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*****Research Article*****

Fractures in Representation and Family Discourse: Conflictual Reconciliation of Actors on Marriage Shows[*]

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Abstract

The reality *marriage/matchmaking* format in Turkey is one of the most watched reality television formats, and was broadcast during daytime hours between 2007 and 2017. As a result of viewer complaints and sanctions imposed by the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), the program was removed from mainstream television channels by a decree issued during the 2017 state of emergency. The main complaints about the program included negative portrayals of the family, disregard for national and spiritual values, degeneration, and immorality. Television is an interactive mass communication tool that shapes the cultural experience of family viewers through representation and allows them to discuss and change that experience. Reality shows with audience participation are a source of dialogue, conversation, and discussion, especially with their target audience of housewives. The current government in Turkey has placed the strengthening of family discourse at the center of its "neoliberal conservative" political process over the past twenty years and has sought to make it even more effective under the leadership of religious and official institutions. For this reason, reality matchmaking shows have created representations of the family that are seen as "problematic" and have become the sole visible arena for the struggle over meaning. To this end, this study examines the discourse of political and institutional actors regarding family discourse before and after the shows were taken off the air, using qualitative research and document analysis methods. The study reveals that a reality matchmaking show is not merely an entertaining spectacle, but also has social and political implications, and strengthens the assumption that the government increasingly hinders dialogue with any representation that falls outside its ideal family discourse.

Keywords: Marriage shows, RTÜK, representation, family discourse, female audience

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Araştırma Makalesi

Temsildeki Çatlaklar ve Aile Söylemi: Evlilik Programlarında Aktörlerin Çatışmalı Uzlaşısı[*]

Selda Tunç SUBAŞİ[**]

Öz

Türkiye'de *evlendirme/izdivaç* formatı, gerçeklik televizyonun en çok izlenen formatlarından biri olarak 2007 ve 2017 yılları arasında gündüz kuşağında yayınlanan uyarlama bir şov programıdır. Program, izleyici şikayetleri ve RTÜK müeyyideleri sonucunda 2017 yılı OHAL döneminde KHK ile anaakım televizyon kanallarından kaldırılmıştır. Programın temel şikâyet noktalarını aileye yönelik olumsuz imaj, milli ve manevi değerlerin yok sayılması, yozlaşma ve ahlak oluşturmaktadır. Televizyon, aile izleyicisinin kültürel deneyimini temsiller yoluyla oluşturan, bu deneyimi müzakere edebilen, değiştirebilen etkileşimli bir kitle iletişim aracıdır. İzleyici katılımlı reality şovlar, özellikle hedef kitlesi olan ev kadınlarıyla diyaloğun, sohbet ve tartışma konularının kaynağıdır. Türkiye'de mevcut iktidar, son yirmi yıllık dönemde "neoliberal muhafazakâr" politik süreçlerin merkezine aile söyleminin güç kazandırılmasını koyarak bunu dini ve resmî kurumlar öncülüğünde daha da etkin hale getirmeye çalışmaktadır. Bu sebeple de izdivaç programları, aile üzerine "sorunlu" görülen temsilleri oluşturmuş ve anlam üzerindeki mücadelenin görünür yegâne ortamı olmuştur. Bu amaçla, bu çalışmada aile söylemine yönelik siyasal ve kurumsal aktörlerin, programın yayından kaldırılmadan önce ve kaldırıldıktan sonraki söylemlerine yer verilmiş ve bunlar niteliksel araştırmanın doküman analizi yöntemiyle incelenmiştir. Çalışmada, şovun toplumsal ve siyasal izdüşümleri ortaya çıkarılmış ve bir izdivaç şovunun sadece eğlencelik bir seyir deneyimi olmadığı, iktidarın ideal aile söyleminin dışında kalan her türlü temsille diyaloğu giderek zorlaştırdığı varsayımı kuvvetlenmiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Evlilik programları, RTÜK, temsil, aile söylemi, kadın İzleyici

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Fractures in Representation and Family Discourse: Conflictual Reconciliation of Actors on Marriage Shows

Introduction

Marriage shows, which challenge the boundaries of the conservative family institution definition that the Justice and Development Party government has reinforced over the 2010s, have been removed from the channels' broadcast catalogs by the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) under the state of emergency (Decree Law No. 690). Marriage shows, even if their purpose is “marriage,” are a format that offers entertaining viewing and is framed by the material expectations of the candidates. Indicating an increase in viewer complaints about these programs, RTÜK has discussed in various parliamentary reports that the programs are incompatible with national, spiritual and moral values related to the family and has strongly focused on the “erosion of values.” This study, which focuses on the intense public debates surrounding marriage shows over the last five years, examines not only the media content but also the discursive struggle surrounding a marriage show that “shakes” the prevailing value system of the family. This study reveals how the prohibition of marriage programs following a decade-long journey was legitimized through media via *family discourse*. In this context, the study examines how the program’s female viewers are positioned within *family discourse* and how the actors reproduce the ideology of *familism* through discursive and practical strategies. The prohibition of marriage programs is not merely a regulation of media content; rather, it is a form of discursive intervention through which the ideology of *familism,* which places the family at the center of social order, is reproduced by political, institutional, and media actors.

