DECODING INDIA'S POPULAR CULTURE.
THE ROMANIAN WOMEN VIEWERS' GAZE

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Abstract
Our article starts from the assumption that the ingredients of success in the case of the Indian cultural products are based on their "cultural value". India's value of cultural products is multidimensional and it does not strictly reside at the language level known by the public or by just part of it. Our analysis shows that the success of India's popular culture is based on the perception of Romanian audiences of them as a cultural "mix" between the "local" (that is, Indian) elements and the appeal at a set of "global" (universal) values. More precisely, in the case of Romanian audiences for India's cultural products (TV series) there was a validation of theories regarding the cultural hybrid motivations involved in media consumption, theories about the importance of cultural proximity in the consumption of popular culture's products and theories emphasizing globalism and of these cultural products, making them desirable and wanted world-wide.

1. Theoretical framework

The consumption of Indian films and TV series is not a new phenomenon in Romania. As the studies carried out in the field of cultural studies showed, the dissemination of Indian popular culture was specific to the period of "relaxation" from the communist period, those being the years in which the public became acquainted not only with Indian cultural products but also with Western films, mainly French and American ones (Ștefănescu, 2010a; Ștefănescu, 2010b). However, the changes brought about after 1989 in the audiovisual sector pointed out the rediscovery in Romania not only of Western culture, but also of Asian culture, more precisely the Indian culture.

The so-called "Soft Power of Bollywood" (Thussu, 2014) is often used as an example of the success of glocalism (Coman, 2016), surpassing the success of its use by Japan or South Korea. When he defined "soft power" Nye (1991)

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emphasized the difference between power based on coercion ("hard power") and that which uses attraction ("soft power"). Recognizing that it is a multifaceted concept, Nye (2004) has also specified the export of popular culture as the main vehicle through which the world comes to know about and is attracted by a country.

Our paper starts from the theoretical perspective opened by the "cultural trend", whose appearance constituted one of the materializations in the cultural studies of the so-called "turns" (or major changes), since the end of the 50s. This "turn" was marked by the appearance of a vast amount of studies (Hoggart, 2017; Williams, 2010; Hall and Whannel, 2018; Thompson, 2015) who challenged the liberal/idealist tradition, in which values and ideas were considered autonomous and free, separated from the economic and political life of society. At the same time, those authors also challenged earlier Marxist reductionist theories, which saw culture as ultimately determined by the economic basis of society. The new theorists tried to explain culture as having an interrelationship complex with other aspects of political, social and economic life (Calvert et al., 2007). From this perspective, culture is actively produced – it is not a passive receiver, influenced by economic structures; it can, in turn, be influential, can have an effect on other parts of society.

In this vein we used as a theoretical framework a "mix" of theories related to the consumption of popular culture in contemporary societies. Those theories are, first, the perspective which emphasizes globalism and the hybridity of the contemporary cultural products (Chan and Ma, 1996).

Also, we based our analysis and research project on theories about the cultural motivations involved in media consumption (Katz and Liebes, 1984; Katz and Liebes, 1986; Liebes and Katz, 1986) – the fact that the audience wants to be informed and educated, on one hand, and to identify with characters and cultural values presented in the media, on the other hand. Thirdly, we introduced in our theoretical framework the theories which discussed about the importance of cultural proximity in the consumption of popular culture products – that is, the fact that audiences would prefer either their own local or national cultural products or, if those are lacking, they will prefer those from similar, nearby cultures – (Trepte, 2008; Berg, 2017; Straubhaar, 2021) and those which stressed the relationship between cultural distance and cross-cultural consumption of popular culture) – in this case the thesis stated that audiences would find culturally different foreign entertainment interesting if unfamiliar symbols, characters, or storylines are perceived as cognitively challenging, on the one hand, and, on the other, the idea that foreign entertainment consumption could be mediated by the psychological mechanisms of audience's enjoyment and interest (Baek, 2015; Verboord, 2017).

2. Research assumption

In our analysis we assumed that India's value of cultural products is multidimensional and it does not strictly reside at the language level known by the public or by just part of it (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2001).

