turgut Akyüz to be shot and killed in his own night club, even after evidence proved otherwise. This event led her to demonstrate her tabloid value, which will be examine later, at the very beginning of her career.

In 1987, her first album with her new stage name, *Seda Sayan ile Baş Başa* [Alone with Seda Sayan] was released and the celebrity persona of Sayan as we know today has gradually started to take shape since she changed her music style from Turkish folk music to tavern music and arabesque.<sup>10</sup> Arabesque, which has found its place not only in music but also in cinema and performing arts, is seen by most authors as a

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<sup>10</sup> Arabesque, specific to Turkey, is a kind of oriental folk music means ‘Arabic style Turkish music’. Its lyrics are usually emotional, and concern hopeless love, everyday troubles, hopelessness, and failure.

sub-culture. It is expressed as an alienated, overly dramatic and negative culture created by immigration from the village to the city in the first years of the Republic of Turkey. With the migration from the village to the city, the lifestyle of the families has changed; The primary type of rules and relationships in the village have been replaced by secondary type relationships in the city, arranged by written rules. People looking for a solution to this alienation have developed a unique system of values and a brand new culture (Kongar, 2010, p. 579; Ok, 2004, p. 13). The ban on broadcasting arabesque, in 1930s on radio and then in 1960s on television, emerged as a result of the breakout effort of Republic of Turkey from the cultural regimes of Ottoman Empire. In this period, the artists who adopted arabesque both in the cinema and the music industry, were considered as the representatives of not only a genre but also a sub-culture (Özbek, 2013, p. 143). Sayan, by changing her music style to arabesque, signaled that she was a part of this culture even though this change prevented her from appearing on television screens with her music in the first years of her career.

Although she has a career in both singing and acting, the medium of television is really the core of Seda Sayan's stardom. Since her persona is almost synonymous with Turkish daytime talk shows and her persona impacts heavily on the content and the format of her shows, understanding TV and its genres in Turkey is an important starting point from which to uncover the nature of her celebrity persona.

### 3.2. Seda Sayan as a Television Personality

Although the digital revolution has challenged the position of television and enacted major changes in viewing habits with new platforms and multiple screens, Turkey still occupies the top ranking in the world for television consumption, with an average of 3 hours and 34 minutes per day. Considering that 98% of the television audience accesses content via traditional TV sets in their home, this supports an

assumption that in Turkey, the core of celebrity culture and promotion is still television (RTUK 2018, p. 14).

Having started national broadcasting around 30 years later than the rest of the world, Turkish television was synonymous with Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) from its first telecast in 1968 until 1990, when a legal loophole allowed the first commercial broadcast channel to start broadcasting through Germany. Magic Box Star 1, established as an alternative to TRT's formal and educational broadcasting approach, aimed to entertain instead of informing, an approach that has fundamentally changed both the media and the celebrity system in Turkey (Akkor 2012; Cankaya 1997; Yıldırım & Esen 2018). While trying to attract viewers, Magic Box Star 1 used celebrities that had been banned from TRT screens in new programs—and one of these names was Seda Sayan. While arabesque genre and the use of slang were strictly prohibited on TRT, Sayan's upbringing in the ghettos of Istanbul, her casual slang, and her arabesque songs became a major promotional tool for alternative broadcasters in the early years of her career.

The dismantling of the TRT monopoly in 1990 paved the way for a wave of experimentation with new formats: talk shows, docu-dramas, gossip and reality shows were introduced and gained popularity (Binark & Kılıçbay 2004, p. 74). These developments eventually led to the creation of television personalities in Turkey.

As Dyer puts it, the 'star vehicle' determines not only the construction and maintenance of the star, but also how this established persona will work in the media context (Dyer 1998, p. 67). In Turkey, the music industry is a fairly common gateway to the screen, and quite a few celebrities of the same generation emerged first as singers and then transitioned to acting, including Hülya Avşar, Gülben Ergen, Yeşim Salkım, and Harika Avcı. And these transitions across media were not definitive; Sayan continued her music career and performing in films while she was banned

from television. She used different media as star vehicles at different points of her career and finally by using television, gave a completely different direction to the persona she started to create. According to Bennet (2010), the star vehicle can also be adapted to the television industry as a means to create or cement a celebrity personality (Bennett 2010, p. 104). As an ‘intimate’ medium due to its position in our homes and its simultaneity of transmission and reception, television has transformed the meaning of celebrity from being elites living under near-magical conditions to more reasonable and ‘ordinary’ personalities (Marshall 1997; Auslander 1999; Cashmore 2006; Bennett 2011). Sayan, in constructing her celebrity brand as one of the most trusted and intimate television personalities, has used these medium and genre specificities in her favor.

Seda Sayan’s broadcasting career started in 1992, when she persuaded producer Osman Yağmurdereli, one of the most famous producers at that time, to co-host a talk show. The *Seda - Osman Show* (1992-1993) was launched that year on Kanal 6, which is established by Ahmet Özal, a politician and the son of former Turkish President and Prime Minister Turgut Özal. Considering the genre history, the first TV talk shows in Turkey, aired on TRT, were generally midnight programs in which celebrity guests talk about themselves. By the 90s, with the increasing number of private channels, talks shows began to increase and diversify in terms of content (Tanrıöver 2003). Sayan’s first experience as a talk show host, *Seda - Osman Show* was not completely free from the TRT impact of that period. Considering Sayan’s television personality today, it is possible to say that there is a notable difference between her first show and her shows as the sultan of the mornings. Her proper use of Turkish, very polite and formal attitude is quite different from the talk show host persona that makes her exceptional. TRT had an impact on daytime television shows and their contents, as well. It is seen that in the first examples of daytime programs that started with TRT in the first years of television broadcasting, there were generally educational studio programs for informing housewives during the daytime.

With the increasing number of private channels, daytime television shows started to increase in quantity, as well. Sayan entered the daytime zone in 1994 with a show named *Kadın Gözüyle* [*Through the Eyes of Woman*] (1994-1995) on commercial channel TGRT, which was established through public donations with the promise of remaining loyal to ‘Islamic values’. With this mission statement, *Kadın Gözüyle* helped Sayan direct her persona away from the Yeşilçam star to a more domestic figure. What made her exceptional in the context of Turkish television was her successful narration and commodification of her autobiography, combining her status as a multimedia personality with the intertextual construction of intimacy and familiarity.

While being a daytime talk show host, she continued her music and acting career without slowing down, granting her exceptional media visibility that also supported her public image. In 1996, after releasing her second hit album *Ah Geceler* [*Oh, Nights*] in arabesque genre, she started performing in a TV series inspired by her biography called *Geceler* [*Nights*] in which she portrayed the daughter of a poor family with five children, a character named Seda. The character, like the performer, is a famous artist despite being from the slums, and in the show she battles her brother's drug problems which was also based on her real life experiences. Portraying herself on television helped Sayan to blur the boundaries between private and public, and earned her the nickname ‘Kadırgalı’ (from Kadırga) which indicates the poor neighborhood in Istanbul where Sayan was born and grew up.

The series *Geceler* was one of the turning points in Sayan’s career since her biography became a public interest around that time. Seda Sayan, whose fame and fan base expanded every day, was having one of the most successful times of her career in every aspect. In 1996, a few months after she received the Best Arabesque Female Artist award from the most prestigious award ceremony of Turkey at that time, Kral TV Music Awards, her sudden break up with Mahsun Kırmızıgül, who

was the owner of Prestige Music Family which Sayan works in, created a great sensation that they even became a subject of prime-time newscasts which is the most watched broadcasting of Turkey (RTUK, 2018). This break up can be considered as one of the milestones of Sayan's constructing her celebrity persona and contributed to her tabloid value to a great extent. Although the couple declared that they will remain business partners, after he learned that Sayan has a new relationship, Kırmızıgül withdrew 4 songs from Seda Sayan's new album. On September 26, 1997, while Mahsun Kırmızıgül was talking about their relationship as a guest of one of the most controversial news anchors, Reha Muhtar in prime-time newscast, Sayan joined the show over the phone and accused her ex-love of not being a man, playing with her fate and faking: "He took back four songs that he gave me, played with my fate and still plays. He says that he is a man: If you were a man, you would say that I liked this woman and get jealous". When Kırmızıgül replied her "I do not love you and don't feel sorry", Sayan hung on the phone by saying: "I have made the biggest mistake by loving you" ("Canlı yayında ağız dalaşı!", 1997). The couple, who attracted great attention with their sensational break-up, has also influenced the news format of the tabloid press at that time. Tabloid journalism, which has progressed in the axis of sports and entertainment until that day, has turned to the more gossip and scandal oriented axis with this sensational breakup. Their relationship, which was the subject of newspapers almost every day, was even compared with *Dallas* (1978 - 1991), which was broadcasted in Turkey from 1980 to 1998 and has attracted great interest as the first American-made series aired on Turkish television. The series was so effective that it has influenced daily life to an extent which it has contributed to everyday language and idioms that are part of social culture. Phrases like "buy yourself a whiskey" and "feel at home" started to be used in Turkish society after the series. The phrases like 'Dallasvari', meaning 'Dallas like' for the situations



involving revenge and intrigue began to be used and people involving in these situations were being accused of becoming ‘J.R.’ or ‘Sue Ellen’.<sup>11</sup>

Sayan and Kırmızıgül’s fight in live broadcasting and the never-ending tension between them became the new favorite of the media and this visibility made very positive contributions to Seda Sayan's career. Kanal D started to broadcast the mini-series *Geceler* [Nights] again and Star TV starting to broadcast her old concert recordings. She received, once again in 1998, the Best Arabesque Female Artist Award at the Kral TV Music Awards. During this period, her media visibility has increased so much that the news about her indicated that she was everywhere (“Seda, her yerde”, 1998). Her old shows and concerts were screening again on different channels, she was managing to attract attention in every show she joined and added more glam to her reputation. Sayan, who was having one of the brightest periods of her career after her break up with Kırmızıgül, started to perform in a new minis-eries titled *Sırtımdan Vuruldu* [Shot in the Back] in 1997. Sayan, moving from a small, fragile and beautiful singer to a strong, dominant and independent personality, needed to have a break in album records because of a contract dilemma she had with Kırmızıgül, which led her to the television screens, again. She started to host a daytime talk show titled *Sabahın Seda’sı* [Seda of the Morning] in TGRT in 1998, and her break from music industry for a while has provided her the opportunity to construct her persona as a talk show host.

### 3.3. Seda Sayan as a Talk Show Host

As Bennett, in his *Television Personalities, Stardom and Small Screen* (2011) states that, the study of television personalities has largely been evolved around two tendencies. The first, which is inspired by the tradition of Frankfurt School, is a

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<sup>11</sup> Who shot J-R? question was the biggest mystery of the 80s. See the article: ( <https://www.cnnturk.com/2012/yasam/diger/11/26/jri.kim.vurdu.sorusu.80.lerin.en.buyuk.esrariydi/686153.0/index.html>)

rather negative approach and considers television personalities as inferior to cinema's star system, while the second body of work focuses more on differentiating television personalities from one another, instead of treating all television celebrities as an undifferentiated conglomerate. (Bennett, 2011, pp. 2-3). Both Bennett (2011) and Turner (2014) claim that the previous academic studies of television personalities have tended to distinguish between film and television's system of celebrity, and the particular dynamics of television in creating its celebrities were underscored. While in the formational theories on media and culture, television has often been depicted as a cheap and inferior medium compared to film, the ordinariness and 'down-home' image of television personalities also perceived negatively. In negative understandings of the term, which is common in the perspective of scholars of Frankfurt School such as Theodor Adorno (2001), 'mass and negative approaches to the democratization of celebrity, the nature of mass media is recognized as manipulative, alienating, and inauthentic (Bennett, 2011, p. 27). On the other hand, there are scholars such as Bennett himself and Su Holmes (2005), who perceive television personality's fame "involves both labor and achievement, often taking the form of promotion, publicity, and performance" (Bennett, 2011, p. 18). In this more positive perspective, instead of seeing television celebrities as famous by appearing just as they are, it considers the ways of creating this aura of authenticity and intimacy as a kind of performance. In other words, television personalities perform a public version of their private selves by creating an illusion of intimacy. According to Bennett, the television personality as a category consists of performance, intimacy, ordinariness, and authenticity (Bennett, 2011, p. 18).

As David Marshall states that, one of the most dominant features of the "televisual universe is the host, the familiar face and personality who guides the viewer through the discontinuities of any television program" (Marshall, 1997, p. 122). The tactics used by the host to make the audience feel included distinguish the televisual universe guided by a persona from the cinematic universe. The mode of address is

direct: the host's continuous address by looking directly into the camera creates the illusion of familiarity (Marshall, 1997, p. 132). The television talk show, by giving the host the central role of the show, is one of the most suitable places to create this familiarity. As Timberg and Erler (2002) state that, leading talk show hosts around the world such as Oprah Winfrey, have generally achieved a great deal of control over their shows and their production. From a production point of view, the host often acts as a managing editor. From a marketing point of view, the host is the label, the signature that sells the product. In other words, "the host is the one irreplaceable part" (Timberg & Erler, 2002, p. 4). Wilson also believes that, "what distinguishes one show from another then is the persona of the host whose images are tightly controlled by publicists"(Wilson, 2003, p. 158).

As a genre with confessional values, the TV talk show has blurred the private and public spheres by commodifying peoples' experiences, biographies, pains and struggles (Wilson, 2016). Savaş, by using her past and interacting with other people on her talk shows and TV series, aims to close the gap between her celebrity persona and the person behind it. The difference that separated her from her contemporary daytime rivals was (and remains) her intertextually constructed biography; other successful daytime hosts Ayşe Özgün, Yasemin Bozkurt, Ayşenur Yazıcı and Serap Ezgü all started their TV careers either in journalism or as a TRT announcer—and these rivals could speak multiple languages and completed higher education abroad. Meanwhile, Seda Savaş's formal education ended at age 15 when she left the slums, and her language was peppered with slang. Considering the target audience of the daytime talk shows – women over 45 with minimal education – her modest beginnings have made her more relatable (RTUK, 2018, p. 61).

She earned the top spot as Turkey's most trusted celebrity according to the Celebrity Trust Index, calculated with MediaCat magazine's large-scale surveys of television audiences. Responding to this status, Savaş attributes this public trust to audience's

belief that, ‘Seda never lies; because she is “one of us”. She grew up poor in the slum, she does not allow us to be deceived’ (‘Nuriye Akman’la Akılda Kalan’ 2011). Here, and in many other interviews and speeches, her emphasis on sociocultural solidarity has produced her exceptional place amongst her wealthier and better-educated rivals. Although Sayan has made a great fortune in her 30-year career, she also maintains the perception of being ‘one of us’. Richard Dyer’s paradox of stars being both ordinary and extraordinary can be explained, according to Wilson, by the audience perception of celebrities as people with extraordinary wealth but remain untransformed by this (Dyer 1998; Wilson 2003). Sayan herself claims ‘I have not changed, I am always the same. Since I came to this point by working in front of people’s eyes, I did not experience that class transition very sharply. Nothing can ever change me’ (‘Nuriye Akman’la Akılda Kalan’ 2011). While her rivals’ television image conformed to upper-middle class taste codes, by mentioning her tough childhood and her claim to be untransformed by her wealth, Sayan achieved a higher and more durable celebrity. Shaping her career within the framework of sincerity and familiarity, Sayan has taken advantage of many opportunities to strengthen the perception of intimacy by living her private life on television screens. Framing herself like a family member, a big sister for her audiences, she sought to cultivate this reputation with major events, like hosting 2000 people at the Bostancı Show Center with a wedding theme in 2007 when she married Onur Şan. This high level of public visibility supports the continuity of her persona. Comparing media coverage of Sayan and her rivals, for others the news mainly covered the programs that they hosted, while news about Sayan contained more tabloid value: scandal, marriage, divorce, polemics, with coverage of the show (along with other concerts and events) in addition to this more personal baseline content.