As conservative *family discourse* gains strength, actors’ statements calling for the removal of marriage shows from broadcast are becoming more frequent, and these statements circulating in newspapers and social media are quickly gaining public support. When examining the discourse of both political and institutional actors concerning marriage shows, it is evident that they have coded the boundaries of any representation as a closed area for negotiation, which establishes *familialism* as a value system. In this context, the article uses the concepts of *family discourse*, *ideal family*, and *familism* as analytical tools to examine how norms related to the family are produced in actors’ discourses and how these norms intersect with gendered care and

labor relations. Drawing on the tradition of cultural studies, this work does not take the family as a given when examining representation on television, but rather approaches it as a normative and ideological field constructed through media discourse. The analytical categories used in the study are established at three main levels. The first of these is *familism*, a doctrine associated with conservatism that involves cultural intervention processes (Sirman, 2019; Öztan, 2014). The second level is *ideal family*, a representational framework that centers the heteronormative nuclear family, elevates values such as conformity, sacrifice, and emotional attachment as established norms, and positions women as the bearers of these values placing them as the guarantors of care, emotional labor and family unity (Kocamaner, 2019; Yarar, 2018). *Family discourse* in the third section expresses norms, values and emotional expectations regarding how the family should ideally exist through media; the expectations mostly positioning women as the bearers of care, emotional continuity and family unity (Kandiyoti, 2013; Sirman, 2019; Öztan, 2014). In this context, these three categories of analysis reveal how boundaries concerning the family are drawn in the actors' discourses, which forms of representation are legitimised and which positions are excluded. The fundamental axis that stands out in media content ranging from the research commissions established in the Parliament to the statements made by the Head of RTÜK in interviews and talk shows is *family discourse*, which is to be explored through critical discourse analysis.

Although there is significant literature on marriage shows (Akınerdem, 2015; Hill, 2005; Livingstone, 2004; Rahte, 2010; Sirman, 2019), most of these studies focus on viewers' worlds of meaning in these shows. On the other hand, the process of program bans offers an important analytical opportunity to examine how established boundaries related to the family are re-established within media debates. This study approaches the process of bans on marriage shows as a discursive field of struggle where *family discourse* intensifies. As such, it reveals the capacity of discursive struggles conducted through representations to guide and intervene in everyday life.

Methodology

This article proposes an interdisciplinary study in the fields of media, sociology, and political science. Macropolitical discourses, which are of fundamental importance in this study, are based on the method of critical discourse analysis. According to Michel

Foucault (2008: 10), discourse is reformed in every society and is reorganized and redistributed each time in order not to cause fear. When discussing a practice, discourses produce knowledge about it, and these must be evaluated independently of the subject (Hall, 2003: 14). When considering actors, it is necessary to focus on their context within the power and their relationship with social domination as well. The dialogue established with the representations of television shows via discourses will thus make the struggle over meaning visible (Hall, 2003: 40-41).

Critical discourse analysis seeks to reveal how social practices are constructed and emerge through linguistic acts, and to uncover the existence of power relations established through discourse (Üşür, 1997: 115). Van Dijk (1999) argues that critical discourse analysis, which examines text and context together, reveals a detailed analysis of social power relations. In this analysis, ideologies shape the common attitudes of social groups and are constructed through discourse as in the case of family ideology (van Dijk, 2024: 25). In his work (2003), Fairclough states that discourse is shaped by structures, that this discourse order is mediated by codes and words, and that it reproduces institutional relationships such as politics and gender relations. For example, political and institutional actors who take the right-wing ideology's *family discourse*, embedded in common sense, to its extreme and reinforce it produce power through their strategic discourse. According to Van Dijk (2024: 30), political actors produce discourse not only through their speeches but also through institutions and media. Party programs, campaign slogans, television debates, and news reports are seen as diverse channels of discourse. These texts circulate the same ideological structures such as family and nation in different formations. Therefore, discourse becomes a social practice that gains continuity within institutional power relations, transcending individual action. The selection of eight texts below are an attempt to reveal how actors disseminate the discourse of *ideal family* through the media in their various statements about a reality show:

No	Type of Source	Source Name / Title	Date	Scope	Notes/Reason for Selection
1	YouTube program (Ekol TV)	“Sorgusuz Sualsiz” Guest: Ebubekir Şahin, Head of RTÜK	2024	Daytime television	Complaints about women’s programs and the supposed nature of daytime television.
2	YouTube program (TV100)	“Az Önce Konuştum” Guest: Ebubekir Şahin, Head of RTÜK	2021	Daytime television	Answers to the question “Why did marriage shows end?”
3	YouTube program (Ekol TV)	“Az Önce Konuştum” Guest: Esra Erol	2025	Institution of Marriage	Answers to the question “Did marriage shows harm the institution of marriage in Turkey?”
4	YouTube (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi)	Ruhi Aksoy’s address in the Parliament	2017	Marriage and matchmaking shows	Aksoy’s address in the Parliament titled “Marriage shows that have become a social problem have to be taken off the air.”
5	Newspaper	Sözcü, “Numan Kurtulmuş’tan evlilik programları çıkışı”	2017	Media discourse	Statement on the marriage shows’ posing a threat to the institution of family.
6	News Report	Birgün, “Numan Kurtulmuş’tan izdivaç programlarına ilişkin açıklama”	2017	Media discourse	Kurtulmuş’s speech about the cancellation of marriage shows by a decree despite their high rating scores
7	Parliamentary Report	Aile Bütünlüğünü Olumsuz Etkileyen Unsurlar ile Boşanma Olaylarının Araştırılması ve Aile Kurumunun Güçlendirilmesi İçin Alınması Gereken Önlemlerin Belirlenmesi Amacıyla	2016	Official documentation	Approaches to reinforce the family discourse

No	Type of Source	Source Name / Title	Date	Scope	Notes/Reason for Selection
		Kurulan Meclis Araştırması Komisyonu Raporu			
8	Parliamentary Report	Medya ve İletişim Araçlarının Aile Bütünlüğüne Etkisi Meclis Araştırma Komisyonunun Araştırma ve İstişare toplantısı	2017	Official documentation	Suggestions about how to reinforce the family discourse

The study analyzed a total of eight discursive texts produced between 2016 and 2025. These texts were deemed suitable for this study as they were considered to provide discursive diversity in terms of their ideological intensity and representational power. These texts consist of statements made by the Head of RTÜK as a guest on various programs on YouTube channels as well as parliamentary reports and newspaper articles. The selection criterion for these texts is their combined ability to reveal discourses calling for the removal of marriage shows alongside discourses aimed at empowering *family discourse* through the media. The existence of a direct relationship between the discursive struggle undertaken by actors to remove marriage shows and the relational meanings and normative gender roles that emerge through representation will also be demonstrated thereby.

