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Sultan of the mornings: Seda Sayan and daytime talk shows in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of her career in the 1980s, Seda Sayan has become one of the biggest popular culture icons in Turkey, sustaining a multifaceted career in entertainment that includes singing, acting, and, most influentially, television. Sayan's career trajectory from wedding singer to the 'Sultan of the Mornings' illustrates how the Turkish celebrity industry works, and the evolution of her persona as a talk show host tracks the development of the genre format in Turkey. This article considers Seda Sayan's daytime talk shows in order to better understand how she built her audiovisual empire among strong competition to become an exceptional force in Turkish television history. Her shows illustrate identity construction practices over time and have secured her place in Turkish entertainment. Taking this chapter in Sayan's career as its case study, this article offers a brief introduction to the operations of celebrity culture and contemporary media industries in Turkey.

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Self branding; identity construction; celebrity persona; talk show; daytime television

Introduction

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 the famous producer and tabloid commentator Erol Köse, with whom she had worked and who had taken to Twitter to insult her:

You try to humiliate me by being uneducated and uncultured while praising your own medical 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 five 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! (Sayan 2011).

She may not have been aware that this moment on '*Beyazın Seda'sı*', recorded for the broadcast of 14 December 2011, would become a cult text. The video¹ uploaded to YouTube has been viewed more than four million times, with subtitle options in seven

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My current status is Independent Scholar, but the work undertaken to complete this article was done as a postgraduate student at Bilkent University, Ankara.

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languages, and even became a subject for kinetic typography projects.² It 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. Although her career started with singing and was supported by acting in Yeşilçam films, television became the core of Sayan's enduring celebrity. She is synonymous with daytime talk shows, and her celebrity persona impacts heavily on the content and format of her shows. Her use of her own life experience has promoted a sense of intimacy as well as significant public trust and admiration, constructing her celebrity persona around the aura of familiarity, the illusion of intimacy, and the public trust with the help of television as a medium. This article will explore Seda Sayan as a television host and a celebrity brand, unpacking how she has constructed and narrated her persona by using medium and format specificities to her advantage.

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 (Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu (RTÜK) 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 (Cankaya 1997, Akkor 2006, Yıldırım and Esen 2018). When Sayan entered the picture, the star system in Turkey was more dependent on Yeşilçam movies and actors, but since the start of private broadcasting in the 90s, popular culture in Turkey has become more TV-oriented. While trying to attract viewers, Magic Box Star 1 used celebrities that had been banned from TRT screens in new programmes – and one of these names was Seda Sayan. While the arabesque genre³ and the use of slang were strictly prohibited on TRT (Öncü 2000), 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 and Kılıçbay 2005, p. 74). These developments eventually led to the creation of television personalities in Turkey.

Seda Sayan as a television personality

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 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. 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 mediums as star vehicles at different points of her career, and finally by using television, she gave a completely different direction to the persona she had started to create. According to Bennett (2011), the star vehicle can be adapted to the television industry 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, Cashmore 2006, Auslander 2012, 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 favour.

Seda Sayan's broadcasting career started in 1992, when she persuaded producer Osman Yağmurdereli to co-host a talk show. The *Seda – Osman Show* was launched that year on Kanal 6, established by Ahmet Özal, a politician and the son of former Turkish President and Prime Minister Turgut Özal. The first TV talk shows in Turkey, aired on TRT, were generally midnight programmes in which celebrity guests talk about themselves. By the 90s, with the increasing number of private channels, daytime talk shows specifically targeting women began to proliferate (Tanrıöver 2007). 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, towards a more conservative, domestic figure. What set her apart from her competitors on Turkish television was her successful commodification of her rags-to-riches autobiography, in which her status as a multimedia personality combined with the intertextual construction of intimacy and familiarity that were grounded in her own life experiences.

As 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, issues that were 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 neighbourhood in Istanbul where Sayan was born and grew up.

Seda Sayan as a talk show host

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, 2003). Sayan, 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 highly publicised, 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 had completed higher education abroad. Meanwhile, Seda Sayan'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 than her more class-privileged competitors (Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu (RTÜK) 2018, p. 61).