In addition to living her life in front of the cameras and in tabloid pages, Sayan has supported her persona through production techniques in her programs. Her daytime talk show titled *Sabah Sabah Seda Sayan* [Seda of the Morning] (2002-2005)

differed markedly from the morning shows up to that time. Housewives were attending the show and bringing along homemade food and engaging in conversation with the host. In Turkish tradition, housewives meet once a week in the home of one of the group members, bringing food they made, to share gossip over tea. The show tried to replicate this tradition, called ‘gün’ (day), to further the intimate relationship between host and audience. All the programs she hosted after *Sabahın Sedası* have also adopted this approach, which have always managed to be among the top 20 in the ratings. Following Sayan’s example, other TV channels began to imitate these strategies to boost a sense of intimacy with their studio audiences and home viewers. *Sabahların Sultanı Seda Sayan* [Sultan of the Mornings] (2006–2009) achieved significant success and made her professional reputation in large part by building the very format of a daytime talk show around her deliberately constructed persona. The show starts with a short title sequence featuring Sayan and the day’s celebrity guests, then transitioning to shots of the studio setting, the live orchestra, and the studio audience waiting for her with excitement while one of Sayan’s songs started to play. Paul McDonald (2013) states that, the star entrance has a significant place in the establishment of stardom since it announces the star of the show and the central character (McDonald 2013). Sayan’s entrance to the studio with spotlights pointing her and the applause of the audience along with the preparations for her entrance signals her stardom in the show. After this point, Sayan’s every move is calculated to reduce the distance and build the intimacy between her and her live audience: she dances with them while singing, she hugs them and makes other friendly physical contact. Bennett (2011) and Marshall (1997) underscore the importance of direct address in the talk show format to serve as a device of intimacy, and Sayan’s shifting use of direct address, which complements television’s simultaneity of transmission and reception, lends an air of spontaneity to this performance and introduces her into familiar domestic relationships while amplifying the spectacle of her stardom (Bennett 2011; Marshall 1997).

Her status as “most trusted celebrity” has frequently come up on her shows, and it has made Sayan a desirable face for advertising campaigns in Turkey. Unsurprisingly, this ranking has helped her promote her own show, and on February 2, 2009 she thanked her audience for this honor: ‘You ranked me higher in February in a competition that everyone from the world of art, business and politics was involved. You said, “We trust Seda Sayan’s words most, we believe her.” Thank you, thank you very much.’ (Bakan 2019, p. 478). But the Celebrity Trust Index was designed primarily to guide communication needs of the brands, helping them recruit the most reliable celebrities for their own advertisement, so it’s no coincidence that Seda Sayan became the campaign face of Pepsi in 2009. For the campaign, Sayan recorded different voice memos that were loaded onto participating phones via SMS for 24 hours. To participate, consumers had to buy a ‘family size’ bottle of Pepsi and send the code under the bottle top. The campaign tripled the sales of ‘family size’ Pepsi, significantly growing its market share and making it one of the brand’s most profitable partnerships (‘Pepsi’nin yeni yüzü’ 2009). Immediately after this successful campaign, she signed with Lay’s, which is also a subsidiary of PepsiCo, for an annual campaign for 2 million dollars (‘Seda Sayan Victoria’ 2009).

Sayan has often acknowledged the trust she has received and expressed pride in this trust, promising her fans to work to remain worthy of it. In this spirit, Seda Sayan became a tax record holder in the same year. In Turkey, tax evasion is a common situation among Turkish celebrities and is frequently reported in the news; in emphasizing her tax payments, Sayan expresses a sense of patriotism as well as honesty and reliability. Addressing this issue in her program, she announced: ‘I am a tax record holder now. You brought me here; I work, I earn and give you again. As long as God gives me health, I will work for you’ (Bakan 2019, p. 479). With these words, Seda Sayan pushed beyond the solidarity of being ‘one of us’ to create a ‘working for us’ persona; by publicizing her tax records, she conveys the message that her continued celebrity will enrich all of Turkey.

Sayan, who tied this trust to her closeness, did not hesitate to emphasize this point in her iconic speech on Beyaz TV. She opened her show “*Beyaz’ın Sultani*” in Beyaz Tv the day after she attacked Erol Köse in Cenk Koray Television Awards ceremony with this statement: “You know me with my sincerity, frankness. Let me tell you about what happened last night in detail” (Sayan, 2011). Sayan, who took the trust of society as personal capital, also brought her credibility and sincerity to the fore in this event. As it is illustrated at the beginning of the chapter, her speech (Sayan, 2011), which lasted one and a half hour, has become a true popular culture icon with the statements Sayan made reflecting her personality that she constructed up to that point such as:

Nobody can talk to me like this. I am a woman who works like a dog in this country and tries to live like a queen, trying to keep her children and her family alive at the best level. I am a woman who pays her taxes and helps people. What did you do for this country?

She underlines her personality as a hard-working woman and her ‘working for the country’ image with this statement and emphasizes her strong, ‘Kadırgalı’ persona, by saying: “Erol Köse, I’m in front of you; I’m in front of you as a woman. No man could stand in front of you, here I’m standing. Come, let’s talk to me!” (Sayan, 2011). Throughout the episode, Sayan emphasizes her dominant and strong character by challenging a strong media personality who exposes and slanders people as a means of revenge, and underlines her sincerity by ‘performing’ a real event. Language of Sayan throughout the speech, the emphasized and repeated ‘I’ pronoun are the indicators of her emotional stage and anger which strengthen the illusion of intimacy. The main reason why she constantly needs to emphasize what she is doing for public and their trust is the fact that the key for her brand is trust and sincerity. After the show, the speech, as it was mentioned in the introduction, became a popular culture icon. The video contained the speech uploaded to YouTube with 7 different language choices, people began to memorize and imitate the speech. Many different contents were produced on it and became a phenomenon in a very short time. At the same time, Sayan’s strong, dominant and masculine character started to be emphasized again in the news (“Çantana sağlık Kadırgalı, 2011).

Sayan, who played a leading role in many defamation and threat cases throughout her career and appeared in courts for several different reasons,<sup>12</sup> has been in several ‘unfortunate’ situations for a television host. Although some of the scandals her name involved were related to her family, such as her brothers’ gun fight or her younger brother’s drug addiction, in some cases she brought the controversy on herself. The last of these controversies was in 2017 when Sayan had Sefer Çalınak, who killed his two wives, as a guest to her *Seda Sayan Show* on Show TV. RTÜK fined Show TV 800 thousand liras for this situation and a social media campaign was started for the show to be taken down. In the face of increasing reactions, the sponsor company canceled the agreement with the show. Sayan defended herself by mentioning her past where she and her mother were domestic violence victims and highlighting the fact that she is the tax pay record holder.<sup>13</sup> In such a context, she has the agency to court controversy as well as the ability to adjust herself to scandals that are sprung on her by others in her orbit. The trust on which she rested her back, not only helped her success but also quickened the process of such scandals to be forgotten by public. After the Sefer Çalınak incident, Sayan remained as a television host and continued to be one of the most trusted screen faces despite all this.

In recent years, Sayan has taken an indefinite hiatus from her talk show career due to the heavy penalties imposed on daytime shows by state media regulator RTUK. Yet Sayan has a rich history on Turkish screens, with 16 movies and series and as host for 14 talk show programs and released 31 albums throughout her career, and she cannot be erased completely. Even without her own show, she is a jury member at *The Voice Turkey* and host of cooking competition show *Yemekteyiz* (Turkish version of Come Dine with Me).

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<sup>12</sup> See some of the news about the scandals in which Sayan was included: (<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/o-gun-neler-yasandi-24785797>) (<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/magazin/seda-sayana-544-bin-liralik-boynuz-cezasi-28158021>) (<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/seda-sayanin-2-yil-hapsi-istenyor-15833409>)

<sup>13</sup> See Sayan’s defense on the topic: (<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/magazin/bana-tesekkuredeceklerine-27133866>)



Sayan's control over her celebrity persona shows the role of agency and publicity in the process of creating a successful celebrity persona. From the beginning of her career, she has shaped her persona around intimacy, reliability, familiarity and ordinariness, applying it across platforms and intertextually to achieve continuity. The power that makes her Turkey's most trusted celebrity strongly depends on the perception that she is 'one of us'—a perception currently enforced by her highly publicized assistance for more than 300 families under quarantine due to COVID-19 ('Ünlü isimlerden dara düşen ailelere destek' 2020). Sayan is a postmodern figure who manages her celebrity in different media and enhances it with the power of television. For many, she is like a member of the family. This extraordinary intimacy is the result of a well-managed persona and cultural product initially built by writing and narrating her biography on screens.

## CHAPTER 4

### COMEDIC SUPREMACY OF CEM YILMAZ IN TURKEY

Since the beginning of his career as a caricaturist in the 1990s, Cem Yılmaz has been recognized as the biggest comedy star in Turkey, expanding his brand and establishing some ‘signature’ themes across several media platforms. While these themes have evolved over time, his overall persona has remained recognizably true to its original framework. Since celebrity is an industry in which “everybody has to be sold” (Gamson, 2007, p. 64), the self-branding of Cem Yılmaz as a multimedia comedy star reveals a lot about Turkish celebrity culture. The evolution in Yılmaz’s stand-up comedy demonstrates the concurrent development of his identity as a comic performer, a celebrity persona, and a distinctive brand.

Yılmaz’s celebrity persona is reinforced by the public and the Turkish popular press, but by conveying authenticity through autobiographical narratives, especially but not exclusively in his stand-up comedy, Yılmaz has promoted a sense of intimacy as well as admiration among his audience. By putting cross-cultural references in the center of comedy in all media he performs, he uses the ‘familiarity’ created by intertextuality and strengthens his overall comedic persona. Such responses to Yılmaz’s work have attracted more followers on social media than the current president of Turkey. These signature features of his stand-up have continued to appear in other works, including popular films that he has written and directed,

giving him a multimedia reach that has positioned the Yılmaz persona at the epicenter of comedy in Turkey.

This chapter aims to explore Cem Yılmaz's celebrity persona, his signature themes, his meaning and value in Turkish media. It examines the ways he develops a sort of flexible celebrity across different media. To explore how Yılmaz is positioned in Turkish comedy, his signature practices through analysis of his major shows and films will be examined, placing a particular emphasis on the way he constructed his celebrity persona around the authenticity, intimacy, and intertextuality.

Cem Yılmaz has a place in the Turkish entertainment industry that gives a chance to read broader categories within the industry and the history of media. By exploring his major works, identity construction practices over time as well as across key media forms and texts, this chapter offers a brief introduction to the operations of celebrity culture and contemporary media industries in Turkey.

#### 4.1. Early Career and Turkish Comedy

Considering the Turkish comedy, especially in national comedy cinema, there has been significant impact of the traditions '*orta oyunu*' [light comedy] and '*meddah*', which will be defined in detail later in this chapter, on both the narrative structure, comedic style and the format of the films. In both traditions, a storyteller is responsible for making the audience laugh with the jokes and short funny stories they tell. Since there is no script and limitation in the content, the plays could be about anything and anyone.

With the influence of these traditions and the actors with theatre background, the first comedy films of Turkey were unscripted and based solely on farce. From 1920 to end of 1950s, the Turkish comedy cinema was dominated by films that rely on popular actors, far more than on the cinematic narration (Şahinalp, 2010, p. 79). The socio-

economic and cultural structure that changed with the onset of migration from the village to the city in the 60s led to the emergence of lower-class characters in comedy cinema such as *Cilalı İbo* [Ibo the Polished] (Feridun Karakaya), *Adanalı Tayfur* [Tayfur from Adana] (Öztürk Serengil), and *Turist Ömer* [Tourist Omer] (Sadri Alışık), all of which were representing the characters that migrated from the village to the city and were culturally alienated. Although they still depend on village traditions and spirit, their efforts to live according to city rules were used as a comedy element.

The 70's in Turkey was when character comedies evolved into social and political humor. Family comedies and satires started to become visible in popular films. Under the direction of Ertem Eğilmez, films such as *Tatlı Dillim* [My Honey-Tongue] (1972) and *Canım Kardeşim* [Dear Brother] (1973), in which warm relations within the family were told, were created. Thanks to his extras in the *Tatlı Dillim*, Kemal Sunal was discovered by Ertem Eğilmez in the 70s and quickly became the comedy star in Turkey with the character of Şaban. Later, many films, based on the character of Şaban, such as *Şaban Oğlu Şaban* (1977) and *Dokunmayın Şabanıma* [Don't Touch my Shaban] (1979) were shot. Sunal played the leading roles in many films such as *Salako* (1974), *Süt Kardeşler* [Milk Siblings](1976), *Hanzo* [Churl] (1974), in which he played different characters. Kemal Sunal, who has marked the comedy cinema for a while, has a significant place for the Turkish comedy since he was accepted by the majority of the public and is still considered as one of the most important comedy stars of Turkey. In the 70s, many theater actors such as İlyas Salman, Zeki Alasya, Metin Akpınar, Ali Poyrazoğlu, Nejat Uygur, Müjdat Gezen contributed to the comedy cinema along with Kemal Sunal. In particular, the character *Sefil Bilo* [Bilo the Miserable] portrayed by İlyas Salman created an alternative comedy character to Kemal Sunal's Şaban. The 70s can be considered as a period in which Turkish comedy cinema has been enriched and diversified in terms of both the actors and movie subjects (Şahinalp, 2010, p. 82).

In the 80s, when modernization in the economic, social and political fields was targeted by Turgut Özal and the country went through many radical changes, while some of the society tried to integrate into more modern and western environment, another part evolved into a group that had difficulty in breaking from its roots and habits. Kemal Sunal started making more dark humor films such as *Namuslu* [Honest](1984), *Milyarder* [Billionaire](1986), and *Arabesk* [Arabesque](1988) which dealt with the changing Turkey during Özal era and the distortion that this change made to individuals (Şahinalp, 2010, p 82).

By the time Cem Yılmaz became visible in the comedy scene in the 90s, the cultural hierarchy in Turkey was being challenged by political, social, and economic changes of the 80s. This process of change and development in the country created unique resources for comedians. In this environment, Cem Yılmaz, who has a sharp humorous intelligence, and his main starting point, *LeMan* magazine, were becoming an increasingly effective source of humor since the young people, who consumed humor, were bored with Zeki Alasya/Metin Akpınar films, Cabarets, and Kemal Sunal comedies. Although humor magazines have frequently been a valuable resource for comedy in Turkish culture since the Ottoman era (Demirkol 2016), *GırGır*, launched by Oğuz Aral in 1972, has changed the humor magazine culture in Turkey by serving as a school of humor, and the artist/caricaturist and author team of many humor magazines that are published today are trained from *GırGır*. In 1985, *Limon* magazine was founded within the body of Güneş newspaper by humorists such as Şükrü Yavuz, Mehmet Çağçağ, Tuncay Akgün, Suat Gönülay, Can Barslan and Gani Müjde, who left *GırGır*, the best selling humor magazine of the period.

*LeMan* is one of Turkey's oldest and most established comic magazines which was founded by the same team after *Limon* magazine in 1985. While *GırGır* and all other humor magazines (including *Limon*) belong to large media organizations, *LeMan*

was founded as an independent magazine with the partnership of Mehmet Çağçağ and Tuncay Akgün. With this aspect, it became a model for humor magazines (such as *Penguen*, *Uykusuz*, and *CafCaf*) that came after them (Hoşafçı, 2006). *LeMan*, which has become a publishing group that has expanded publishing many other humor and non-humor magazines, organized the lower floors of its office Beyoğlu as "Leman Cultural Center" shortly after its establishment. This place, decorated to reflect the cartoon world of *LeMan*, and where Cem Yılmaz made his first performance as a stand-up comedian, hosts a small shop and exhibition areas where *LeMan* magazine products are sold and operates as a café-bar where concerts, panels and stand-up shows can be held. Leman Cultural Center has opened branches in many other cities such as Ankara, İzmir, and Antalya in recent years.

By rejuvenating its staff, *LeMan* aimed to appeal to young people, who were the target audience of humor magazines. Considering the comedic style of *LeMan*, the effect of the magazine on Turkish humor can be observed perhaps the best in street jargon. *LeMan* added the street jargon of its neighborhood, Beyoğlu/Taksim region in Istanbul, to the content of the magazine from the beginning of its establishment and made it spread among its readers. Everywhere the magazine was sold, words, jokes, and catchphrases arising from this region began to be spoken, jokes arising there and idioms embedded in the language everywhere in the early 90s. After a while, this process turned into a humor movement and became widespread among young people (Hoşafçı, 2006, p. 106).