Marriage Shows and *Family Discourse* on Television

Television is not merely a medium through which cultural meanings circulate but also a representational space where the boundaries of these meanings are defined and negotiated (Çelenk, 2005, pp. 96-97). As Hall (2003, p. 23) points out, television produces meanings that circulate among members of a culture through language and symbolization; however, this production process never reflects culture as it is but rather reconstructs and reorganizes it. Therefore, while television representations rely on cultural common sense, they function as a mechanism of selection and struggle that decides which realities will be made visible and which will be pushed to the margins (Gledhill, 2003, pp. 350-360). In this context, television becomes not just a tool representing cultural reality but a contested space where cultural boundaries are constantly tested and redrawn. As Gledhill (2003) emphasizes, representations

establish a relationship with the audience based on whether they are “close to” or “distant from” cultural reality and that relationship creates a tense line between the preservation and transformation of the cultural order. Daytime television, in particular, has become one of the most visible areas in which this tension is felt as it intertwines with the viewer’s daily rhythm of life. These TV shows which target a female audience produce narratives that affirm the viewer’s daily practices while simultaneously attempting to keep these practices within normative boundaries.

Reality shows are particularly significant in this respect. The reality format places different actors in a fictional time and space with the claim of “showing the reality” while inviting the viewer to make moral judgements about that very reality at the same time. As Hill (2005, pp. 1-14) notes, viewers watch reality shows not only for entertainment but also to reflect on family, morality and social values. Therefore, reality shows create a cultural space that allows us to observe how values such as family and morality are reinterpreted between media representations and viewer reactions. The historical development of reality shows also demonstrates how these processes of reframing and negotiation have changed over time. Emerging in its early days as crime-based productions that made law and order visible, reality television has gradually shifted towards the emotional, health-related or romantic aspects of daily life, transforming into a hybrid TV format at the intersection of information, entertainment and drama genres. This transformation has reinforced the idea that reality is represented by a shift from social events to individuals’ private lives (Ellis, 2000, p. 106). Reality formats that bring romantic relationships into the public sphere represent a critical turning point in this regard. As Ellis (2000) puts it, television shows that dramatize couple relationships are not a form of entertainment but rather narratives that create a public arena for discussion about marriage, dating and morality. These programs find their way into the day-to-day conversations of viewers and non-viewers as well, and thus the media text itself becomes a component of public discourse (Mittell, 2004, p. 27).

The localization of reality show formats in Turkey has further highlighted this area of debate. Since the 1990s, the mediation of Western formats through local narratives has transformed reality television into both a global television genre and a medium for discussing local cultural values. Marriage shows, one such form of localization, have achieved high viewership ratings in daytime broadcasting and turned

romantic relationships into a foundational element of social structure (Hill, 2005, pp. 1-14; Akınerdem, 2014, p. 80). While marriage was conceivably the primary performance output measuring the show's success, over time it moved away from its meaning as an individual union and transformed into one of the discursive sources within the media text, where *family discourse* was circulated, expectations were exposed and emphasis was placed on traditional values. The first example of a dating program, The Dating Game, produced in the US in 1965, inspired the programs such as Blind Date (ITV, 1985–2003) in the UK and Perfect Match (Network Ten, 1984–) in Australia (Topal, 2022: 15). Nourished by reality-style dating shows, marriage/matchmaking shows have become a widely watched television program with changes in their format, spanning most of the daytime schedule. One of its first examples in Turkey was broadcast in the 1990s under the name "Saklambaç" (Hide and Seek), hosted by Nurseli İdiz, and had a format most similar to Western dating shows (Karaman, 2016: 80). The date show format later evolved into a matchmaking/marriage show type in the 2000s, with the dynamics of family formation as the main source of motivation. Similar programs to the matchmaking show pioneered by Esra Erol on Flash TV in 2007 were later produced on different national channels. Moderated by a presenter, the program featured men and women discussing their dreams of marriage and deciding whether or not to marry, and had a format with colorful decorations, music, and entertainment. It has gained high popularity among daytime shows for women (Akınerdem, 2014: 78). The show was broadcast live five days a week from 12:00 to 16:00 and presented by Esra Erol. In addition to the presenter, the show featured experts such as lawyers and psychiatrists. This matchmaking/marriage show received high ratings equivalent to prime time shows and became the subject of fierce competition among many networks (Akınerdem, 2019: 109). The marriage shows continued first on Star TV under the name Esra Erol'la İzdivaç and then transferred to ATV under the name Esra Erol'da Evlen Benimle. Similar marriage shows have also been broadcast on many channels under titles such as Zuhal Topal'la İzdivaç, Su Gibi, Semra Kaynana ile Dest-i İzdivaç, Huysuz ile Görücü Usulü, Hande Ataizi ile Dest-i İzdivaç, and Seren Serengil ile Evlenir misin? (Özsoy, 2012: 5).