She earned the top spot as Turkey's most trusted celebrity according to the Celebrity Trust Index, calculated from 2007–2012 with *MediaCat* magazine's large-scale surveys of television audiences.⁴ Responding to this status, Sayan attributes this public trust to her 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 who 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 images conformed to upper-middle class taste codes, centring her tough childhood and her claim to be untransformed by her wealth has brought Sayan 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 Centre 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 programmes 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. Key scandals include her name mentioned as a cause of murder in the 80s and her brother in the news for shooting her older brother (Sayan kardeşlerin kavgası kanlı bitti 1999), generating publicity that distinguishes her from her rivals in terms of both class background and media visibility.⁵ Her break-up with producer and arabesque singer Mahsun Kırmızıgül, who was the owner of entertainment company Prestige Music Family, which managed Sayan, occurred just as Turkish interest in tabloid content was increasing and journalists were beginning to cover the lives of national celebrities (Bek 2004, p. 375). During the 1990s, Sayan's sensational break-up made her a media favourite, and this visibility had a positive impact on Seda Sayan's career. Kanal D started to rebroadcast the miniseries *Geceler*

[Nights] and Star TV started to rebroadcast 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 increased so much that the news made her omnipresence a story in itself 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 these appearances added more glamour to her reputation.

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 programmes. 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 have 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 programmes 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 programme starts with a short title sequence featuring Sayan and the day's celebrity guests, then transitions 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 in the context of the programme 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 programme. 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 (Marshall 1997, Bennett 2011).

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 2 February 2009, she thanked her audience for this honour: '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). Because the Celebrity Trust Index was designed primarily to guide communication needs of brands, helping them recruit the most reliable celebrities for their own advertisement, 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 Seda Sayan 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 Beckham’a rakip olacak 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 emphasising her tax payments, Sayan expresses a sense of patriotism as well as honesty and reliability. Addressing this issue in her programme, she announced: ‘I am a tax record holder now. You brought me here; I work, I earn and give to 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 publicising her tax records, she conveys the message that her continued celebrity will enrich all of Turkey.

In recent years, Sayan has taken an indefinite hiatus from her talk show career due to the heavy penalties imposed on her programmes by state media regulator RTÜK. The reason for these penalties was mainly the attitude of RTÜK towards marriage and daytime shows. Penalties⁶ were frequently imposed on these programmes because of the belief that these shows ‘harmed family values’ and regular penalties continued until finally, in 2017, the AKP government banned matchmaking programmes via emergency decree ((İlhan & Usta, 2018)).

Yet Sayan’s rich history on Turkish screens – with 16 movies and series, 14 talk show programmes, as well as 31 recorded albums throughout her career – means that she cannot be erased completely, and her star power has been leveraged by other television shows. Even without her own show, she is a jury member at *The Voice Turkey* and host of cooking competition show *Yemekteyiz* (the Turkish version of *Come Dine with Me*).

Sayan’s control over her persona shows the role of agency and publicity in the process of managing a successful celebrity persona. From the beginning of her career, she has consistently shaped her persona around intimacy, reliability, familiarity, and ordinariness, applying these characteristics 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 publicised assistance for more than 300 families under quarantine due to COVID-19 (Ünlü isimlerden dara düşen ailelere destek 2020). Sayan is a transmedia figure who manages her celebrity across different platforms, and particularly enhances it through the power of television. For many in Turkey, 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.

Notes

1. Seda Sayan Erol Köse'ye Canlı Yayında Küfür!, youtube.com. Available from: <https://youtu.be/cR7Es4hDOSI> [Accessed 28 April 2022].
2. Seda Sayan ın EROL KÖSE ye EFSANE ATARI Kinetic Typography, youtube.com. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YA9Qn2dqJc0> [Accessed 28 April 2022].
3. 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.
4. The article about Sayan being the most trusted celebrity from the beginning of Celebrity Trust Index: <https://mediacat.com/seda-sayan-marketing-bir-hataydi/>
5. In 1982, Milliyet claimed that the death of the famous manager Turgut Akyuz, who was killed in a clash in his bar, was due to Sayan Katilin, Akyüz'ü daha önce üç kez tehdit ettiği belirlendi (1983).
Her break-up with Mahsun Kırmızıgül, who was a famous arabesque singer and producer, kept the agenda for a long time Canlı yayında ağız dalaşı! 1997; 'Dallas gibi! 1997; Mahsun yüreksizdir 1998).
Her past experiences as a child and her brother's drug problems were the most frequently reported topics ('Çocukken kaçak mal sattım' 2009; 'Kardeşim uyuşturucu batağında 2011).
6. For more detailed information about these penalties and how they affected Sayan's stardom: Acar, Aysin Ece. Individual to societal figures: construction of celebrity identity in Turkish media. Diss. Bilkent University, 2020.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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