Following his career as a caricaturist in *LeMan* magazine in which he started to create his unique-for-Turkey cross-cultural comedic style, Yılmaz started his stand-up career in *LeMan*'s cultural center during the years he was working for the magazine. By the time he was becoming visible on stand-up stages, *LeMan* was undergoing a great change. In the 90s, political humor shifted to a more radical line, rather than the general political and economic troubles of the previous period, which

led to sharp distinctions in humor magazines and readers. *LeMan*'s use of a more radical content during this period led to a rupture that could be considered as a turning point for Turkish humor magazines. This caused a group of illustrators leaving *LeMan* to release *L-Manyak* [L-Maniac], which aimed to stay away from controversial issues and political events as much as possible, within the same publishing house (Hoşafçı, 2006, pp. 106-110).

*L-Manyak* began to be published in January 1996 and launched many popular comics that still have impact on Turkish humor such as *Kötü Kedi Şerafettin* [Bad Cat] which was later adapted to the cinema, *Robinson Crusoe ve Cuma* [Robinson Crusoe and Friday], and *Cihangir'de Bir Ev* [A Home in Cihangir]. Although it had many breaks in its staff throughout its publishing life, *L-Manyak* managed to outlast all the monthly humor magazines it influenced. It was a work that has put aside *LeMan*'s political stance and aims instead to make the reader laugh and have a good time without openly targeting hot button issues. *L-Manyak*, which uses many successful observations to reveal humor in people and events, has had a great impact on Cem Yılmaz's humor. The rise of *L-Manyak* in the period when he started to announce himself more as a comedian on the stage, was effective in the shift of Yılmaz's comedy line to a 'safer' and daily life oriented point. After leaving *LeMan* as a caricaturist, he focused more on stages and his stand-up performances with his ready-made audience from the magazine. Yılmaz has always been aware that he owes *LeMan* a significant debt, such that years after the end of his cartoon career, he protected the magazine in 2002 when a *LeMan* illustrator, Cem Barlas accused him of being a 'court fool'. He replied to Barlas, who said that he was promising as a comedian at first but changed over time: "*LeMan* is where I started my career. If I respond, it would be rude" and preferred to remain silent ('Leman doğduğum yer' 2002).

#### 4.2. Stand-up Career

As a sub-genre of comedy, stand-up is a show in which the performer stands on the stage and speaks directly to the audience. The performers of this sub-genre are called ‘stand-up comedians’ and with the main aim of making the audience laugh, they tell funny stories, one-liners or short jokes which are often called ‘bits’ (Schwarz, 2010, p. 17). As Ian Brodie (2008) states, the jokes in the stand-up shows are usually self-contained, discrete units that can be understood outside the performance contexts. This allows them to be consumed outside the performance and makes the performer more visible. The way that the performers tell the jokes is not a series of discrete units but a routine material that can run from two minutes to three hours (Brodie, 2008, pp. 162-163).

Considering the history of stand-up comedy, it has its roots in *vaudeville* in Europe and America, which is a performance based on a series of distinct and unrelated acts. The developments on technology and the increasing opportunities to listen to the acts without having to pay have affected the place of *vaudeville*, starting in the 1920s. *Vaudevilles*, which changed form to keep pace with time, evolved into stand-up performances and in the USA, reached its peak in the 1970s (Schwarz, 2010, p. 19).

Considering Turkey, the origins of stand-up shows are influenced by both the Western stage performances and the *meddah* tradition which is one of the most important sub-genres of comedy in Turkey. *Meddah* was both the name of the tradition and the individual performer who tells various stories, imitates funny moments, and improvises jokes according to the reactions of the audience. Considering the format of this traditional play and stand-up performances, they both are constructed as one-man, mimicry, and improvisation based plays with only limited use of props or make-up (Cankara 2017; Kartal 2006). With the main aim of making the audience laugh, *meddahs* performed on small stages in public places such as traditional Turkish coffee houses. Just like in the examples of US and Europe, the *meddah* tradition shifted alongside with the technological and socio-economic



developments, and the performers transformed their position in daily life. Like in the vaudeville example, *meddahs* managed to maintain their existence in different ways; they adapted to the change.

In Turkey, one-man plays, especially after 1980, occupied an increasing share of stage performance. Since they were produced with one person, they provided ease of production and are preferred by the producers in a period of economic difficulties. Also, the one-man play was a way for the ‘stars’ of comedy genre to prove themselves better since the play depends on the ‘talent’ of the performer. The names such as Ferhan Şensoy and Genco Erkal were prominent in these years with their one-man comedy plays. Both Şensoy and Erkal were well-known theater actors at that period and their cultification by the public thus began before their one-man plays. Özdemir considers stand-up in Turkey as a reinterpretation of *meddah* tradition in the current context. He states that the tradition of *meddah* was carried on by stand-up comedians such as Cem Yılmaz, Beyazıt Öztürk, and Yılmaz Erdoğan from the beginning of 2000s (Özdemir, 2001, p. 121). Although there is a strong connection between *meddah* tradition and the first stand-up shows in Turkey, the impact of international stand-up shows is non-negligible, especially in Cem Yılmaz’s performances. Yılmaz Erdoğan, who can be considered as the representative of this genre before Cem Yılmaz, was performing closer to the tradition of *meddah*. In his performances such as *Cebimde Kelimeler* [Words in My Pocket] (1995), a different setting and venue selections were applied than Yılmaz’s performances: While Erdoğan performed in venues where he is closer to his audience and stands at the same level with them, reminiscent of old coffee houses and therefore closer to the venues where the *meddahs* performed, Yılmaz performs on stages higher than his audience and uses microphone which is more similar to the setting used in the US examples of the genre.

The setting is not the only feature of Yılmaz's shows that has influenced by US examples of genre: His comedic style carries much more US impact than the *meddah* tradition and his rivals' comedies. In the early 90s, when Yılmaz started to create his own comedic style, the comedy and stand-up culture was developing faster than ever with the effect of the Comedy Channel's broadcasting in America.<sup>14</sup> Although the channel was a premium service which wasn't accessible to Turkey at that time, its effect on the stand-up culture and the sketch-comedy has grown out of the borders of US. Yılmaz's interest in Anglophone pop culture which found its place in his comedic style from the very first caricatures he drew, together with the US influence in comedy in general, are the essential forces behind his comedic persona. This influence and his background as a caricaturist has brought him success and his stand-up show called *Bir Tat Bir Doku* (2000) inspired producers to label the one-man plays as stand-up comedy in Turkey after that.

*Bir Tat Bir Doku* (2000) was one of Yılmaz's first stand-up shows which were about the funny little details of everyday life.<sup>15</sup> The show was 3 hours 55 minutes and one of Yılmaz's most successful shows that still influences Turkish stand-up tradition. One of the most important features that distinguished Yılmaz from his previous representatives was that he proceeded on a much more apolitical ground and talked about daily life compared to the old shows. The non-satirical performance enabled uniting the Turkish audience, who was constantly politically polarized. In such a context, Cem Yılmaz, who has performed a show that attracts the attention of the general public, not a certain segment and ideology, just like Kemal Sunal's Şaban, was embraced by a large population. Cem Yılmaz has started his stand-up career in Leman Cultural Center in August 1995 and then at BKM [Beşiktaş Cultural Center] in December of the same year. Beşiktaş Cultural Center and its owner Yılmaz

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<sup>14</sup> This resource provides a chronological and detailed history of Comedy Central since its founding in [1992] It is a useful resource in order to follow the comedy trends that affect the world and Cem Yılmaz's comedy: <https://tv.avclub.com/night-after-night-to-midnight-an-oral-history-of-come-1798246395>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0382568/>

Erdoğan has a big place in his career as a stand-up performer, as well. Yılmaz managed to make his name more visible with the performances he made there and has been on stage more than 4.000 times in Turkey, Europe, and the US. By combining high and low cultural codes along with the cross-cultural references, he creates a comic conflict in his shows which he supports with his body language and wit. His comedic style contributes his authentic persona which have brought him a great success and fortune.

Considering his performances, he establishes his relationship with the audience in the opening and closing sections of the show and keeps the communication alive throughout the performance, which allows the integration of audience to the show. After the first engagement, he moves straight into the anecdotes from his personal or stage life, usually a shaming one, which places him in a lower ground. His vulnerability and imperfection as an object of laughter and mockery establishes a low status and makes the audience more comfortable in front of him. Richard Dyer's paradox of extraordinariness/ordinariness in celebrity studies can be exemplified by these shaming anecdotes since while he established his place as the star of the show, with an anecdote that emphasizes his ordinariness, he also aims to destroy the perception of stardom and extraordinariness which results with the audience feeling 'familiar'.

Lockyer and Myer's research (2011) has shown that audiences enjoy a sense of intimacy with the stand-up comedians enabled by their proximity and appreciate the riskiness of the comedian's interaction with them in a live event. They admire the performer's courage in laying themselves open to the instant judgment of creating laughter and their skill in delivering the unexpected through the structure of their joking performance. Yılmaz, to be able to create this intimacy, uses an autobiographical narrative in addition to his close interaction with the audiences. As Brodie states that, "most stand-up comedy implies a level of the performed

autobiography” (Brodie, 2008, p. 174). According to him, stand-up comedy is a genre of intimacy. The illusion of intimacy which is created by the direct addressing and the conscious use of performed autobiography makes the performance unique to the comedian and creates an intimate environment. In such a context, deciding how much to reveal and how much to hide while constructing a stage persona is crucial for managing fame. By using ‘edited’ autobiographies, performers also have a chance to construct their public identity through their performances.

Cem Yılmaz, while becoming famous as a comedian, has benefited this room of intimacy in his identity construction practices. By providing examples and anecdotes from his ‘personal life’, he created an illusion of intimacy which makes audiences believe that they have knowledge about the performer and his personal life. The persona which is established mostly outside the performance by the popular press and the persona which is constructed on the stage by Yılmaz works together for closing the gap between celebrity persona and the actual person in audiences’ perception. In such a context, the more the audiences think they know about the performer, the more performer benefits from the illusion of intimacy. Since the main aim of the genre is to make the audience laugh, the performer should edit his autobiography and create a version of the events in which he has more control. This is the main reason that what is created over the course of the performance is only an ‘illusion’ of intimacy. Since the performer’s aim is not telling the ‘actual’ truth but the parts that work for the performance, the use of autobiography and editing of it is a crucial part in stand-up performances (Brodie, 2008, pp. 174-180). The stand-up performances of Yılmaz are driven by an autobiographical narrative which consists of anecdotes based on authentic life experience and he consciously uses the conflicting details between his stage persona, his ‘actual’ self and his performances to retain public interest for his celebrity. He uses popular press and news about him as an object of ridicule to show his audience that the ‘real’ Cem Yılmaz is not on the papers but on the stage for gaining their trust.

Although Cem Yılmaz started his career as a caricaturist and then became more visible with his stand-up performances, his career in film industry has been the most essential part of his celebrity in recent years. The fact that one of his most successful performances, *Bir Tat Bir Doku*, was right after his debut as a lead actor in *Her Şey Çok Güzel Olacak* [Everything is Gonna be Great!] (1998), supports the idea that his public visibility depends mostly on his appearance in cinema. In Turkish celebrity system, there is a visible tendency to combine fields as it is illustrated in Seda Sayan's celebrity persona. While being a beauty pageant winner is a gateway for being a television personality or singer, for example, in comedy industry, the celebrities tend to benefit from both television and cinema to have a multimedia personality. Considering Yılmaz's rivals in the field of Turkish comedy such as Şahan Gökbar, Ata Demirel, and Yılmaz Erdoğan, all can be considered as multi-media personalities. What makes Yılmaz exceptional in this context is his ability to create a public persona which continues in every medium and provides a whole by feeding each other. At this point, examining him as a multi-media personality who managed to create a continuity in his celebrity, and analyzing his signature practices occurs in every medium which strengthen his public image and authenticity, would provide the answer for what makes Yılmaz the person who comes to mind when say Turkish comedy.

#### 4.3. Cem Yılmaz as a Multi-Media Personality and His Competitors in the Field

As mentioned before, celebrity is an industry in which the fame is provided by media visibility and exists only with maintaining in different media and media platforms. In this context, besides the moment of creation, it is crucial how that visibility is maintained over the years and whether it can adapt to different platforms or not. So the celebrity relies on the industry, the visibility across different media and the cultural reflection it has on the public (Driessens 2013; Dyer 2011; Marshall 2014). This part traces Yılmaz's transition from a stand-up comedian to a multi-media

maestro while examining how his celebrity persona and his place in the Turkish entertainment industry evolved during this process.

As a multi-media celebrity, he has appeared in 21 films including popular and high-quality productions such as *G.O.R.A.: Bir Uzay Filmi* [G.O.R.A.: A Space Film] (2004), *A.R.O.G.: Bir Yontmataş Filmi* [A.R.O.G.: A Prehistoric Film] (2008), and *Arif V 216* (2018) while directing and writing many of them throughout his career, along with being the advertising face of many brands including Panasonic, Opet, Turk Telekom, and directs, writes, and plays in successful advertising companies that included big brands like Doritos. Yılmaz, under the influence of this great popularity, has even conducted the Borusan Istanbul Philharmonic Orchestra in the context of special concerts twice and made a DVD of the funny moments of his university visits. He has a book with his cartoons and the booklets of the scripts of his 3 films (Özçelik, 2017).

As mentioned, being a multi-media celebrity is not unique in Turkish celebrity system, and the comedy industry is not an exception. In the entertainment history of Turkey, producers frequently used TV as a medium which led to the creation of television comedies and television stand-ups. The most famous of the television comedies was *Bir Demet Tiyatro* [A Bundle of Theatre] (1995-2006), first telecasted on New Year's Eve in 1995 and lasted 8 seasons, written and directed by Yılmaz Erdoğan in which he also performed different roles. *Bir Demet Tiyatro* became a phenomenon in a very short time and attracted great interest by the Turkish people, who have the tradition of watching television in the evening, as it appeals to the audience of all ages. The series was produced by BKM (Beşiktaş Cultural Center), established and owned by Yılmaz Erdoğan, in which Cem Yılmaz performed his shows after leaving *LeMan*'s Cultural Center, also produced the first and still the biggest of Cem Yılmaz's films, *G.O.R.A.* (2004). Yılmaz worked with BKM Film and Yılmaz Erdoğan for three years and performed in Erdoğan's *Organize İşler*

[Magic Carpet Ride] (2005) during this period in which his supporting role have become unforgettable figures for film and Turkish popular culture.

As a result of a disagreement between Cem Yılmaz and Yılmaz Erdoğan on producing *A.R.O.G.: Bir Yontmataş Filmi* [A.R.O.G.: A Prehistoric Film] (2008) in 2007, Yılmaz parted ways with BKM Film, while his stand-up performances continued with the BKM Organization. After leaving BKM, he established his own production company Cem Yılmaz Fikir ve Sanat [Cem Yılmaz Idea and Art] in 2007. As a comedian and stand-up performer before him, Yılmaz Erdoğan could be considered as an inspiration for Cem Yılmaz together with their experience as co-workers. However, as Erdoğan stated, Yılmaz has almost established an autonomous republic in BKM with his unique style and always managed to be exceptional. Although their relationship, which started with friendship and continued with co-workers, turned into a competition with both of them having a production company, this competition never took up as much space in the media as the Cem Yılmaz - Şahan Gökbarar competition in film industry.

Just like Cem Yılmaz and Yılmaz Erdoğan, Gökbarar is a multi-media personality whose career started in television with *Zıbn* [Snapsuit] (2004), a comedy show combining humor and criticism by mocking popular advertisements and events, and reached top with *Dikkat Şahan Çıkabilir* [Caution: Şahan May Break Out] (2005–2006), a comedy show consisting of sketches on daily events. *Dikkat Şahan Çıkabilir*, which turned into a phenomenon in a short time with its sketches and characters created and performed by Gökbarar such as Recep İvedik, Engin Jurnal and Küçük Oskar (Little Oscar), has become a popular culture product which is still in circulation on social media. Gökbarar brought the character Recep İvedik to the big screen in 2008, and broke box-office records previously held by Yılmaz's *G.O.R.A.* and *A.R.O.G.*, by grossing over \$24 million. Considering their places in the entertainment industry and comedy field in particular, although they are rivals as

producers and directors in the film industry, the fact that Gökbakar has not showcased his talent on stage made them different as comedians since the dominance of Cem Yılmaz in comedy industry strongly connected with his experience in different branches of the genre. Considering their celebrity, Yılmaz's ability to support his celebrity persona in every medium is one of the essential factors distinguishes him from Gökbakar. Yılmaz creates a sense of familiarity by using the autobiographical elements he uses on stage also in his films, and successfully uses intertextuality both in his filmic universe and his celebrity persona in media. Arif character he created for his films, which successfully blend the genre comedy and character comedy, supports the persona he creates on stage and together they act as parts of his broad celebrity persona. While the character created by Gökbakar in his films is not similar to his public image at all, the bond and intertextuality Yılmaz established with Arif provides his overall celebrity persona and supports his visibility in media.