TV marriage shows in Turkey are presented not so much as an individual choice emphasising romantic relationships but rather as part of the ideal of establishing a family. Consequently, marriage in these shows is represented not as the result of an

emotional bond between two people but as an institution guaranteeing the sustainability of the social order. Narrative structure of the show, the studio layout, remarks given by specialists and audience interventions constantly redefine the family as a normative reference point (Akınerdem, 2015, p. 30; Sirman, 2019, pp. 1-3; Rahte, 2010, p. 57). Nonetheless, reality shows by their very nature and due to genre-specific characteristics never form a completely closed circuit within the established normative framework (Hall, 2005, pp. 118-119). The participants' discourses, material expectations, status pursuits or imagined non-normative relationships create "cracks" within the *family discourse*. Not only do these cracks generate dramatic tension, they also uncover the points at which the common-sense understanding of the family is shaken. For example, when certain cultural boundaries are crossed, any program, whether a series or a reality show, may be taken off the air (Williams, 2004: 59). As a result of the program being taken off the air, the contradictory position surrounding the "possibility of expression" and "form of expression" of the boundaries of culture as well as representation becomes evident (Çelenk, 2005: 90). These fractures which we discuss in the context of Turkish marriage shows constitute a hegemonic arena of struggle that shakes the paternalistic order of the AKP government seeking to establish traditional roles within the family and questions the validity of family solidarity. The regime relying on the traditional common sense, that is also backed by general viewer complaints, attempts to first repair and then eliminate these fractures. Should the sanctions not be complied with, removal from the screen becomes a possibility. In the event of non-compliance with sanctions, public debates regarding the cancellation of the show become visible through the media, making the prohibition process more obvious. In this case, the prohibition process goes beyond an administrative intervention and gains visibility as a cultural and discursive hegemonic struggle over the interpretative frameworks within which *ideal family* derives its meaning.

Public debates before and after the cancellation of marriage shows in Turkey demonstrate that semantic tensions and structural breakdowns result in political consequences as well as cultural ones. Interventions such as viewer complaints, media regulations and program cancellations indicate how *family discourse* has transformed from a representation produced in the media sphere into an object of institutional regulation. In this process, marriage shows evolve into a performative arena that paves the way for negotiations on public morality and family values, moving away from a

format designed to facilitate the consummation that a dating story between two individuals ends in.

The ground for discursive conflict in which the acceptable criteria for family are redefined and circulated through institutional bans and interventions turns television broadcasts into a constitutive element of *family discourse*. Public debates that are fueled by sanctions such as warnings, condemnations and penalties, incorporating viewer complaints centered on the representation of family in the media, also create an opportunity for institutional and political actors to intervene at certain junctures. These debates create an opportunity also for institutional and political actors to step in at certain stages. It is observed that political actors evaluate the narratives produced by the marriage/matchmaking format, which is the source of the debates on television and is seen as the “enemy” of the family institution despite its aim of establishing families, in a way that is consistent with family policies focused on the management of the private sphere, from a “new” “proximity to cultural reality.”. This brings about a reinterpretation of family representations produced in the media and endorsed by political actors in light of viewers’ daily life practices and domestic relationship dynamics, and simultaneously renders the debates over the bans on the show visible at a collective level.

Female Audience, Ideal Family and Family Discourse

Although gendered division of labor varies historically and culturally in almost all societies, it has associated women with the private sphere where reproductive activity takes place (Dedeoğlu, 2000, p. 151). Domestic labor is not only part of family relations but also a central category in the reproduction of the patriarchal class order (Dunezat, 2022: 98). The exclusion of domestic labor from the wage economy, the provision of domestic activity as unpaid service and the invisibility of it place women within a family order that is accepted as “natural” (Delphy, 1999: 36). Thus, domestic labor forms the ideological basis for both economic reproduction and gender norms.

In this context, ideal family functions not only as a cultural value but also as a normative model that ensures the continuity of social order. Qualities associated with women such as fragility, sentimentality and caregiving are presented as natural elements of this model (Kergoat, 2022: 135). The family order based on marriage, motherhood and domestic division of labor has long been a dominant social norm also

in Turkey (Öztan, 2014: 179). As Kandiyoti (2013) points out, solidarity networks among women support this order, reinforcing men's exemption from domestic responsibilities and generally leading to their identification with the public sphere and economic production. Following this narrative in television matchmaking shows, the current government is transforming *ideal family* into a social contract reproduced in everyday relationships, distancing it from a model established solely through official discourse.

Family discourse in this process emerges as one of the primary ideological fields where ideal family model comes into circulation. Ever since Kemalist modernization in Turkey, women's social position has been largely defined within the family and then since the 2000s this position has been reshaped by neoliberal-conservative policies. Particularly during the rule of the Justice and Development Party, family has been placed at the center of social order, and women have been constructed as subjects who both adapt to the flexible labor market and continue their maternal roles (Şenel, 2017: 49; Yarar, 2020: 133-134; Kaya, 2015: 15; Coşar and Yeğenoğlu, 2014: 166; Dedeoğlu, 2000: 151). The equality-based reforms initially developed under the influence of the European Union process have gradually been withdrawn, leaving room for conservative policies focused on strengthening family (Güneş-Ayata and Doğangün, 2017: 611; Yarar, 2020: 133-134). This transformation has begun to strip the family of its status as a social institution and turn it into one of the supporting pillars of the political and economic order.

This is where *familism* emerges as a strategy for the state to transfer its social responsibilities to the family in neoliberal welfare regimes. Taking care of children, the elderly and the disabled within the family instead of through public services makes women's labor a forced requirement (Doğdu, 2022: 86). *Family discourse*, thus, is reinforced by economic policies, establishing women as the natural providers of care labor. As Öztan (2014) states, policy and project-level networks define women as the primary caregivers within the family and these frameworks are consolidated at the institutional level at the same time.