Following the above-mentioned general framework our research assumption was: the ingredients of success in the case of the Indian cultural products are based on their "cultural value" – the core values of Indian culture concerning the moral behaviors, concerning what is good or bad, what is desirable or what is disdained.

3. Research questions

Our research project attempted to answer the following empirical research questions:

1. What are the levels at which the Indian cultural products are spreading in Romania?
3. What are the influences of this type of popular culture products on the Romanians' perceptions and representations about India's culture and society?
4. What are the factors that explain the increasing popularity of this type of cultural products among Romanian audiences?

4. The methodology

As a result of our adherence to the "cultural" tradition of social research we chose a qualitative research method, namely the individual semi-structured interview. In the period 2016-2018 we conducted thirty-two interviews with Romanian women who were consumers of Indian TV series. The sampling strategy was the "snowball technique" and, as a result of this fact, all our respondents were located in Bucharest.

The coding and data analysis did not use any software and was made by all authors in a balanced manner.

5. Analysis of the results

When asked how they could characterize the Indian culture and society using a single word our respondents mentioned "interesting culture"; "romanticism"; "love"; "pure emotion". Also, they mentioned the fact that, prior to the moment when they started to watch Indian TV series, their knowledge of Indian culture and civilization was minimal.

How did Romanian women start to watch Indian TV series? As our discussion showed, some of them only followed the example of their relatives or friends.

I started to watch those TV series after a friend recommended them to me. (S1)

Other respondents declared that they watched those TV series because they were curious and eager to learn new things about a different society and civilization.

Well, my wife started watching those TV series and as we have only one TV in the house, when she watches them, and I'm home too, whether I want it or not, *I'm forced to watch them. So, gradually, I became curious and…here we are.*

There is also a small proportion of our sample who started to watch Indian TV series after they returned from India and their reason was "to remain in contact" with this country.

My grandmother followed them, and I hated them at that time. For me they seemed boring and awful. But I went to India, I stayed there for almost 3 months, and when I came back I started following those TV series because I missed the culture there that I started to love. And I'm starting to better understand Indian people. At first, the Indians seemed slippery, not very sincere, people who were not very discreet; I had all sorts of opinions and misconception about them. After I was in India, I changed my initial misconceptions and I started to appreciate Indian culture. For me Indians are now respectful, polite people and from whom we have a lot to learn. When I came back, I started watching Indian TV series so that I could learn the language and other things about India's culture and civilization. (S12)

A special question from our interview guide asked the respondents to stress the main values they have identified in the Indian TV series. As our analysis revealed, for many respondents there was a similarity between the values they advocate in daily life and the values they noticed in Indian TV series. A particular stress was put in this respect on the "moral" values (love, honesty, virtue, honor).

Firstly, I mostly like the moral values these series promote – love, virtue, honesty, strength of character. (S16)

The script is commercial indeed, but it also contains many values and deep visions. Eternal values such as: emotion, deep love, soul noblesse, honor. (S8)

I watched half of the series on TVR and it captivated me so much that I looked for the first episodes on YouTube in order to understand the action better. I can say it is a wonderful series, very well directed and played by actors. In time I have identified the values that count so much for me: love, family, respect towards another, sensibility, all these are values that count as much for me as for the main

characters in these series, although these values are presented at a superior level, much higher from a spiritual point of view than in my own case. (S22)

According to the answers registered, the defining attributes for the Indian popular culture products broadcast by Romanian television were: the "sensible" character; "the centrality of family"; "the surprising", "the unexpected" (the last one having a meaning "different from what one could have initially assumed").