Yılmaz's comedic style, which blends cross-cultural references with authenticity, has started with his caricatures, improved with his stand-up shows, and reached its peak with cinematic medium in which he performs all his signature practices together and created his overall comedic persona.

#### 4.4. Film Career and His Signature Practices

Cem Yılmaz's debut as a lead actor, *Her Şey Çok Güzel Olacak [Everything's Gonna Be Great!]* (1998), also co-written by him and directed by Ömer Vargı who met Yılmaz during the years he performed in *LeMan*'s culture center, achieved a great success at that time, which demonstrates the transformation of Turkish national cinema. By the time Yılmaz started his comedy career, in 1990s, Yeşilçam had lost its impact irreversibly because of the 1980 coup d'état and the national broadcasting. Although in 1990s, Yeşilçam no longer dominate production or exhibition patterns,



the impacts of the era such as the habit of series and cycles has continued nonstop. During the period, because of the economic struggles caused by the lack of investment in film productions led the industry to use ‘altered’ versions of foreign films, for a long time. The process of modifying the international films in order to give the impression of *Turkishness*, by inserting new scenes to international films and retitling them, is described as the ‘*Turkification*’ of a movie” (Gürata, 2007, p. 337), which has led the industry to remakes and made Turkish film industry one of the largest film-producing industries by the 1960s, with an average annual production of 200 movies (Gürata, 2005, p. 242). These low-budget and mass produced remakes, which in itself look like parodies of Hollywood films have influenced as well as reflecting the cultural structure. The contrast created by the characters who have Turkish values and find themselves in Western situations provided numerous materials to the comedians, and Yılmaz was one of the beneficiaries of this situation, while already having a style which depends on cross-cultural references. Although he has appeared in dramas such as *Hokkabaz* (2006), *Vizontele* (2001) and internationally prestigious productions such as *The Water Diviner* (2014), his best-known and commercially popular films were his genre parodies each of which has achieved the top films of all times at the national box office. While the main component of his films is genre parodies rich in non-Turkish references, especially American and from Hollywood films, he also supports his authentic aura by repeatedly paying homage to Yeşilçam.

True to the comedic style of Cem Yılmaz, *G.O.R.A.*, the first component of ‘Arif trilogy’, consisting of genre parodies each of which has achieved the top films of all times at the national box office, is a genre parody targeting *The Fifth Element* (1997), *Star Wars* (1977), *The Matrix* (1999) and other science fiction touchstones, and centers the cross-cultural references in the comedic narrative. At this point, although its not clear whether there is a direct influence or not, there is a strong similarity between Yılmaz’s comedic style, which, from the beginning of his career as a

caricaturist, puts the Hollywood references at the center, and Mike Myers'. Myers' *Austin Powers* series, started with *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997), which like the Arif trilogy films are both genre parodies, particularly targeting *James Bond* films, and character-based comedy where Myers plays the hero and the multiple antagonist roles besides, like Yılmaz does in Arif trilogy. What makes Yılmaz different in this context for Turkish audience is that his way of blending American pop-culture which his audience is familiar enough to enjoy references, and Turkish film history by using his comedic persona as a bridge between all.

Considering *G.O.R.A.*, beyond being a genre comedy, it has a strong intertextual relationship with Yeşilçam, especially with *Turist Ömer series* (1964–1973), whose final of seven installments is a remake of *Star Trek* known in Turkey as *Turist Ömer Uzak Yolunda* [Ömer the Tourist in Space] (1973), “which has become a cult object outside Turkey under the informal title of “Turkish Star Trek” (Örsler & Kennedy-Karpat, 2020, p. 39). The Tourist Ömer character, which was portrayed by Sadri Alışık and left its mark on its period, has a great impact on Arif both physically and as a character. The scene in which Sadri Alışık is shown on the screen watched by crying Ceku,(Özge Özberk) is used as a clear reference point that reflects the connection between Tourist Ömer, Arif and the two films. In this context, it is possible to say that Yılmaz aims to create a familiar feeling not only with Hollywood films but also with Yeşilçam by establishing an intertextual connection. The subject of both films is the story of returning to the home of a Turk kidnapped by aliens. In such a context, by placing the parody of Yeşilçam and Hollywood in the center of the comedy both through narration and character, Yılmaz revives the sense of inclusion in the audience provided by intertextuality.

With the financial success of *G.O.R.A.* which brought in roughly \$18 million in Turkey and broke the box office record of *Vizontele*, Yılmaz quickly became the

trendsetter in popular Turkish cinema. Following Yılmaz, Hollywood parodies inspired by *G.O.R.A* by many different production companies, began covering a wide range of Turkish film industry within a short time. *Kutsal Damacana* (2007), which was released in the same year as *A.R.O.G.: Bir Yontmataş Filmi* [A.R.O.G.: A Prehistoric Film] (2008), while its intake could not match *G.O.R.A*'s great success, is still one of Turkey's highest grossing films of 2007 which is a parody of Hollywood horror, primarily *The Exorcist* (1973) (Örsler & Kennedy-Karpat, 2020, p. 41). The initial success of *Kutsal Damacana* led to its first sequel *Kutsal Damacana 2: İtmen* (2010), which once again featured Şafak Sezer, this time in a parody of werewolf series and the *Rocky* series (1976-2006). However, the reign of Hollywood parodies did not last long, and by 2010, the industry witnessed the end of this genre. *Destere* (Saw, 2008), which is a parody of *Saw* horror films (2004-2017), brought in just \$1.2 million. The second sequel to *Kutsal Damacana*, *Kutsal Damacana 3: Dracoola* (2011) which was a parody of vampire films, failed to achieve its expected success and grossed even less than *Destere*. This situation was actually the most significant sign of the fact that the Hollywood parodies are no longer interest the Turkish cinema audience. Nevertheless, Yılmaz continued to work on this genre for a little while and first shot a Western parody, *Yahşi Batı* [The Mild West] (2010) and then *Ali Baba ve 7 Cüceler* [Ali Baba and the 7 Dwarfs] (2015) which is a parody of Hollywood action/adventure films and the *Hunger Games* series (2012-2015) which grossed less than \$7.5 million (Örsler & Kennedy-Karpat, 2020, p. 41).

Cem Yılmaz, who has now identified intertextuality and parody with his films, started working to make a new movie without excluding these elements, and by returning to the character comedy, released *ArifV216* (2018), the last component of the Arif trilogy, which is in an intertextual relationship not only with Hollywood, but also with the recent history of Turkish cinema. As Örsler and Kennedy-Karpat (2020) state that, "Manifesting an eclectic intertextual realm, Yılmaz articulates his deviance from *G.O.R.A*. and the Hollywood parody cycle of the 2000s through innovative

approaches to pastiche and intertextual referencing” (Örsler and Kennedy-Karpat, 2020, p. 41). The film extends the adventures of Arif and his beloved friend Robot 216 (Ozan Güven) by placing pastiche and parody, at the center of its comedy, with Yılmaz’s signature cross-cultural references. In the film, Arif and 216 take a journey to 1969 Turkey after Robot 216 comes to Earth unexpectedly and tells Arif that he wants to live like a human. Since Robot 216’s desire to be human and great interest in Yeşilçam era have been shown to the audience since the first film of the series, Yılmaz has managed to support the narrative structure of the series with Arif V 216’s particular attention to Yeşilçam.

Yılmaz uses nostalgia to make audience feel familiar and connect them to the movie by evoking emotions. Expressing his admiration for Sadri Alışık at every opportunity, Yılmaz chose Sadri Alışık’s son, Kerem Alışık to portray the Ömer character in *Arif V 216*. The farewell between Ömer (Kerem Alışık) and Sadri Alışık (Mert Fırat) remained a topic of press for a long time for being a farewell of a father and son that could never happened in reality. Along with the references to Yeşilçam classics in terms of both aesthetics and narrative structure such as asynchronous dubbing in the scenes where Filiz Akin (Maria Anastasiyeva) talks which is a problem encountered so often in Yeşilçam that it has become one of the symbols of the period, Yılmaz also refers to directors and films that had a considerable place in Turkish cinema such as Zeki Demirkubuz and Nuri Bilge Ceylan. In the scene where their names are mentioned, a squeaking door opening sound is heard which is an indispensable symbol in Demirkubuz films and an apple enters the scene by rolling which is a direct reference to Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s *Bir Zamanlar Anadolu’da* [Once Upon a Time in Anatolia] (2011). Cem Yılmaz, who places the pastiche and parody in the center of his films in order to evoke familiar feelings in the audience and to provide a comedic flow, also includes the audience in the process of interpretation of the film with the intertextuality which is a natural result of these genres. In this context, he carried the parodic elements he put in the center of his comedy on the

stage, his sincere communication environment and the jokes he built on Turkishness in the same way to his film-making process. Besides, just like in stage shows, his films make a sudden transition between Turkish and English. While *G.O.R.A.* starts with a conversation between the characters in the spaceship in English, in *A.R.O.G.*, Arif explains to his friend that he has been kidnapped on the phone in English.

Breaking the fourth wall is another pattern that is encountered in all of Yılmaz's films. In *G.O.R.A.*, Arif, while giving a speech after making Comander Logar to be caught, turns to the audience and says "American cinema, I'm calling you! You have introduced aliens to us as monsters for years. But remember, even if it's an alien, man is man. In another scene in which the fourth wall is demolished, when Garavel is asked who Ceku's father is, Arif and 216 turn and look at the audience with a sudden cut. Similarly in *A.R.O.G.*, after the preparations for the football match, while the jerseys are distributed in the cave, Arif cheers his friends by saying that 'We have audience'. However, when he swears in a moment of heedlessness, Taşo stops him and shows the audience; by looking at the camera together, they break the fourth wall once again. In *ArifV216*, as Arif and Pembeşeker (Seda Bakan) are walking in the dystopian Istanbul of 2017, Seda Bakan reacts when Arif continues to habitually call him Pembeşeker and says: "Enough dear, my name is not Pembeşeker". Arif replies "No problem, the audience is very confused right now. You can call me Sami if you want, it would not be a problem". Here, we see that the world of fantasy is over now and that Yılmaz refers to what he wrote in the preface of the script book of *G.O.R.A.* In this preface, Cem Yılmaz wrote that the name of the character Arif was considered Sami from the beginning of pre-production, but at the last minute he decided to put his father's name, Arif.

As Corrigan (1998) puts it, in today's commerce, in order to identify themselves with them, audiences want to know how the stars or authors act in their personal lives, they want to see a connection between their personalities and public personas. At the

same time, audiences want to have something common with the person who stars or directs the films that they watch. Having autobiographical narrative in the center of his stand-up shows, Yılmaz carried this practice to his films, as well. By making references to his life in his films, he benefits from the audience knowledge about his persona. For instance, the birth date of series protagonist Arif, December 8 1968, is actually the birthday of Cem Yılmaz's brother, Can Yılmaz. Arif is Yılmaz's father's name, Ceku is his grandmother's nickname, and Garla is the name of his grandfather (Kalipci, 2016). By making references to his 'personal' life, Yılmaz again benefits from the intimacy between him and his audiences just like using autobiographical narrative in his stand-ups.

Another pattern that distinguishes Yılmaz from the other comedy directors in Turkey is the creative partnership which is more a 'close knit cinematic family' than just a collaboration. Yılmaz works with Ozan Güven, Zafer Algöz and Özkan Uğur in eight films including 'Arif Trilogy', *Yahşi Batı*, *Karakomik Filmler 1* (2019), *Karakomik Filmler 2* (2020) and *Pek Yakında*. This partnership and their friendship outside the set is well known by the audience and the press. Being a family, loving someone, the importance of friendship and family are themes that find expression in his films and having his 'best friends' as partners in his films create another intimacy and familiarity as well. Although this partnership is criticized by some, they mock about these critics. Zafer Algöz, when asked why Cem Yılmaz always works with the same team, defends Yılmaz by saying: "Barcelona always plays with the same team as well. We have harmony; you cannot manage the one you do not know" (Bozok Aytek, 2017).

According to Şimşek, the magic of Cem Yılmaz lies behind the 'reachability' or the 'reality' of his characters (Şimşek, 2014). As mentioned, his films are not just character comedies or only genre parodies, with Arif character which is integrated with the great Cem Yılmaz persona, he created an exceptional place for himself in

public eye. Considering his rivals' characters in their films, such as Recep İvedik, created by Şahan Gökbakar for short sketches and then carried over to hugely successful comedy films, is constantly swearing, crude, and alcoholic, which is completely different from the public persona of its creator. The fact that Yılmaz's connection with Arif lacks in his competitors, besides his comedic style and signature practices, also ensures the uniqueness of his celebrity persona.

Throughout his career, he benefited from the room for identification of the comedy genre by telling the stories of ordinary on the stage and making fun of himself as an ordinary man. Arif character, now integrated with Cem Yılmaz, is a great example of this ordinariness by being a reflection the lower-middle class Turkish man, even more specifically, the Grand Bazaar salesman. It is the character that the public was in search of after Kemal Sunal's character of Şaban which every class of the public find something from themselves. Yılmaz places a clean but cunning character in the center and while making him familiar for the audience, he also use Turkish culture as a comedic factor that makes the connection stronger. Being a man who talks a lot about women and romantic relationships, he also uses the similarities between Arif and himself as a comedic element. As an ordinary man, Arif somehow manages to become a hero and steal the beautiful princess Ceku's heart. Considering his relationships and his stages persona, he uses this 'having the princess on his side' metaphor frequently. Him being an 'ugly and ordinary man' in his own words and having relationships with beauty pageant winners and models such as 1994 Best Model Of Turkey winner Sema Şimşek, 1995 Miss Turkey winner Demet Şener, 1999 Miss Turkey winner Ayşe Hatun Önal, third of 2000 Miss Turkey Cansu Dere, 1991 Miss Turkey winner Defne Samyeli and finally second of 2010 Miss Turkey, Serenay Sarıkaya, with whom Yılmaz is currently in relationship with. While this issue is frequently brought up by the magazine press, Yılmaz often turns this similarity with Arif on the stage into comedy material.

His construction of his celebrity persona which is a step by step media strategy, allowed him to be more visible in media. Considering the media coverage of Yılmaz, the fact that he is the second most followed Turkish person behind only the current president of Turkish republic in Twitter, and being the second most talked-about celebrity in Turkish press in 2019 with the total of 68.037 news in print media,<sup>16</sup> reveals his capacity for publicity and his difference as a celebrity from his rivals. What makes his public visibility different than his rivals such as Şahan Gökçek and Şafak Sezer, is the tabloid material his personal life carries. His relationship and breakup with Defne Samyeli in 2019, for instance, was among the most popular topics of the news along with his works. Although he previously released *Karakomik Filmler 1* (2019), and *Karakomik Filmler 2* (2020) [Dark-comedic Films], he frequently comes up with his relationship with Serenay Sarıkaya on the magazine's agenda. In Hürriyet's website, between 10.08.2019 and 14.08.2020, his name appears in 63 news stories covering his relationships with Defne Samyeli and Serenay Sarıkaya, the same newspaper over the same time frame includes only six stories about his new films. In such a context, in addition to his works and comedic style, his tabloid side is a big supporter of his media visibility. It also reveals the interest of his audience, who believes to have a knowledge about the intimate persona he created on the stage with the autobiographical elements he uses, in his personal life as much as his works.