Television programs function as a discourse space where daily life practices and the meanings associated with them are reproduced through audience experience. Especially daytime programs serve as platforms where *family discourse* circulates and

roles of marriage and caregiving are reformulated. Broadcast times for women's programs are based on the assumption that women are positioned within the home (Akça and Akbulut, 2005: 50). The selection of housewives as the target audience for matchmaking shows leads to the experience of care labor overlapping with the viewing experience. While casting female spectators as media consumers, this also makes housewives daily producers of *family discourse*. Accordingly, representations of marriage and caregiving roles cannot fully achieve their intended functionality without spectator commentary and interaction.

Looking at female viewers' comments on marriage shows, it is observed that they evaluate the representations in the shows in terms of their values of morality, tradition, religion and privacy. For example, in a study on women's television viewing habits conducted by RTÜK women expressed their discomfort with marriage TV shows, citing concerns such as "degradation of family values, promotion of a showbiz approach towards the institution of marriage and exposure of private matters of a personal nature" (RTÜK, 2010, p. 109). These assessments can be interpreted as an effort to protect the boundaries of *family discourse*. While viewers support the television industry by watching this programming, they also demand broadcasting that conforms to ideal family model standards as they appeal to regulatory bodies. In this context, the Radio and Television Supreme Council is no longer acting just as a regulatory body but is positioning itself as the institutional representative of the family discourse. The audience's expectation of an institutional intervention indicates that there exists a societal consensus on protecting the family.

Television viewing habits among women also support this picture. Research shows that daytime programming is watched intensively by women who are not employed and have low incomes in particular (RTÜK, 2010). This situation illustrates that women's use of time in connection with care work determines their media consumption practices. The fact that women's employment rates in Turkey are significantly lower than men's (TÜİK [Turkish Statistical Institute], 2023); TÜİK and ASHB, 2021; Topçuğlu and Koçak, et al., 2010: 231; Toksöz and Dedeoğlu et al., 2014: 18; Ministry of Family and Social Policies, 2011: 241; Hacettepe Population Studies Institute, 2019: 10; World Economic Forum, 2021: 1) and that caregiving responsibilities are largely assigned to women reveal the economic rationale behind the *family discourse*. Women do not take their viewership experiences—they form

through the programs while performing domestic care practices in their daily lives—outside the normative family order, yet they do become involved in debates about banning marriage programs.

Female viewers' criticisms of marriage shows should be interpreted not simply as a moral reaction, yet as a discursive intervention aimed at preserving the ideal family model. As consumers of the television industry female viewers are integrated into the market whilst simultaneously acting as carriers and reproducers of the family discourse. This dual position demonstrates how the logic of *familism* operates in everyday life and how it becomes visible in the media. In their comments and discussions about marriage shows female viewers engage in cooperation with actors who reinforce *family discourse* through either conflict or debate, expecting their complaints to be addressed. Thus, female viewers take on an active role as producers in the daily production of the ideology of *familism*. The process of representation and meaning-making that female viewers undergo as actors extends to debates on the prohibition of marriage shows and assumes a crucial function in legitimizing *family discourse*.

In this respect, it is evident that the banning process for marriage shows transcends the scope of technical regulation regarding broadcasting policies and becomes a battleground where the *family discourse* is redefined by different actors. The criticism of these shows was voiced by a wide range of actors, from representatives of the political power to media commentators, regulatory bodies and audience groups. In these debates the institution of family was established as the fundamental reference point for the preservation of social order. Particularly the interventions of the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK, 2017; RTÜK, 2010: 109) were legitimized through the discourse of protecting the family while the media sphere became a public stage where the boundaries of the ideal family model were redrawn. Here, RTÜK, as the representative of the common sense, acts as an institutional actor protecting viewership from the "harmful effects" of television as a regulatory and supervisory body. Approaching the audience with a "protective" discourse, RTÜK responds to the audience with sanctions such as fining or removing programs from broadcast when deemed necessary (Berfin and Çetin, 2016: 29). The process of the ban on marriage programs clearly occurs on a multi-layered ground that cannot be explained solely by a single show format coming to an end. On this ground,

a moment of discursive conflict has emerged, revealing which actors defend established values concerning the family and through which discourses. This moment of conflict makes it possible to reveal how the discourses of media actors, RTÜK representatives and other political and institutional figures function in the processes of perpetuating and legitimizing norms related to the family in the context of the *ideal family, family discourse* and *familism*, and how they gain visibility in the debates regarding the prohibition of marriage shows.

Political-Institutional Actors and Family Discourse

The culture with which the audience engages through the media gives rise to a political discourse struggle. The politicization of marriage shows reveals the discursive intersections between politics, industrial interests, and the audience (Berfin and Çetin, 2016: 2462). The sanctions imposed on marriage shows by RTÜK and the debates regarding the inadequacy of these sanctions were brought to the agenda by research proposals made by politicians who were the then members of parliament. Between 2016[1] and 2017, when complaints about marriage shows were at their peak, the AKP, MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) and CHP (Republican People's Party)[2] engaged in "bargaining" over marriage shows, and the lines of debate began to emerge at the discursive level. Ruhi Aksoy, an MP from the MHP, who called for swift action against marriage/matchmaking shows and their removal from the airwaves, stated the following:

> "This issue has gone beyond being just a television show and women's entertainment and has evolved into a serious social wound, the degeneration and alienation of values, and every segment of society is observing and discussing it on various platforms... Mr Head of RTÜK, why

[1] Citizen Complaints Report 2016 categorized complaints as follows: "In 2016, a total of 416,572 complaints were received from citizens, of which 79,416 were classified under the review criterion of 'Violation of the Principles of Public Morality, Moral Values, and Protection of the Family.' This was followed by 50,610 reports under the criterion "Enforce Penalties/Sanctions (Close the Channel - Impose a Fine - Remove the Program - Warn the Channel)" and 38,246 reports under the criterion "Programs That May Negatively Affect the Development of Children and Young People." These two review criteria are highly interrelated as they primarily pertain to marriage shows. This is because, as reflected in citizen reports, there is a prevailing belief among viewers that marriage shows undermine societal morality, leading to the opinion that such shows should be removed from the airwaves (RTÜK, 2017: 14).