Some respondents proved to be eager to share a lot of new information about India with the researchers. We found a lot of interesting and vivid details not only about the simple act of consumption but also about the vast array of motivations and opinions which constituted the "inner world" of Romanian women, such as in the example from bellow:

Q: What do you know now about the culture, history and socio-economic life of India?
A: Enough to know almost everything. First of all, there are many, many per square meter, they have a very high density of population. This also leads to a very close relationship between people and tolerance. Staying in a house with 15 people makes you much more tolerant than staying with one person. That, I think, matters a lot. Another aspect is their social aristocracy. For example, the fact that India in general is characterized by poverty, sometimes even filth. Now, however, I do not make a correlation between tolerance and these tendencies to talk about love. I know from historians that they had many wars and civilians. They are still being attacked by Pakistan. There have been quite a few wars between them. What I also know, on the other hand, is the fact that from a historical point of view it is a country that has been exploited a lot. They have a lot of wealth and I think everyone knows that it was colonized by the British precisely because of the country's potential. Due to this fact, India has become a poor country. Many great powers controlled it, but no one invested money in its development. From this point of view, I think Indians are also very frustrated. They are, in a way, only under a certain political system. The fact that they were colonized made them behave in a certain way: very submissive. On the other hand, their way of behaving also is full of indulgence and tolerance, gentleness, patience (as shown in the TV series). But from a socio-economic perspective, they are often poor. (S24)

To add a supplementary "personal" view in our discussion we discovered that some of our respondents have found similarities between the events or situations presented in the series and the events or situations they have faced in real life.

Yes, there are similarities. They also talk a lot about family. I said at one point that from every episode I could take a dictum or a wise thing and I saw a lot of what their attitude is towards their parents: they respect them very much and even if they are not right, they do not answer them back, do not comment, do not even argue.

Respect is so great that their love and respect matter more than their justice. Many times I have encountered this in my life, in my relationship with my parents, as a problem. I couldn't do that. If I was right, I would keep my justice (even if it was my mother or father), I would express my point of view, or from here I would learn how love and respect are more important than justice. (S7)

7. Conclusions

Our analysis allowed us to provide some answers to the initial research questions. Thus, the discussions with Romanian women who consumed (in fact watched) Indian TV series show us that the spread of Indian cultural products was not limited to the simple exposure of those audiovisual products, but also took the form of a greater interest in the culture and civilization of this country. Similarly, some of the women who were part of the stable audience of Indian series and films changed their perceptions and representations related to India. As they stated in the discussions we had, they began to appreciate the positive aspects of social life in India, put a greater stress on the moral values presented in these cultural products and became more open to the cultural influences that came from this part of the world.

Regarding the factors that explain the success of this type of cultural products, our results showed that the success of India's popular culture is based on the perception of Romanian women audiences of them as a cultural "mix" between the "local" (that is, Indian) elements and the appeal at a set of "global" (universal) values. The act of consumption of Indian TV series, as our analysis showed, had become a way in which the respondents started to learn new things about a (geographically) distant country and civilization. The theories of Baek (2015) and Verboord (2017) about the existence of a causal link between cultural distance and cross-cultural consumption of popular culture were validated by our analysis.

Our analysis also allowed the validation of the perspectives which emphasised the global character of those cultural products, making them desirable and wanted world-wide (Chan and Ma, 1996). On the other hand, in our analysis we could validate the set of theories regarding the cultural hybrid motivations involved in media consumption (Katz and Liebes, 1984; Katz and Liebes, 1986; Liebes and Katz, 1986).

Nevertheless, we could not validate any aspects related to the importance of cultural proximity in the consumption of popular culture products (Trepte, 2008; Berg, 2017; Straubhaar, 2021). We assess that this last type of theories could be better tested in some societies which are in a closer geographical proximity to India – such is the case of Central Asian states or even South-East Asian ones.

Our analysis contains a series of limitations, the most important being the small size of the sample, its location strictly in the large urban areas of Romania and the fact that our interest was strictly limited to a certain type of popular culture products, namely TV series. However, after we read the information provided by our respondents we could assess both the validity of some contemporary theoretical perspectives related to cultural consumption and, on the practical side, the confirmation of the necessity for building "bridges" through well-articulated strategies from the "Soft power" arsenal, those being the aspects which were essential in India's strategy to penetrate and remain on a prime position within the contemporary global markets.

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