Considering the branding process of the celebrity identity, it can be done by producers or for some like Cem Yılmaz through self-promotion. Cem Yılmaz's visibility across multiple media genres offers new opportunities for him to establish his celebrity. In this chapter, by tracing his process of celebrification, the characteristic style of Cem Yılmaz's comedic persona, his authorship, his signature styles, his cinematic family, and finally how he adapts these to different media are

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<sup>16</sup> According to Media Monitoring Center's report, Cem Yılmaz came second most talked-about celebrity following Acun Ilıcalı in 2019. (<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/magazin/2019-yili-magazin-ve-sanat-dunyasinda-boyle-gecti-41406475>)



investigated. The extraordinary range of media in which Yılmaz has established a presence as a celebrity identity provides a rich range of texts in order to examine his skills and the development of Cem Yılmaz brand in the Turkish entertainment industry. Cem Yılmaz has been creating a celebrity brand from the very beginning of his career by using specific elements in his works and his ‘personal’ life. He managed to have a simultaneous development both in his performance, his stage persona and his public persona as a celebrity. In addition to using his ‘signature’ in his works, he also promotes himself as a ‘star’ while also making fun of his celebrity status in his stage performances. In this sense, it can be said that he benefits from the ‘star paradox’ which first defined by Richard Dyer (2003) as the paradox of being ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. Cem Yılmaz is conscious about his fame, his celebrity identity and his fortune being talked by public and press and he benefits from this well-knownness in creating his brand.

## CHAPTER 5

### MEDIA EMPEROR ACUN ILICALI AND REALITY TELEVISION IN TURKEY

Getting his start as an ordinary sports reporter, Acun Ilıcalı has become, if not the top, certainly among the top media personalities in Turkey, hosting and judging localized versions of popular reality shows such as *Survivor*, *The Voice*, *Fear Factor*, and *Got Talent*, and recently as the owner of TV8, which is one of the Turkey's top-rated TV channels. Self-made media mogul and TV producer Ilıcalı, is also expanding his company, Acun Medya, in the international arena, by producing his own unscripted show format, *Exathlon*,—now available on Netflix— which is the world's first sports-entertainment reality show to go global, starting with Brazil, Romania, Mexico and having great success in those markets. He also produces adapted he used in Turkey in five different countries including Brazil, Romania, Mexico, Columbia, Greece and the U.S.A.. Considering his unwavering place in the Celebrity Trust Index reports and his feature as the most covered celebrity in the news every year since 2017 according to the analysis of Medya Takip Merkezi (Media Monitoring Center), one can see that Ilıcalı has a significant place in the Turkish entertainment industry. Since he first appeared on TV with *Acun Firarda* (2002-2006), his reputation as a formidable television personality and a businessman has been on a rising curve. By transforming his experience in the industry and knowledge about his audience to the greatest advantage, Ilıcalı created his own brand

and brought this brand to a constantly growing and developing position over the years. His broad media visibility as both a wealthy businessman and a television personality along with his entrepreneurship in media, have provided him a unique celebrity in the context of Turkish media.

In this chapter, business methods of Ilıcalı which made him exceptional among his competitors will be examined in depth to investigate their contribution to his celebrity persona. The main argument of this chapter is that, Ilıcalı constructed his public persona in the line between a savvy businessman who is extraordinarily wealthy, and entertainment personality whose public persona is shaped around ‘intimacy’ ‘familiarity’ and ‘authenticity’ with a step-by-step media strategy, and successfully managed the continuity of his celebrity on more than one platform. By placing his celebrity image central to the shows he produces, Ilıcalı not only generates new formats and celebrities, but also distribute his celebrity both nationally and globally, as well.

### 5.1. The Man Behind the Brand and Early Career

Acun Ilıcalı was born on May 29, 1969 in Edirne as the second child of Ergün and İlknur Ilıcalı and has an older brother named Ömer Cenker Ilıcalı. The life of Acun, whose father was a contractor and mother was a manager in a private company, started in very modest conditions compared to what he has now. Having an ordinary childhood, his life began to change when he got married while he was a 19 years old university student. Ilıcalı married Seda Ilıcalı in 1988 and had a daughter named Banu from this marriage. The year 1990, as he explained in Brand Week Istanbul 2018, turns out to be a turning point in his life with the events that started 10 months after the birth of his daughter. In a traffic accident that year, while his 10-month-old daughter Banu survived with fractures in her body, Acun lost his parents, whom he referred to as his greatest supporters in life. He got divorced from his wife with the

effect of the depression he experienced that year, at the age of 21, bankrupted when he was dealing with trade at the age of 22 and had a had a serious motorcycle accident in 1994 in which he lost his friend sitting behind. Ilıcalı, who described himself in those days as a man who had lost everything he had in life, applied Show TV at the age of 24 and in his own words, his life was progressing in an extraordinary course (Ilıcalı, 2018).

He started to work as an office boy in Show TV for the first month and then met İrfan Şahin, who was the financial coordinator of the channel in 1995, which he believes, was a milestone in his career. Realizing Ilıcalı's great interest in football, Şahin asked him to work on Show TV as a reporter and Ilıcalı started to work as an intern reporter of Beşiktaş Sports Club, took his first step into the television world with this title. His intimate relationships with the football players and consequently successful interviews made him visible and he asked to be a reporter in a sports-gossip show which was very popular at the time, *Televole* (1994-2005). Acun Ilıcalı had his own format included in this program. *Acun Firarda*, which consists of short videos in which he travels the world and makes interviews with different people, started out as 15 minutes videos, sometimes covered 45 minutes of *Televole*. Ilıcalı, who realized his own success as the time he occupied in the program increased, despite his early success as a reporter, decided to choose another path and rather than sticking to one company for years, started to host his own show in 2002. *Acun Firarda* [Acun on the Run](2002—2006), started to air in Show TV and gained great interest, especially from the young Turkish audience. In this interest, the impact of the time slot that the show was broadcasted and the position of Internet at that time were significant. According to RTÜK's reports, the time slot between 24.00 - 03.00, which was the time slot of the show, are the hours that the 15-24 years segment is the most active in watching the television (Televizyon İzleme Eğilimleri Araştırması 2018). Considering the fact that the Internet was far behind its current position at that time, this format provided a great resource to see different countries of the world and

learn different cultures for the young audience. Ilıcalı demonstrated his skill in creating unforgettable televisual events which are still in circulation through social media after almost two decades <sup>17</sup>.

Such interest and success made the show being sponsored by big brands such as Doritos in 2002, Gillette in 2003 and Siemens in 2004, which was a great success for a late-night show at that time in Turkey. Most loved episodes of *Acun Firarda* has been released as a VCD in 2006 by Sony Music and between 2004 and 2005, he performed a stand-up show *Acun Sahnede* [Acun on the Stage], in which he told the interesting stories he experienced while making *Acun Firarda*. The show's name has changed into *Avea Acun Show* in 2007 with a tele-communication company, AVEA's sponsorship. His performances were targeting the university students who were also the target audience of *Acun Firarda*. While hosting *Acun Firarda*, he established his own production company, Acun Medya Group in 2004. He bought the many world famous reality show formats such as *Deal or No Deal*, *Fear Factor*, *Survivor*, and *Got Talent* and adapted them for Turkish audience, and broadcasted in prime time of the most watched TV channels in Turkey, including Show TV, Kanal D, and Star TV, before owning TV8, which is the channel brought a new broadcasting approach based solely on reality TV formats to Turkey (Göker, 2015, p. 271).

*Var Mısın Yok Musun* [Deal or No Deal] (2007-2017), in his own words, “was the biggest game-changer” (Vivarelli, 2018). The format had previously failed in Turkish market twice; *Trilyon Avı* [Trillion Hunt](2003-2004) was the first attempt, hosted by actor Zafer Engin and aired in ATV which did not achieve the expected success and lasted only one season. The second attempt with the same format was *Büyük Teklif* [Great Offer] which was aired on Kanal D and hosted by a famous actor Halit Ergenç. Although it was the closest version to the U.S. format, it shared the same fate

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<sup>17</sup> Funny moments from *Acun Firarda* are still in circulation through social media: (<https://youtu.be/noVFgpKt7I>) .In addition, the videos he narrates his memories are among the most watched: (<https://youtu.be/LRuygp9Nza4>)

with *Trilyon Avı* and lasted less than a season. Ilıcalı started *Var Mısın Yok Musun?* [Deal or No Deal] in September 10, 2007 in Show TV as both the producer and host of the show which became a huge hit in a short period of time. Having brought a previously unsuccessful format to the top and making it the most covered topics in the news in 2008, Acun took the first step towards establishing a reality television empire by eliminating his competitors one by one. What made his format different and brought him success while the same format has failed twice, which will be analyzed in depth in the next section, reveals what makes him exceptional in Turkish television.

## 5.2. Turkish Reality TV and His Competitors

Although the digital revolution has changed the watching habits and consequently the place of television in people's lives in USA and Europe, in Turkey, it still has a significant position in the entertainment industry. In line with the research conducted by Ajans Press, a media monitoring institution, and national media regulator, RTÜK, on the television viewing habits of the Turkish people, according to the daily television viewing rates across the world in 2018, Turkey ranked first with 3 hours and 34 minutes.<sup>18</sup> Considering the fact that %98 of viewers watch the content using traditional television sets in their homes, the importance of television in Turkey, it is possible to claim that the place of television in both entertainment industry and the construction of celebrity is still significant.

The dismantling of the TRT monopoly in 1990 paved the way for a wave of experimentation with new formats: talk shows, docu-dramas, gossip and reality shows were introduced and gained popularity (Binark & Kılıçbay 2004, p. 74). Reality TV is a genre which positions non-actors into dramatic scenarios with unpredictable outcomes (Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak, 2015). Simon (2005), Marshall

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<sup>18</sup> See the related article: (<https://www.posta.com.tr/dunyanin-en-cok-televizyon-izleyen-ulkesi-turkiye-1282969>)

(2010) and Kavka (2012), have argued that reality television is one of the key factors, given the transformation of celebrity culture over the past three decades. According to Simon, reality television has become one of the cornerstones of broadcasting, while shaking and changing the history of television and the future of production (Simon, 2005, p. 179). Emergence of this new genre formed a television personality system, which is parallel to the star system of Hollywood, and the audience habits have also changed. Given that the supply-demand relationship is the top priority in the television industry, as everywhere, as Edgerton and Rose (2005) state that, “as much as the audience has gazed at the Hollywood stars, the viewer has also taken pleasure in seeing an average Joe or Josephine on television” (Edgerton and Rose, 2005, p. 179). Reality TV has not only turned ordinary people into celebrities, but also made the everyday lives of celebrities previously known visible (Kavka, 2012).

Being a hybrid genre and cheap production costs made reality shows beneficial for television industry, especially comparing to the other formats such as sit-coms and dramas since it uses nonactors and it does not need writers (Gamson, 2011, p. 1064). Instant text-messaging and the emergence of the Internet made the genre interactive which made consumers to be able to advocate, ignore, support or tolerate the figures on television. By having more control over the results of the shows, audiences became much more included to the programs which made them active consumers instead of passive observers (Cashmore, 2006, pp. 190-198).

In Turkey, the first adapted reality show was *Biri Bizi Gözetliyor* [Someone is Watching Us] (2001-2007), which was an adaptation of Austrian *Taxi Orange* in which the contestants with different characteristics gather in a house for 100 days and try to attract the audience watching them to stay the longest and win the prize. The show, which was hosted by Ilıcalı for a short period of time, attracted a great attention that different channels started to imitate the format and almost all were liked by the audience. Considering Turkish television, one can see that reality shows,

which have been developing since the early 2000s, still maintain their significance in terms of television programming. Especially after Acun Medya bought TV8, as mentioned, reality TV based broadcasting approach has emerged.

As Su Holmes (2008) states that, “reality TV has developed an appetite for the type of ‘ordinary’ people that can guarantee something close to a semi-professional performance” (Holmes, 2008, p. 118). As a strategy to invite audience identification with celebrities, reality television uses everyday environment for celebrities to demonstrate their ‘real selves’. In such a situation, ordinariness for reality television was working in the exact opposite way for Hollywood stars. While ordinariness in classical Hollywood star system was a phenomenon that should remain in the shadow of a glamorous life, it became the point of interest in reality television (Gamson, 2011, pp. 1063-1065). “Here, the exposure of the ordinary self – offered as a demonstration of authenticity – itself becomes a means to celebrity” (Gamson, 2015, p. 276).

Individuals who are the subject of reality shows are never involved in these productions by luck: It is known that these people were interviewed by the producers and participated in the competitions after various evaluations and pre-selection. As Holmes (2008) states that, in order to make the format interesting and seem spontaneous, several strategies are used such as the *verité* camera style which creates the feeling in the audience that what they are watching is real along with the strategic use of first-person confessional segments. By making the production apparatus and the pre-production phase invisible, the shows aim to convince the audience that the program depicts the ‘real’. Although the premise of the show is to depict reality, by planning the shooting and editing methods in accordance with the narrative, reality shows concerns with the visibility of the contestants, the involvement of the audience and produce the episodes according to these factors (Mittell, 2004, p. 197). According to Holmes (2008), all these strategies “represent very heightened



examples of the strategies of ‘selection’, ‘form’ and ‘content’ which always shape television’s construction of ‘ordinary’ identities” (Holmes, 2008, p. 126).

In Turkish television market, another reality TV program after *Biri Bizi Gözetliyor*, which attracted a great interest, is *PopStar* (2003-2014) which was an adaptation of *Pop Idol*. Produced and hosted by Osmantan Erkir, the industry's most successful name before Acun, who had already brought the format *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* to the country, remained on the air for a long time *Popstar*’s scandals, dramatic biographies of the contestants, and active audience participation to the eliminations via SMS. The show gained so much attention that other channels started to produce shows with the same format such as *Akademi Türkiye* [Academy Turkey] (2004)(2008) in ATV and *Turkstar* (2004) in Show TV and the format dominated the Turkish television for a long time (Yıldırım, 2007, p. 97). By the time Acun bought *Deal or No Deal*’s format rights, it was the fourth year of the same formatted talent shows without any change but the fields’s most significant name was still Osmantan Erkir. Despite *Popstar*, which ruled Turkish television for a while, Osmantan Erkir was lost out to Acun, who came across with his entrepreneurship and experience. This competition and the differences between the two reveal how Acun established his kingdom in this industry. Over the years, he has demonstrated a range of personality attributes and skills that has served him well in the entertainment industry. The next section will be focusing on the unique personality traits and practices that made Acun exceptional in Turkish media.

### 5.3. What Makes Him Different?

In Turkey, Acun is frequently compared to Simon Cowell since once considering their career trajectories and the time intervals when they set up their careers, there is a visible impact of Cowell on Ilıcalı. Although Cowell’s career has a strong connection with music industry, their media appearances as both a TV personality and a media mogul is quite similar as well as their innate qualities and skills. Of

course, there is similarity between the formats Acun and Cowell both use, moreover, the ways they achieve and maintain success are similar in many ways. As producers, they both know what it takes to create hits; they also share a gift of spotting commercial potential and knowing both industry and audience pathways to televisual empires. Considering their careers from the beginning, the fact that they both started out in newsroom and built their reality TV empire internationally is one of these similarities in their path. However, one essential thing is very different about them is that the public persona they created which make them unique in their own cultural contexts. Cowell was known for the 'blunt' image he created from the first days of his television visibility. While successfully managing this harsh but beloved image in time, he integrated his catchphrase "I don't mean to be rude but" with his celebrity identity by using it as a title of his autobiography. As Clawson states that, Cowell mentions that he is not that harsh in his 'real life' which indicates that his choice in creating his screen persona is this way (Clawson, 2011, p. 7). Considering Acun, the persona he created for the public is quite different than both Cowell and his local competitors. Rather than being an arrogant and distant figure, he chose to approach both the competitors and audiences much more closer and drew a brother image.

Having achieved success in the late night zone, Acun wanted to change the time-slot to appeal to more audiences in different segments. Annoyed that *Acun Firarda* was broadcasted late and therefore only appealed to the audience segment of ages 15-24, Acun pitched *Fear Factor*, which was the first format he brought in to Turkish market, to Kanal D, the biggest competitor of Show TV in which he was doing *Acun Firarda*. After the format was rejected by Kanal D, Acun presented it on Show TV and they made an agreement. *Fear Factor* (2006) broke the rating records in 12 episodes and became the most watched game-show in television. After the success of his first format, he decided to make *Survivor* in Turkey, sensing the ready-made audience in 2005 which is the 9th year of *Survivor* in global. *Survivor* was a previously failed format in Turkish market just like *Deal or No Deal*. He published

the first Survivor in both Turkey and Greece, with the great interest in both countries, he produced *Survivor Turkey-Greece* in 2006 (Ilıcalı, 2018).