[2]"Let's impose severe sanctions on these channels that violate the law. First, let's impose heavy fines. If the violations continue, let's remove them from the catalog in accordance with the law." However, this request was rejected by the votes of four AKP and one MHP members. (İndigo, 2017). İndigo Magazine (2017). "Should marriage shows be removed?" https://indigodergisi.com/2017/03/evlilik-programlari-kaldirilmali/. Access Date: 05.03.2025.

> are you not imposing closure penalties or other sanctions, or if the laws are insufficient, why are you not submitting a bill to parliament?" (Aksoy, 2017).

It is observed that marriage shows are positioned as a threatening factor to the family by Aksoy, who claims they engender cultural and social decay. The family is one of the fundamental battlegrounds of political conflict (Kocamaner, 2019: 496). Politicians, religious leaders and state officials are engaged in the task of restructuring family in the contemporary world. The family acts as a leverage against cultural decay, economic insecurity and social fragmentation. The function of the family as an administrative tool is to ensure the continuity between state order and family order, perpetuating gender inequalities (Yılmaz, 2015: 382). Therefore, although marriage shows serve as a means of establishing a family, they are laden with connotations that lie outside the order attributed to the family by the ruling power.

For this reason, being strengthened through policies the ideal family, where women are defined primarily by their domestic and maternal roles and the head of the household is male, comes into conflict with the family portrayed in reality shows, which are woven with material expectations and dreams, and representations that create fractures opposing the ideal family discourse are being questioned.

Viewers as key elements to the family institution do not watch reality shows solely for entertainment; female spectators produce discourse on cultural and social values and express their opinions by participating in debates on family and moral values (Hill, 2005: 9). This is why Aksoy expresses his concern that the marriage shows he describes as "women's entertainment" are eroding the boundaries of family norms and that these boundaries have already been crossed.

Following the removal of marriage/matchmaking shows from the air, Ebubekir Şahin, the Head of RTÜK, continued to explain why the shows were taken off the air on talk shows[3] he appeared on. The main points of Şahin's statements are that the removal of the show from the air is not censorship but that high-rated marriage shows contain maneuvers aimed at weakening the family discourse. Even if the purpose of high-rated shows is marriage, comments, discussions, and plots that target family

[3] Çağlayan, A. (2024). "We Have the Authority to Monitor All Platforms," Ebubekir Şahin in Without Question. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMaI6kumQhg&t=857s. Access Date: 05.02.2025.
Tolga, C. (2021). "I just spoke: Ebubekir Şahin, President of RTÜK, Appears on Live TV for the First Time! Here are Şahin's Statements to Haber Global!"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZTm0GSF2AY. Access Date: 03.03.2025.

norms are taken seriously while entertaining elements of the show are excluded. Ebubekir Şahin, the Head of RTÜK, said:

> “Penalties are not my preference. We want to open the way for channels... Let’s discuss how morning shows or women’s shows should be because there is a serious television audience out there. Housewives are watching. Whatever the show might be... Let’s not call it censorship; we can call it self-censorship. Let’s call it self-regulation… It started to really draw the public’s reaction, and the political authority said, ‘We’re removing it.’ Because there was a demand. Instead of removing it, I spoke my mind at the time, so I can say this comfortably. I don’t think it was wrong, but it was removed because it had gone too far. It had gone off track. I think these types of shows need to be rehabilitated (Tolga, 2021).

Şahin specifically stated that political actors were behind the decision to remove the show from the airwaves due to discomfort with its content. Family is a mechanism that governs male-female relationships within the social structure. The AKP government’s policies on family focus not on the issues of inequality and social rights but on the regulation of family life and the preservation of the family structure (Yılmaz, 2015: 382). Consequently, morning shows targeting female viewers, such as marriage shows, contradict the ideal family concept, display inconsistencies with the paternal structure in the representation of female and male roles and create contradictions.

Marriage shows are a controversial medium whose fate is constantly questioned and which also involves political actors in heated debates. As a result of the debates, matchmaking shows were banned by a decree during the state of emergency, becoming the scene of a struggle between political and media actors, and the view that this reality show had crossed the line ultimately prevailed. Ebubekir Şahin, the Head of RTÜK, listed his expectations from daytime programming as follows:

> “Complaints about daytime television shows come not only from viewership, but also from NGOs, the government, the opposition, and all sides. We gathered our friends. We met in Ankara. We met in Istanbul. As you can see, we are still discussing these issues. Daytime television shows are a topic that needs to be discussed at length. Unfortunately, the producers continue for a certain period of time. Who watches these shows? Women watch them. What should be on a show watched by women? There could be something related to women’s health, topics related to women’s self-care, or topics related to women and child care. Let’s go further. There could be things related to economic skills that would contribute to a woman’s economic independence and support her in that regard… In addition to the law that must be followed, there will also be principles to be paid attention to in daytime TV shows. I hope it will be effective…” (Çağlayan, 2024).