By the time he started *Var Mısın Yok Musun?*[Deal or No Deal] in 2007, *Popstar* was in its fourth season under the name of *Popstar Alaturka* which had a jury contains of arabesque artists. While audience was searching for new formats on TV, *Deal or No Deal* started broadcasting in September 10, 2007. The first episode was broadcasted at 5 pm., which was a time slot in the working hours hence only the housewives and retirees watch television. When the first 2 episodes of the program were the last in the ratings, a meeting was held on removing the show from broadcasting where Acun asked the channel to give him one more week (Ilıcalı, 2018). At this point, besides the sector experience, another feature that distinguishes Acun from his competitors is revealed: knowing his audiences.

What puts Acun forward is his ability to define his target market well and analyze their desires about television. Once *Deal or No Deal* did not achieve enough success to maintain its presence on TV in the first two episodes, Acun used an old woman who did not scheduled for that week, as a competitor and examined which age group watched which time periods in the ratings of that episode to see what he can change. Realizing that the viewers, especially the young ones, watched the minutes in which the competitors talk about themselves and the moments when there is an intimate sharing take place; Ilıcalı has made the studio setting and the show format completely competitor oriented which then became the signature of his shows and made his formats exceptional. Starting with short videos consist of competitors' life stories, childhood photographs and families, emphasizing dramatic experiences, Acun continued to create intimacy and competitor oriented format by having competitors' families and friends as studio audience. As mentioned before, the contestants who were chosen strategically to keep the audience's attention alive, made audience to have an emotional bond with the show and increased the

possibilities of identification with the contestants. Acun, who especially emphasized tragic life stories and extraordinary experiences, began to bring new faces to the market while managing his own image. As a result of these changes in both format and setting, the show started to become number one in ratings within one week (İlcalı, 2018).

After this rapid increase in ratings, *Deal or No Deal* has moved to prime-time and Acun's dominance in Turkish television has officially started. After the first season, İlcalı has started to reveal his sector experience more clearly. While the program evolved into a shape that moves on the axis of the competitor, the importance of "casting" has also emerged. At this point, Acun said that his reporter history and Acun Firarda contributed a lot to him: "Since I was a reporter, I am programmed to capture what's interesting around. I'll tell you in six seconds what's going to be watched and what's not" (İlcalı, 2018). In transforming individual private self into a societal figures, autobiographical discourse has a significant place by providing informations for audience to create intimacy. By providing the background history of the competitors, Acun made the audience feel like they know the one who speaks on television. This familiarity with the television personality makes audience feel that, as Wilson states that, "they are involved in a face-to-face exchange rather than a passive observation" (Wilson, 2003, p. 163). The presence of ordinary people, the aura of familiarity and interactive relationship of audience with the competitors, the format created the "intimacy" which, Marshall believes that, "the reason television does not produce stars but rather personalities" (Marshall, 1997, p. 122).

Having known that the illusion of intimacy and authenticity are the core for televisual success, Acun started to use this room that the genre and medium provide for his celebrity persona construction, as well. The atmosphere of intimacy and sincerity established with the audience and competitors, with the influence of his stand-up and reporting experience, made him more fun and energetic as a host and

differed him from his active rival Osmantan Erkir at that time. While Erkir draws a more distant and formal image by preferring formal addressing methods to the audience and the members of jury—even to Ebru Gündeş, whom he was married with at that time—Acun’s way of constructing his relationship with both the jury members, competitors and the audience around sincerity and friendliness made his persona easier to be accepted by public. As Marshall points out, “the film celebrity plays with aura through distance [whereas] the television celebrity is configured around conceptions of familiarity . . . [and] embodies the characteristics of . . . mass acceptability” (Marshall in Wilson, 2003, pp. 161-162). In such a context, Acun used both genre specificities and medium features in his favor in the process of constructing his celebrity identity. He knows what sells so he constructed his celebrity persona around this knowledge.

A common strategy in including the audience to the reality shows, especially game-docs, is the recirculation of past competitors into new seasons or new shows. They appear either as competitors in seasons or as mentors, judges or commentators (Hargraves 2018, p. 511). Acun also makes use of this re-circulation in his formats. When the contest is over, the contestants who are known and supported by the audience are on the screen with their new television projects. Audiences who previously knew these competitors want to watch new shows. Thus, the audience is tried to be kept on the screen continuously. Considering the example of Semih Öztürk, who was recognized in Acun’s another reality show broadcasted on TV8, *Ütopya* [Utopia](2014-2015), and finished the contest in the second place, he became the Survivor contestant in 2016 in volunteers team. He started to appear on the program called *Survivor Panorama* (2014-present) as a commentator in 2017 and he currently is a commentator in *Survivor Extra* (2014-present). The same images of the competition, which is watched by the audience each weekday, are reproduced and interpreted in the daytime zone at the weekends. Hakan Hatipoğlu, who has competed in *Var Mısın Yok Musun* in 2009, *Survivor Girls - Boys* in 2010 and in the

*Survivor All Star* in 2015, is now a commentator in *Survivor Panorama* and *Survivor Extra* since 2017. Alp Kırşan, who competed in the 2012 *Survivor*, served as a host in both *Got Talent* and *Survivor*. Another contestant of *Survivor 2013*, Duygu Çetinkaya, is a commentator in a gossip show called *Aramızda Kalmasın* [Let it not Stay Between Us] (2009-present) in TV8. Only three names of *Survivor* competitors did not appear on television. In this context, it is possible to say that Acun's television strategies are based on constantly considering the people he believes are suitable for television and establishing an intertextuality between programs, and now this also works in favor of TV8's channel-specific synergy. This intertextuality, also made audience feel more familiar with the screen faces and contributed the 'fan culture' since as Jenkins (1992) states that, "media fans take pleasure in making intertextual connections across a broad range of media texts" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 37). As a natural consequence of game-docs as a genre, diversity in characters help identification of audience with at least one competitor and recirculation of the ones they identify in different shows make them feel included to the new formats, as well.

Having the same faces around him in different contexts and his intimate relationship with these celebrities has helped Acun to draw a close family image for his audience. Experiencing the significance of familiarity and sincerity for the Turkish audience throughout his career, Ilıcalı aims to create the same effect on his persona, which distinguished him from his rivals. Considering his shows, as mentioned, his approach to the contestants is usually intimate and he creates a 'brother' image for them with his behaviors such as playing football with them, asking about their problems and drawing an image who tries to solve every contestants' problems like a big brother. In *Ekşi Sözlük* [Sour Dictionary], which is an online dictionary-forum similar to *urbandictionary* built up on user contribution where users can comment on anything and everything anonymously, there is a topic titled 'Acun abi' [Acun brother], in which users comment on people calling Ilıcalı as 'Acun abi' since most of the

contestants in all his formats call him ‘abi’.<sup>19</sup> In *Survivor*, he often underlines the long time he spent with the contestants in the island and how much he got used to them, while he often expresses that he was very sorry for the eliminated names. In *Survivor 2020 Celebrities-Volunteers*, due to the fact that they could not leave the island because of COVID-19, he spent 3 months with the contestants in the island even after they eliminated from the game and this allowed him to establish an intimate relationship with them which he often expressed during the show. Even in Dominican Republic, he concerns the Turkish traditions and continues them to his audience: he gives gifts to the contestants, makes them meet their loved ones during the Ramadan feast, along with making special episodes during the feast and consequently creates an atmosphere of sincerity. By showing his bond to the traditions and priorities of Turkish people, he supports his image of being one of us. Ilıcalı, who also frequently mentions this image in interviews has supported this idea by saying: “No matter what happens in my life or how rich I become, I never give up Turkey and the streets; the love here is very different. The people of my place are coming to overlook our mistakes. They say ‘Acun is our child.’” (TV100, 2019).

Considering the previous game-docs or quiz shows in Turkey, it is visible that the formats had very few differences compared to adapted versions. *Survivor* in *Cengiz Semercioğlu ile Sabah Sohbeti* [Morning Chat with Cengiz Semercioğlu], a daytime talk show hosted by Cengiz Semercioğlu, one of the most famous tabloid writers and gossip show hosts in Turkey, in TV100: “The format of *Survivor* in Turkey is my invention; there is no such *Survivor* in the world and in my opinion, the adapted one is boring which is held as an adventure competition. We started making *Survivor* with another mentality about 7-8 years ago and started to evaluate the show from a sporting point of view, which made the competition more athletic. It really attracted a lot of attention from our audience that we brought together our athletes in many branches, both amateur and professional, as well as volunteers who are passionate

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<sup>19</sup> Topic titled ‘Acun Abi’: (<https://eksisozluk.com/acun-abi--2715091>)

about sports. In this way, we actually turned it into a sportive activity. This was indeed the most successful competition of the last 10 years in our country” (TV100, 2019).<sup>20</sup>

While broadcasting *Deal or No Deal* and *Survivor*, he bought the format of *Got Talent* and started broadcasting on Show TV at prime-time as *Yetenek Sizsiniz Türkiye* [You are the Talent Turkey] (The name of the show means both “You are the Talent” and “You are Talentless” with the play on words) (2009-2015, 2017-present). The show attracted great attention and remained on the agenda with what both the contestants, Acun, and other jury members said and done. Considering the sharp difference as a screen persona between Cowell and Acun, instead of playing the blunt member of the jury, Ilıcalı gave this role to Ali Taran, who is a famous advertiser/publicity agent. While he was in a jury member in the show, he married the writer Ayşe Özyılmazel, 18 days after his divorce with his wife who was a cancer patient at that time, has been on the agenda of tabloid press for a long time. After his ex-wife died from cancer, he left his place as a jury member. For Taran and his leave of the show, Ilıcalı said: “It was because having this marriage in front of the public. More precisely, having a marriage in a way that upset the ex-spouse who was fighting with cancer. Of course, it is none of my business, but I have the right not to have him in my show” (Altaylı, 2011). He saw the reaction of Turkish people to Taran and made a move to prevent the show from being harmed by this reaction, and with the statement he made, which indicates that his values are parallel to the public’s, he increased his mass acceptability as a public persona. The fact that he re-included Taran in the jury in 2015 after 4 seasons also shows how accurately he could analyze the public. Ilıcalı, just like Cowell, with his sincere relations with the jury members and his funny dialogues as a result of his stand-up experience, is far more than a judge; he is a choreographer. Again, the reporting and stand-up history is very

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<sup>20</sup> See the entire interview: ([https://youtu.be/OLlk\\_yJ9DMA](https://youtu.be/OLlk_yJ9DMA))



beneficial for Acun to construct an intimate environment and his wit helped the shows he hosts or judges to be more entertaining.

Acun's restlessness which he often highlights in the interviews and entrepreneurship conferences he attends, is another feature stands out for him as a media personality. In his speech in July 2019, he states that he went to Dominican Republic for *Survivor* sometimes 11-12 times in a season, his life was spent on the plane and this is now the normal for him. Ilıcalı, who makes his own PR by participating in the shows of his friends whom he knew well in the media, often talks about his achievements and successes. However, he does not boast about doing this, but seems to be telling the ordinary, and supports his hardworking and modest image. He never rests on his laurels and always keeps going to stay ahead of the game. While already broadcasting 2 talent shows and game-docs on TV, he bought the rights of *The Voice* and started broadcasting in 2011. Ilıcalı says that he bought the format, although the format owner Dutch company has already agreed with another Turkish channel, by referring to his success in his previous formats in Turkish prime-time television (Ilıcalı, 2018). This unusual process of ending an agreement with another channel to own the format also reveals Ilıcalı's self-confidence and ambition as a businessman. *The Voice Turkey* became one of the most successful branches of the format in the world and he started producing *The Voice Greece* in Greece, where he has also been doing *Survivor* for a long time now.

In addition to Turkey and Greece, he is currently producing the Mexican version of the format, *The Voice Mexico*. Although Turkish television exports *dizis* to many different countries of the world<sup>21</sup>, as mentioned in the introduction chapter, no reality television format has been exported before Ilıcalı. Acun signed an agreement with *Azteca* channel in Mexico in 2018 to manage all the contents of the channel for 3

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<sup>21</sup> Data indicating that Turkey is among the most series exporting countries: (<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/kultur-sanat/abdden-sonra-en-fazla-dizi-ihrac-eden-ulke-turkiye/1641524>)

years.<sup>22</sup> The same year, he signed a prime-time broadcasting agreement with the American *Telemundo* channel, which targets the Latin American audience, 5 days a week.<sup>23</sup> Currently there is no company in Turkey except Acun Medya which produces global content except for TV series.

As Holmes states that, reality TV as a genre, “aims to strip away the celebrity façade, exploiting viewers’ hunger for seeing famous faces outside their usual media roles” (Holmes, 2008, p. 131). Su Holmes believes that reality television satisfies the audiences’ desire to see celebrities under the intense pressure and stress that ordinary people experiences in every day life. Watching the celebrities who we always used to see the glamorous lives and their best, fighting for food in *Survivor* or getting anxious as the options narrow in *Deal or No Deal* gives the audience a different pleasure (Holmes, 2008, p. 131). David Marshall states that, “the television host’s status as a celebrity is built on proximity to other celebrities and celebrity systems and (...) their own status as celebrities is also modalized around familiarity (Marshall, 1997, p. 126). This closeness and familiarity are the essential factors that deepen the celebrity persona and make it more meaningful for public. The proximity and friendliness of the audience depends on this familiarity established by the host (Marshall, 1997, p. 126).

Acun used this hunger for seeing celebrities undone and the proximity to the celebrities and celebrity systems in his favor in his shows. In *Deal or No Deal*, he has celebrity guest competitors such as Paris Hilton, Christina Aguilera, 50 Cent, Adriana Lima, Alessandra Ambrossio, Cem Yılmaz, Bruce Willis, and Emma Heming. In *Survivor*, between 2011 and 2014, all seasons were in the concept of Celebrities vs Volunteers. In 2015, *Survivor All Star* included different celebrities and

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<sup>22</sup> Related article: (<https://www.haberler.com/acun-ilicali-meksika-nin-en-buyuk-medya-grubuyla-11044387-haberi/>)

<sup>23</sup> Related article: (<https://www.milliyet.com.tr/cadde/ali-eyuboglu/acun-amerika-da-yarisma-yapacak-2601498>)

volunteers from previous seasons and again between 2016-2018, the format was *Celebrities vs Volunteers*. Finally in 2020, again the ongoing season is combines celebrities and volunteers in Dominican Republic. The seasons which includes celebrities and volunteers were the most watched seasons in the history of *Survivor Turkey*, since by putting the celebrities in an unpredictable and challenging environment with non-celebrities, the show met the audience expectations of reality television. In the current season of *Survivor Celebrities vs Volunteers*, he made two special episodes in which different celebrity friends of Acun played a game similar to ‘Taboo’, called ‘Anlat Bakalım’ (Let’s Tell Me) with video call. Realizing that the ratings of this episode was high, he made an Instagram survey asking if the audience wants another Anlat Bakalım with celebrities. 68% of the 6 millim viewers who voted in the survey answered yes and he made the second version of it with different celebrities in 18 May 2020 again. The episode has been a subject of the news before it was released and gained great interest from the audience. Realizing that the ratings of this episode was high, he made an Instagram survey asking if the audience wants another ‘Anlat Bakalım’ with celebrities. 68% of the 6 million viewers who voted in the survey answered yes and he made the second version of it with different celebrities in 18 May 2020 again. The episode has been a subject of the news before it was released and gained great interest from the audience.

Buying TV8, in his own words, was one of the milestones of Acun’s career trajectory. In 2013, he took a great risk and bought TV8, which at that time had 1% audience share, by investing all his money. TV8 has established on February 22, 1999 under MNG Media as a news channel. In 2003, it changed its telecasting format into entertainment and changed its logo. It continues its broadcasting life with Acun Media in the period from 2013 until today. Ilıcalı's comment for TV8 is following: “We can say that it is the channel that can entertain people, make people smile, laugh and have fun while watching” (Youtube, 2013). The channels broadcast stream usually includes reality shows, and there are no news bulletins. According to a recent

report published by RTÜK, the most-watched program types in Turkey is the news bulletins (RTÜK, 2018, p. 53). TV8, which had 1% share in prime-time when Ilıcalı bought it, six years later, according to Turkey Statistical Institute's 2019 data, TV8 came second after Fox TV with 8.4 % share. Again, according to the same statistics, the most watched program type on Fox TV is news, and not broadcasting news on TV8 clearly shows the success of the channel (RTÜK, 2018). Ilıcalı claims that being a television producer is more difficult in Turkey than it is anywhere else in the world and attributes this difficulty to the presence of eight mainstream channels in competition along with national regulatory body RTÜK's authority on channels and shows. Despite all these difficulties, he managed to carry a channel from bottom to the top with his unerring analysis of the audience, inventiveness and spotting the commercial potential, along with his openness to new practices as a businessman, which is the biggest part of his persona.

As Mittell (2004) states that, "Channel identity and branding have been important practices in establishing the reality genre" (Mittell, 2004, pp. 199). In this context, it is possible to understand how Acun conducts his celebrity persona and corporate identity equidistantly by looking at his use of personal Instagram account. Ilıcalı, who shared his first Instagram post on 21 March 2015 with the gradual popularization of the platform, rather than sharing himself or his family, chose *Survivor All Star* contestants for his first post. In this way, he signaled an identity formation on social media in which he integrated himself with his brand and channel. As Kavka states that, "extension of televisual material—from long form serialization to ancillary ephemera—across any screen with reception or playback capacity has altered the TV watching habits" (Kavka, 2012, p. 297). Acun once again used the developments in technology in his favor by establishing a website named [acunn.com](http://acunn.com) and publishing all episodes of his shows, all teasers of new episodes and backstage footages that was not included to the television content. He is strictly careful about copyright of his shows and does not allow any platform to share his shows other than

his own website. In addition, with TV8's online live broadcasting feature, also enabled his shows to be watched online connected to his domains and benefited the multiple screens.

As mentioned, although the digital revolution in television viewing habits in Turkey is not affected as much as other countries, to ignore the point where social media comes in the world, would be one of the biggest mistakes that can be made by an entrepreneur. In this context, Ilıcalı, who is known for his entrepreneurship and openness to innovations in every field, came to the fore in the last season of *Survivor* with the link he established between the program and his personal Instagram account, which he previously integrated with his corporate identity. Especially in *Survivor 2020 Celebrities - Volunteers* season, he chose Cemal Can Cansever—who became the winner in July 15— as a contestant of Volunteers team who is an Instagram influencer with 2.6 million followers and became famous as one of the most popular Instagram and Youtube celebrity, Danla Bilic's best friend<sup>24</sup>. This choice enabled the show to be on social media for a long time before it was started and he guaranteed the ready-made audience from Instagram. Likewise, starting from the first episode of this season, he gave different tasks to the contestants every week which he shares the final pieces in his Instagram account and offers audience to vote them on [acunn.com](https://www.acunn.com), allowing the audience to interact with the program through three different platforms. In the communication prize he gives every week as a result of a competition, Acun goes live on Instagram with the contestants to make them answer audiences' questions and use Instagram live videos in his personal account simultaneously with *Survivor Panorama* in TV8. On the evening of May 25, 2020, Ilıcalı, who performed the program live for the first time in its history—except from its final episodes—, held a real-time competition in which the audience participated on Instagram. Participation in the contest where the contestants tried to predict the

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<sup>24</sup> Danla Bilic's Youtube Account: (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJXKKGzjjqnHAEkJsdC7ZKw>)

Cemal Can Cansever's Instagram Account: (<https://www.instagram.com/cemalcancanseven/?hl=en>)

percentage of answers to the questions asked by İlcalı to 11.4 million followers was over 6 million. The same evening, as soon as the competition ended, he broke the record of 2 million Instagram live broadcast views, which was previously held by rapper Tekashi, by being watched by 3.4 million people on Instagram.<sup>25</sup> By using his personal account for his shows and formats, he strengthens the unbreakable bond between his brand and his persona. Considering his place as a celebrity businessman, what makes him different than the personas in business world, such as Hakan and Hacı Sabancı, is the fact that his work is entertainment. In order to be successful in his business, he benefits from his media and television personality and connects his brand to his personas to maintain his image in both sides.

It is not only his career and business that made him exceptional as a celebrity and allowed him to eliminate all his rivals one by one. Considering his career, public persona and celebrity value, *Deal or No Deal* has a great impact on his public visibility along with his career. The 2009 season, which is the most watched season of the program, has become a turning point in the private life of Acun and has caused his tabloid personality to begin to take shape gradually. Considering the national celebrities within the broader world of business/wealth/socialite coverage both national and internationally, such as Hacı and Hakan Sabancı, who are the heirs to the throne of Sabancı family, one of the wealthiest families in Turkey,<sup>26</sup> their media coverages are generally within the framework of their business or their social status / wealth and extraordinary lives. Another factor that distinguishes Acun from the well-known names of business world is the fact that Acun achieved fame at a very young

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<sup>25</sup> Tekashi 6ix9ine Returns, Has Most Watched Instagram Live: (<https://www.eonline.com/videos/307077/tekashi-6ix9ine-returns-has-most-watched-instagram-live>)

<sup>26</sup> According to the Forbes billionaires list of 2016, Sabancı Family is one of the richest families of Turkey with an estimated fortune ranging between \$20–30 billion.: (<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-50-wealthiest-people-named-in-forbes-2016-list-2726#photo-7>) Hacı Ömer Sabancı, who was trading cotton in Adana in 1925, had the opportunity to buy the factories left by foreigners after the Armenian deportation with very low sums and established many factories. Sabancı Holding was established a year after his death and introduced the Sabancı logo to the world by combining its name with companies with which it mostly established 50-50 partnerships, including world giants such as Bridgestone, DuPont, Toyota, Philip Morris, Kraft Foods International, Danone, IBM, Carrefour.

age in front of the cameras. In Turkey, most of the richest businessmen are over a certain age, (Murat Ülker is 61, Semahat Koç is 92, Erman Ilıcak is 53) and choose to live their lives out of sight. Their children follow the same path and although their relationships are covered in media, the weight is in their business lives rather than private lives. For Acun, it was the same way until it changed in 2009.

#### 5.4. Tabloid Personality

In 2009, while he was still married to Zeynep Ilıcalı, mother of his two daughters, rumors about his relationship with one of the contestants of *Deal or No Deal*, Şeyma Subaşı, started to be discussed in tabloid press. The claims that he has a relationship with Subaşı, who was called to *Deal or No Deal* as a contestant after making her name visible with Miss Turkey contest she participated in 2008, and worked as a costume designer in Ilıcalı's *Yok Böyle Dans* after *Deal or No Deal*, were constantly on the agenda of press and social media during 2009-2010. The news about the couple, who became the subject of the news as their photos taken together leaked to the press, turned out to be more juicy news for tabloid press when Zeynep Yılmaz filed for divorce with the claim that Acun has an affair with a woman who is 21 years younger than him. His image of having an exemplary family life ("İhaneti en son eşi duydu", 2010), started to shake with the news. Although he refused his relationship, he was unable to prevent his photos with Subaşı being leaked to tabloid press. While the news about his marriage was put into cold storage after their divorce was postponed by the court, the news about Subaşı and Ilıcalı continued to be published. In 2012, by answering the questions about a photo of Subaşı in one of his parties as "I have never talked about my private life and I won't speak now as well. Miss Şeyma is no different from any employee of our company, she came that night and joined the party, that's all" he tried to remain away from agenda for a while (Şahin, 2012).

His phenomenal success, along with his skills to analyze his audience, depends on his knowledge of the TV industry, working with industry's most successful teams in terms of management and marketing which allows him to know how to manage his persona in public where there is a scandal. Since, as Turner (2014) states that, "celebrity carries a certain amount of power and autonomy depending on its public image, that image should be managed well" (Turner, 2014, p. 16). It would not be wrong to say that Ilıcalı, who is at the center of the media since the beginning of his career, uses his acquaintances in the sector for his image control. As Gamson (1994) states that, the talk-show interviews are popular locations for the exercise of image control since the nature of conversation and the format specificities together create an illusion of intimacy and reality (Gamson, 1994 p. 47). Ilıcalı, who manage his own image in both his own shows and shows of his friends from the industry successfully, was able to protect himself to some extent from unwanted news thanks to this network in the sector. However, with the increasing popularity of Subaşı in social and traditional media and the birth of couple's daughter, Melisa, in Miami in 2013, while Ilıcalı was still married to Zeynep Ilıcalı, placed them in tabloid press' agenda irrevocably. According to Cashmore (2006), such scandals are the center of attention for the audiences by providing interesting narratives to them indicating that the publicist control is insufficient. Such failures experienced by celebrities in managing their lives can be regarded as beneficial up to a point as they create the perception that they are not very special for the audience. By determining the visibility of the celebrity in media and culture, can be even beneficial if managed correctly during and after. In such a context, "scandals that once damned the famous have become opportunities for replenishing a celebrity career" (Cashmore, 2006, p. 161). In Acun's case, all these scandals evolving around their affair made him much more visible in Turkish press and made people more involved his off-screen life which expanded beyond the strict brand focus.



Su Holmes (2008) asserts that, the invisibility of the wealth of celebrities is crucial in constructing the public persona, since the phenomenon itself is ultimately hierarchical and discussing their wealth enlarges the gap between them and public, they are discouraged to demonstrate their extraordinary lives in front of the people who cannot achieve that (Holmes, 2008, p. 130). Subaşı's increasing popularity in social media and openness about her life made it difficult for Acun. Acun, who controlled every detail, experience and development about his life with the programs and interviews he participated in, has opened a part of his life to his audience with the visibility of Subaşı that he has never opened before. As of this writing, Subaşı has 3.2 million followers on Instagram and have a YouTube channel active since September 2019, has 161K subscribers. Increasing number of followers of Subaşı on Instagram and her sharing the luxury and colorful life step by step quickly shaped the agenda around the couple. While she was an idol for some as a fashion icon and a party woman, criticized by others as being the mistress who broke up a family ("Şeyma Subaşı: Metres etiketine alıştım", 2019). At this point, by being a subject of the agenda with her pricy clothes, the festivals she attends such as Burning Man and Coachella, and her expensive life, has revealed the extraordinary life of the couple which Acun Ilıcalı was trying to keep out of sight throughout his career. Although he has made a great fortune, by controlling his image meticulously, he also managed to maintain his intimate personality. Richard Dyer's paradox of stars being both ordinary and extraordinary can be explained, according to Wilson, by the audience perception of celebrities as people with extraordinary wealth but remain untransformed by this (Dyer 1998; Wilson 2003).

Ilıcalı, who frequently underlines how he works hard, emphasizes that the great wealth he has in this way is well-deserved. When his clothing style is examined, Ilıcalı, who constantly wears black t-shirt, cargo shorts and flip flops, supports the image of the ordinary thanks to this image. However, even though he may seem ordinary, Acun has been able to talk more about money as the wealth of Subaşı

continues to be spoken. By speaking on issues which are not accustomed to be spoken on television in Turkey such as debts and salaries in the programs he participates, he creates a very open and honest persona to his audience and close the gap between himself and his audience. Despite this great fortune, Ilıcalı is the 'hardworking child of our family' for the people who have brought him to the top 5 in the Celebrity Trust Index every year since 2011. The impact of the significant place of tax payers list in celebrity culture of Turkey is undeniable for this public trust. In Turkey, tax evasion is a common situation among Turkish celebrities and is frequently reported in the news; by being a tax payment record holder, the celebrities express a sense of patriotism as well as honesty and reliability tool. Frequently, on Twitter, a 'tax' debate arose between Acun Ilıcalı and the lawyer Gönenç Gürkaynak, who is on the list of tax payers. The discussion started with Gürkaynak's tweet, "Acun Ilıcalı is going to buy a football club in Europe. He was ranked 83rd among tax champions in 2018; I was 9th on that list. I cannot buy a club in Europe".<sup>27</sup> With these words, Gürkaynak implied Ilıcalı's tax evasion and emphasized his own credibility. Acun Ilıcalı, who responded to Gürkaynak on Twitter, said, "I agree that you cannot buy a football club in Europe. Can it be because you are not producing shows on the biggest channels of 8 different countries? I have been in that list for at least 10 years. Don't use me to advertise your tax paying, these are ugly tactics. ("Acun Ilıcalı ile Gönenç Gürkaynak", 2020).

Creating an honest image with the high taxes he pays, Ilıcalı also used his wealth as a supporter of a positive image with his helps to the people in need. According to Rojek, celanthropy, which is the term used for the donations and charity work performed by celebrities to support their public image, is an essential part of creating an acceptable public image. By indicating that the celebrity is a responsible, caring citizen, and has a good heart, celanthropy is important for audience to accept the hierarchical gap between them and the celebrities (Rojek, 2012, p. 69). With the aid

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<sup>27</sup> Related article (<https://www.birgun.net/haber/acun-ilicali-ile-gonenc-gurkaynak-arasinda-vergi-tartismasi-300159>)

campaign for the citizens damaged in the earthquake in Elazig in January, he has collected 73 million liras. Also during Ramadan in 2020, he provided food to 20 thousand families in need, through the aid campaign launched by the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan due to COVID-19 (“Acun Ilıcalı sosyal”, 2020; “Acun Ilıcalı'dan dev bağış”, 2020).

Revealing his wealth was not the only result of his relationship with Subaşı. Ilıcalı became one of the most spoken names in the country after this relationship started and what people wanted to hear about him started to change. In the report prepared by the Medya Takip Merkezi [Media Monitoring Center], Ilıcalı has been chosen as the most spoken celebrity every year since 2017. In 2017, he became the subject of the news 38 thousand 737 times.<sup>28</sup> In this great visibility, the impact of his marriage with Şeyma Subaşı after his divorce with Zeynep Yılmaz in 2016, is tremendous. Their divorce in November 2018 is another most covered topic. Having such a short marriage after having a long relationship increased the rumors about their marriage. The custody case they opened for their daughter, together with their relationships with others, is another issue that occupied the agenda in February 2019 and made Ilıcalı the most spoken celebrity again. The custody case, in which many rumors were raised about its reason, resulted in Ilıcalı having the custody of Melisa in February.

As Rojek states that, “celebrity culture revolves around rumour and hersey as much as professional reporting” (Rojek, 2012, p. 7). In such a context, media visibility, which started with a scandalous relationship at the beginning, has become a feature that distinguishes Acun from his competitors. Considering the media coverage of Ilıcalı, it is seen that more personal information is included in the search results made under the name of Ilıcalı such as his relationships, his daughters’ life events, private jets, planes and cars he owns, his family vacations etc., after his relationship with

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<sup>28</sup> See Media Monitoring Center’s Report: (<https://www.medyatakip.com.tr/2017-yilina-damga-vuran-unlu-isimler-belirlendi/devami/>)

Şeyma Subaşı. In this context, he managed to have an exceptional celebrity amongst the other business persons or media bosses, by also being a successful media personality.

This chapter aimed to examine Acun Ilıcalı's celebrity value in the context of Turkish television and media, and analyze the construction of his celebrity brand throughout his career. His experience in the media sector and his ability to spot commercial potential, together with his knowledge of audience preferences, helped him to achieve great success as a media boss, and his way of establishing his persona made him one of the 500 most influential people in the world according to Variety Magazine ("Acun Ilıcalı "En Etkili 500 İsim" arasında", 2019). Thanks to his never-ending diligence, hardworking skills, ability to make his own promotion and his network in the industry, he gained a media visibility and wealth that went on constantly during his 30-year career. His way of understanding different cultures and the preferences of those cultures made his formats successful in not only in Turkey but the all markets he is in which makes him exceptional amongst his local rivals. Ilıcalı, who uses his own signatures in every format he adapts, by placing himself and his public image in the center of his shows, distributed his celebrity value along with the format globally and supported his public image in different cultural environments.