As is evident in Şahin's statements, the increasing intervention of family policies in the private sphere manifests itself in policies concerning the body and space in terms of gender norms (Yeğenoğlu and Coşar, 2014: 179). Şahin highlights the importance of legitimizing these cultural representations through familistic programs by naturalizing the patriarchal structure of roles in family relationships as "innate" biological differences (Özar and Yakut-Çakar, 2013: 25).

RTÜK's president wants to limit housewives' experience of daytime television to shows about domestic care, health, and handicrafts, and to preserve this cycle. Women who bear the labor burden of domestic care are both a high-rated audience and a viewer base that produces domestic labor and nourishes the daytime programming schedule, which reinforces the normative family model.

Christine Gledhill (2003: 370) argues that representation is the fundamental basis of hegemony. Even if a consensus is reached in the bargaining process over representation, these ideas can change and reality can be reconstructed. Numan Kurtulmuş, the Deputy Prime Minister at the time, disregarded the financial competition among producers within the media industry, supported the removal of shows without undermining the normative family foundation, and emphasized the necessity of reestablishing the family foundation. Kurtulmuş made the following statements during the period between 2016 and 2017, when marriage shows were intensely debated by the public:

> "RTÜK is imposing numerous fines, but they are earning so much money that... We are currently working on this issue and about to reach a conclusion. Hopefully, in the coming term, we will be likely to be able to bring this issue to the agenda through a decree law (KHK). Work in this direction is at an advanced stage, and hopefully we will be able to meet these social demands" (Sözcü, 2017).
>
> "There are certain marriage shows where utterly unacceptable words and behaviors are displayed, and these have also reached us from time to time. Well, the ratings are very high and therefore the advertising revenues are also very high. No way for such advertising revenues. There are extremely bizarre shows that will destroy the institution of the family, its sanctity and its nobility, he said (Birgün, 2017).

While gender norms draw the boundaries between "us" and "them," those to be included in the AKP's definition of nation are structured within a conservative definition of the family (Yarar, 2020: 130). The "us" in Kurtulmuş's statement is expressed through a gendered discourse in which the family is shaped around a dominant

husband and a dependent wife. For Kurtulmuş, marriage shows are powerfully capable of disrupting the sanctity of family and dismantling it. The solution lies in removing the show from broadcast via a decree (KHK) and filtering out any representations that could threaten the family from daytime television.

In addition to political actors, presenters also hold an important place in the television representation system. Reality shows employ individuals such as actors, singers, or journalists as *presenters/narrators*. The narrator uses various interpretation strategies and is positioned as a "mediator/intermediary" alongside the audience (Binark and Kılıçbay, 2004: 74). On a YouTube program, Esra Erol, a popular presenter who has contributed to the spread of marriage/matchmaking shows on other channels, responded to the question "Do you think it harmed the institution of marriage in Turkey at that time?" about the removal of matchmaking shows as follows:

> "There were important messages about marriage and the institution of family, and there was no harmful content. The real harm lies within one's own nuclear family. Are we aware of the problems that exist within every home? The important thing is that the institution of family is affected as little as possible. Candaş Tolga, 'What do you think is the most harmful thing to the institution of family?' 'I think it's the lack of communication'" (Tolga, 2021).

In marriage shows, presenters legitimize the authority while reinforcing the ascribed gender relations (Aksop, 1998: 70). Erol defended that her show did not harm the family institution, but rather supported it. As Kocamaner (2019) suggests, the AKP's family policy should be evaluated within a context where state increasingly intervenes in the private lives of its citizens. Preachers and religious officials appointed by the government through the Directorate of Religious Affairs have been integrated into a community of experts aiming to manage the society through family (2019: 499). This is why, even though Erol claims to run a family program, the marriage show she hosts is very far from representing the level desired by the familistic politics. On April 9-10, 2016, Esra Erol, the popular presenter of marriage shows, was a guest at the *Research and Consultation Meeting of the Parliamentary Research Commission*[4]. Erol made the following statements regarding the sanctions for marriage/matchmaking shows:

[4] Bkz. TBMM (May 14, 2016). *Report of the Parliamentary Investigation Commission Established to Investigate Factors Negatively Affecting Family Integrity and Divorce Incidents and to Determine Measures to Strengthen the Institution of the Family*, Ankara.

> "The show I did was what everyone called a 'marriage show,' something they looked down on and said no one watched, but it was one of the most watched shows. I enjoyed doing it very much, but then something happened, and marriage shows suddenly caught everyone's attention in just a couple of years. Because they got high ratings, every channel started doing them. As a result, the project I was running under the name of a marriage show, which also had a social responsibility aspect, started to be discussed everywhere and in every context. I am now the host of that show, and I am incredibly bothered by the criticism" (Turkish Grand National Assembly, April 2016: 89).

> "Of course, most of you are working and don't have the chance to watch the program, but as a mother, a woman, a wife, a child of my family, and a person and individual with values and a sense of self-control, I urge everyone to uphold my values and those values, and I am very uncomfortable with the term "marriage show, because I am doing a *family show*[5]. And we receive a lot of complaints. By the way, let me tell you this: we are five siblings, my father is a retired chief inspector, and my mother is a housewife. I am a child raised with certain values and culture from a civil servant family. Right now, I am sharing everything I am going through with my audience because I have no other choice as an individual who was raised with these values. I am passing on to my audience the values that were taught to me" (Grand National Assembly of Turkey, May 2016: 306).