The steps he has taken throughout his career and the image he has carefully created both on television screens and other media platforms bear the traces of intimacy, which is the benefit of television as a medium and reality TV as a genre. The most significant personality trait that distinguishes him from his rivals is the illusion of intimacy that he has created delicately for years. He made full use of the technological features of television and the contributions of reality television, and made people see him as 'ordinary' and 'one of us' despite the great wealth he had. Ilıcalı, who has a real dominance in Turkish television thanks to his ability in market

analysis and the formats he has created, thanks to these programs, has brought new faces to the Turkish media and supported his image day by day.

Although the persona and sector experience he created has taken him a few steps ahead of his competitors, his tabloid personality and the scandals about his private life made him more visible in Turkish media culture which allowed him to maintain his personality intertextually by managing this tabloid value judiciously.

According to the rating reports, which he shares the results every week on his website, *Survivor* is experiencing the most successful period of its history in 2020. The viewers who turned to television with the effect of COVID-19 and the quarantine process and the fact that Ilıcalı could not return from Dominican Republic and therefore was present in every episode increased both the success of the program and his media visibility. His methods, signatures and public persona what transformed him into a media emperor from an ordinary sports reporter, also reveal the demands and expectations of the Turkish audience and the media parameters in Turkey.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Although celebrated individuals have been with us since societies existed, the notion as we know it today started with the rise of industrialized Hollywood studio system and Hollywood stars in the 90s. This concept brought with it the audience's curiosity about the real lives of the screen characters they admire and identify themselves with, and the logic of celebrity started to be applied in the wider range of social spheres. While, through time, many scholars brought their perspectives and defined the notion by different theories, the latest studies share the idea that celebrities are not only individuals with exceptional status in society, but social and cultural phenomena by being both a commodity and an industry in their own right. While the way celebrities affect us show their significance and place in culture, the way we 'chose' them to celebrate reveals the values and preferences of the culture.

As mentioned, Turkish media is now a global market which exports *dizis*, films and consequently celebrities. The multimedia personalities of Turkish celebrities and their success in maintaining this personality contain very important clues for the future of celebrity culture in a climate where media technologies are developing and the number of platforms are increasing day by day. This system, which has its own unique specificities, has been moved to a very different point from the star system that started with Yeşilçam. In this context, the examination of Turkish media and

celebrities is important for understanding Turkish media, which is becoming more and more open to the world.

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to examine the ways Turkish celebrities construct their public identity, by providing a background information about the Turkish entertainment industry. In this regard, I examined three strong cases from Turkish popular culture: Cem Yılmaz, Seda Sayan, and Acun Ilıcalı, each of which has different career paths and represents different genres, to see whether there are recurring themes which create a pattern to explain the specificities of celebrity culture in Turkey.

In order to situate the names chosen for the purposes of this study in the context of Turkish media, and to examine their celebrity construction practices, I have examined the media and industries they represent, and tried to provide an industry analysis with the close reading of their products. To situate them in the context of Turkish popular culture, I have used their biographies and analyzed the news they appear from the beginning of their careers.

The analysis of Seda Sayan, who dominates day-time television talk shows in Turkey and is known as ‘Sultan of the mornings’, revealed that she constructed her celebrity persona around the aura of familiarity, illusion of intimacy, and ordinariness, which all together helped her to gain public trust. Sayan’s control over her persona, along with her understanding of her target audience, is evident in her construction of celebrity and the ability to maintain her fame for three decades. By narrating her autobiography on screens and performing her personal life in front of her audience, Sayan managed to be perceived as so familiar that she became the ‘bacı’ of everyone. The tabloid side of her celebrity is one of the strongest supporters of her public visibility and fame which provided her a great fortune. Her way of constructing her persona across different media reveals the importance of Turkish audience gave to

‘intimacy’ and ‘ordinariness’, and their desire to know personal life of the celebrity to feel more familiar which made their connection with the person stronger and encourage them to consume more.

Considering Cem Yılmaz and his way of constructing his celebrity as the comedy star of Turkey, the study shows that he created a flexible celebrity across different media, by carrying his signature practices and comedic style to all media outlets. By conveying authenticity through autobiographical narratives in both his stand-up performances and his films, he has promoted a sense of familiarity and intimacy among his audience who believes to have knowledge about him. Although living an extraordinarily wealthy life, his well-managed public persona appears to be ‘ordinary’ and ‘intimate’ with the help of his use of ‘shaming’ anecdotes of his personal life on the stages. By using a cross-cultural comedic style, he benefits the intertextuality and nostalgia to make his audience connected to him and his work across different media. His way of talking about his personal life and using his media coverage, which is significant because of his tabloid side, as a comedic element, he aims to close the gap between the persona and the actual person behind it in audiences’ perception. Being a multi-media personality is the core of Yılmaz’s celebrity and his ability to maintain this celebrity in different media makes him exceptional in the context of Turkish comedy.

The analysis of Acun Ilıcalı, who started his career as a sports reporter and became the media emperor in Turkey, revealed that in the process of becoming the most talked-about celebrity, he benefited from his media experience which allowed him to understand audience behaviors. As a media personality, his knowledge and experience in the industry helped him to manage his image carefully. Along with his experience, his creativity, talent in spotting the commercial potential, and his entrepreneurship contributed his celebrity as a businessman.



The turning point, in Ilıcalı's case, besides the illusion of intimacy he created which distinguishes him from his rivals, is his tabloid side started to be talked in 2009 with his affair with Şeyma Subaşı while still being married. His success in navigating this turning point between these personae is what makes him exceptional in the context of Turkish media. His way of creating intimate relationships with both the audiences, celebrities, and the contestants in his shows, made audience feel more familiar to him. Ordinarity, which is the essential feature of reality television, is what Acun used in the process of constructing his celebrity even though he is one of the wealthiest people in Turkey. Thanks to his public image which is attached to the traditions and country, despite this wealth, he was able to maintain the perception of ordinarity in the eyes of his audience.

Throughout the thesis, some concepts emerged in each case, revealing the patterns that explain the functioning of Turkish celebrity system. To begin with, there is a visible tendency among Turkish celebrities towards existing in more than one medium. The cases chosen for the purposes of study became successful by controlling and narrating their celebrity across different media forms which helps to understand the way Turkish entertainment industry functions. One of the most important features that distinguishes Turkish celebrity system from its counterparts, especially Hollywood-American celebrity culture, is this versatile media usage. Celebrities in many parts of the world, once they find their niche, choose to remain there. However in Turkey, the situation is quite different. Being a celebrity can be likened to playing chess in Turkey in which the right moves can mean that the whole is theirs, as long as they have the key, they can cross all boundaries. For Turkish audience, the key, which is the second concept that repeats itself throughout the study, is the illusion of intimacy which each of these cases created in different ways.

In Sayan's case, the illusion of intimacy is created by her way of narrating her autobiography on screens and performing her personal life in front of her audiences.

Her background as a slums kid and her conscious use of this background have persuaded her audience to perceive her as ‘one of us’, a person who knows the difficulties of poverty. By frequently highlighting that she does not change with fame and always remained the same reinforces the illusion of intimacy, along with the help of genre specificities. In Cem Yılmaz’s case, the illusion of intimacy is created by a successful use of edited autobiography, along with the intertextuality between the characters he created for different media contexts. His way of performing the ordinary in his films and stand-up performances, sharing shaming personal experiences, along with his use of everyday problems as comedic element, made audiences feel that although he lives an extraordinary life, he is someone ‘familiar’. In Ilıcalı’s case, the intimacy is created by his relationship with both his audiences, the contestants, and the celebrities in an environment which supports ordinariness and creates an illusion of reality. His way of sharing his experiences in every possible media outlet reinforces his intimate personality.

One of the most frequently recurring concepts in of thesis is ordinariness. As can be seen from the picture that emerged throughout the study, the Turkish celebrity system is an area where Dyer's ordinary-extraordinary paradox often proves itself. Considering the names selected from different genres and media, and their career paths along with the audience preferences, one can claim that ordinariness is one of the unchangeable cornerstones of celebrity culture in Turkey. These names, which can be considered among the richest celebrities of the country, have managed to look as ordinary and close to their audience as possible, with the help of the persona they have strategically created step-by-step in media. By placing ordinariness in the center of intimacy they created, they strengthen the identification that the audience established with them, which provides their fame.

At this point, the question of what is ordinariness for Turkish audience arises. In order to give a clear answer to this question, it is necessary to look at how the celebrities examined throughout the study set this perception.

Looking at the career paths and media coverage of the names examined up to this point, it is seen that there are specific features celebrities should have in order to be considered ‘one of us’. For women, getting married and having children after reaching a certain age, avoiding stages—even for a short time—after having children, ‘disciplining themselves’ after the birth of their child and even serial monogamy, as Seda Sayan’s case illustrates, can be shown as the examples of these specific features.<sup>29</sup> A female celebrity who is loyal to her husband or the man in her life, who is honest, who appears to put her motherhood before her job and respects religious values, can be regarded as ‘one of us’ by the public, no matter how extraordinary her life is. Looking specifically at Seda Sayan, it is possible to see that Sayan took advantage of all of these while setting up her public persona. Expressing at every opportunity that she was ‘disciplined’ after the birth of her child and crowning of almost every long-lasting relationship she had with marriage can also be considered as a strategy to increase her acceptability by the public. In this context, in order for a female celebrity to be accepted as ordinary, she should act in accordance with the ‘Turkish family structure’ which is frequently emphasized by RTÜK.<sup>30</sup>

Compared to these conditions imposed on women in the spotlight, it is much easier for male celebrities to be considered as ordinary for the Turkish audience. The Turkish people consider the strong, masculine and patriarchal men as being ordinary. When the importance of monogamy for a female celebrity in terms of her image in

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<sup>29</sup> <sup>29</sup> Sayan claims that she disciplined herself after the birth of her son in her reply to Erol Köse. (Video) <http://beyazgazete.com/video/tv-programlari/beyaz-tv-81/beyazin-sultani-beyaz-tv-238035/beyazin-sultani-84-bolum-238752.html>

<sup>30</sup> The most common type of warning and punishment RTÜK gives to channels is violation of general morality and family structure.

society is compared with the same situation for a male celebrity, it is seen that the social pressure for formally sanctioned sexual relationships (that is, marriage) is much stronger for female celebrities. In the case of Acun Ilıcalı's affair with Şeyma Subaşı, it is quite clear that the news are not developed within the framework of Acun Ilıcalı, his character, and his affair, but rather within the framework of Şeyma Subaşı's being a mistress. Years after their relationship ended, Subaşı's being a mistress, her new relationships, and her motherhood are constantly discussed in both traditional and social media.<sup>31</sup> While Ilıcalı's relationship with his 5 children from 3 separate marriages is never mentioned, Subaşı's holidays, festivals and her motherhood are constantly questioned. Similarly, the news about Cem Yılmaz's new relationship with Serenay Sarıkaya, who was 18 years younger than him, immediately after his relationship with Defne Samyeli ended, are shaped around Defne Samyeli's depression.<sup>32</sup> It is, therefore, considered "ordinary" for Turkish male celebrities to change partners, and for their romantic history to have little to no effect on their latest professional accomplishments or their overall celebrity status.

One of the most significant features that the Turkish celebrities must have in order to be ordinary, regardless of gender, is their respect to Islamic values. Although none of the characters studied are prominent with their religious beliefs, it is clear that each of them has special occasions in which they show their respect for Islamic values. The fact that Seda Sayan went to Hajj as soon as she got divorced and the way she

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<sup>31</sup> News covering Şeyma Subaşı's motherhood, relationships and lifestyle: (<https://www.sozcu.com.tr/hayatim/magazin-haberleri/seyma-subasi-burning-man-festivali-paylasimiyla-dikkat-ekti/>) (<https://www.takvim.com.tr/galeri/magazin/acun-ilicalinin-eski-esi-seyma-subasi-sevgilisi-guido-seniaya-ihanet-mi-ediyor-soke-eden-fotograf>) (<https://www.nutuk.com.tr/boyle-annelik-olur-mu-dedirtti-seyma-subasi-dans-etti-7-yasindaki-kizi-melisa-esyalar-21640h.htm>)

<sup>32</sup> News covering CY's new relationship: (<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/galeri-defne-samyeli-sessizligini-bozdu-cem-yilmaz-serenay-sarikaya-askina-ilk-yorum-41445317>) (<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/galeri-defne-samyeli-cem-yilmazi-sildi-41451019>) (<https://www.cnnturk.com/magazin/defne-samyeli-cem-yilmazi-silemedi>) (<https://www.sozcu.com.tr/hayatim/magazin-haberleri/defne-samyeliden-aciklama-samyeli-cem-yilmaz-ve-serenay-sarikaya-iliskisi-hakkinda-konustu/>)

recounted this journey after her return<sup>33</sup>, Acun Ilıcalı's fasting during Ramadan and keeping the spirit of the feast even when he is in the Dominican Republic, can be shown as the examples of this situation.

For both men and women, national identification is tremendously important. All three celebrities in this study underline how connected they are to Turkey and Turkishness at every opportunity and the fact that all three are tax record holders, indicates that patriotism has a very important place in mass acceptance in the context of Turkish celebrity system.

In addition to all these, similar life experiences that create the illusion of intimacy also play an important role in celebrity ordinariness in Turkey. Seda Sayan's coming from the slum and experiencing poverty and domestic violence puts her in a position closer to her audience. Similarly, Acun Ilıcalı's, loss of his family and bankruptcy he frequently mentions have shaped him as a more ordinary person in the eyes of the public. Cem Yılmaz's use of his shaming memories as an element of comedy on the stage is another example of using flaws to be accepted as ordinary. The problems, flaws and similar life experiences of people which have an extraordinary wealth and reputation, and the way they present them to the public, make the audience feel that they are ordinary people just like themselves.

The illusion of intimacy and ordinariness together reveal another recurrent concept: public trust. Turkish celebrities, in order to gain public trust, need to create a public persona which is intimate and ordinary for their audiences. The fact that each of the celebrities chosen for the study have acquired steady places in the Celebrity Trust Index, which is considered an important resource for media studies in the country, supports this conclusion. The celebrities included in the index are the names

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<sup>33</sup> Sayan's visit to Umre: ([https://www.takvim.com.tr/anasayfa/2010/03/02/seda\\_sayandan\\_umre\\_nasihati](https://www.takvim.com.tr/anasayfa/2010/03/02/seda_sayandan_umre_nasihati))

advertisers most prefer to use and therefore their social and economic values are very high.

Last but not least, the tabloid side of celebrities is another concept that distinguishes them from their competitors, and mirrors the Turkish celebrity culture. Considering the popularity of gossip shows and tabloid press along with the celebrity construction of autobiographical narratives, the performed ‘reality’ of the celebrities is not enough for Turkish audience who wants to know even the smallest details about the personal life of the celebrity they follow. While it is always possible for a celebrity to be named after scandals, the way they manage and navigate the media coverage is what makes a celebrity exceptional in the context of Turkish system, as in most of the countries. Whatever the field and the genre they represent, celebrities who manage to create continuity between tabloid personality and public persona manage to eliminate their competitors. All three celebrities examined for the study are mentioned more frequently with their tabloid aspects than with their jobs, and they maintain their reputation by turning this visibility into an advantage in their careers.

Overall, a detailed analysis of three significant names in Turkish popular culture revealed that, ordinariness and illusion of intimacy are the core of Turkish celebrity culture in which being a multi-media celebrity is highly encouraged. Performed authenticity and the successful narration of tabloid personality, together with public trust, which is the natural consequence of an intimate relationship, supports the public visibility of celebrities in Turkish media.

#### 6.1. Limitations of the Study

Although I believe that I achieved most of my goals aimed for this study, there still are some limitations, mostly because of lack of resources on the topic in Turkish context. Also, the fact that there are no written biographies/autobiographies of the

chosen names made for an unusually wide range of sources across different media outlets, significant investment of time.

## 6.2. Suggestions for Further Studies

What calls for further investigation is whether or not this kind of pattern can be discerned in other celebrities in Turkey, and in other emerging such as social media. The main questions here would be whether and/or how Turkish celebrities launched through social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram have created a public persona that expands across media outlets, and whether/how they generate similar feelings of intimacy with their audiences.

Given the current state of celebrity culture in Turkey, thanks to the export of dizis, they had a recognition outside the borders of Turkey even before social media domination in everyday life. When their ability to maintain their fame across different media, it can be predicted that the system and their global visibility will be more developed throughout the next few decades and being a multi-media personality will be much more common outside Turkey.

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