Erol distinguishes her program from the "corrupted" marriage shows on other channels. However, this format can be implemented on different channels, with varying degrees of flexibility and even with new elements added to the format. The most distinctive aspect of the AKP government's gender policies is that the existence of a cultural climate woven with "religious, conservative" gender norms is reinforced by familism politics. Thus, institutions that produce policies related to daily life such as religious affairs and religious services are reshaping family and gender relations (Adak, 2021: 213). The fractures in representation are growing as the gendered private sphere, defined by the limited roles of women and men, cannot tolerate the active, vocal, materialistic and pragmatic female and male contestants on reality shows. Although Erol strongly emphasizes that she aligns with political actors, political and institutional actors seek to restrict representation by prioritizing conservative and religious codes within this narrow, gendered private sphere.

Gülay Toksöz (2016) notes that after 2007, as EU (European Union) policies lost momentum, there was a shift from an egalitarian discourse to one emphasizing the importance of women for the preservation of the family. The family discourse began to

[5] Author's emphasis.

gain strength. The government developed policies aimed at preserving the gender-based division of labor that views women as responsible for the house and family. According to Toksöz (2016), these neoliberal political processes are powerful forces that push women both into the house and into shadow employment (Toksöz, 2016: 117-118). Moreover, the state of emergency declared in 2016 constituted a distinct period during which gender policies became a mechanism reinforcing masculine performances. Kıvılcım (2018) observes that the coup attempt of July 15, 2016, and the ensuing state of emergency played a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of violence, militarism, and normative masculinity in Turkey. During such periods of crisis, dominant gender norms become deeply intertwined with sexist and conservative discourses, leading to the reconfiguration of gender policies in alignment with masculinist narratives.

In the process where the driving force of economic, political and cultural paths comes from the family, the crisis of representation has spread to marriage shows. Esra Erol, who claims to represent the family accurately, presents the stability of her own family structure by leaning on the ideology of motherhood, which is an important indicator of the dominant ideology. In this process, where the driving force of economic, political, and cultural trajectories stems from the family, the crisis in representation spills over into marriage shows, with the show's producers claiming that they accurately represent the family by citing the strength of their family structures.

Reality shows on television generally create a paradox in viewership by presenting images that contradict the viewer's common sense (Gitlin, 1979: 255). The fundamental reason why marriage shows, whose audience consists of housewives, are both highly watched and complained about is precisely this paradox. Viewers evaluate whether or not the format they watch reflects their own values (Ellis, 2007: 127). On April 9-10, 2016, at *the Research and Consultation Meeting of the Parliamentary Research Commission on the Impact of Media and Communication Tools on Family Integrity*, it was stated that there had been an increase in viewer complaints while reality shows became profitable through high viewership and ratings. The conflict between industrial dynamics and common sense weakens the family discourse, and the research commissions established in response propose new ways to strengthen the family discourse in productions. Taha Yücel, a member of RTÜK, and

Deniz Depboylu from the commission made the following statements regarding productions aimed at families:

> “This is the matter: We need to identify what should be included in a show and what should not be included. In terms of protecting families, protecting children, setting good examples... What should be included in certain productions, and what should not be included? And based on this, perhaps with the support of the Ministry of Family, and possibly the Directorate of Religious Affairs and other similar institutions, an incentive system...” (Turkish Grand National Assembly, April 2017: 21).

> “TV channels, in their pursuit of competition and ratings, have been broadcasting imported shows, series, and films that do not conform to our culture for many years, with no regard for social mores and customs. As a result, a generation with different cultural and social values from previous generations has emerged. In fact, when I occasionally see our elders in their sixties and seventies watching so-called ‘marriage shows,’ I think about how much our society has changed” (Turkish Grand National Assembly, April 2017: 3).

The quotations above emphasize the importance of an ideal program being family-based and question how this should be achieved. According to Metin Yeğenoğlu and Simten Coşar (2014), in the neoliberal era, governments around the world began to transform in the 1980s, becoming liberal in economic terms and conservative culturally. During this period, nationalist and religious political motives gained a societal reality within a neoliberal framework (2014: 159). Yeğenoğlu and Coşar (2014) argue that defining the economic, social, cultural, and psychological functions of the family through marriage creates a definition of the family that is compatible with patriarchy and neoliberalism (2014: 166). The AKP’s family values are formed on a common ground with neoliberal policies, whereby the needs of the elderly, disabled and children as well as social care are primarily met by women within the family (Kaya, 2015: 50). Experts debate that marriage shows erode family values, that urgent measures must be taken, and that instead of these, programs based on conservative family values should be created without adopting the “Western” family model in social life.

In the *Parliamentary Research Report on the Impact of Media and Communication Tools on Family Integrity*, family unity is defined as the following:

> “Family life is one of the main topics covered by television, one of the most widespread means of mass communication. The foundation of the family unit, which is the smallest unit of social structure, is laid by the institution of marriage. Today, the institution of marriage has become the source of one of television’s fundamental show formats. Marriage shows, which are

> broadcast with the mission of matchmaking, re-present the processes of marriage—an event that typically occurs within a limited circle of acquaintances and relatives under normal circumstances—on screen, in the witness of thousands of viewers, within a show format unique to the media. For a lifelong union like marriage, choosing a spouse with whom one can live in harmony requires serious consideration. However, in these shows, which are heavily driven by entertainment and ratings, candidates are expected to make immediate decisions about the people who want to marry them. It is necessary to question the possibility of building a solid foundation for marriage and family life in such a format" (Grand National Assembly of Turkey, May 2017: 304-305).
>
> "Based on the findings of the research, it can be expressed that there is a sensitivity towards marriage shows in society in general, and that this sensitivity is focused on the idea that this type of show will have a negative effect on the Turkish family structure and marriage relationships" (TBMM, May 2017: 307).

It is noted that the popularity of marriage shows affects the seriousness, duration and quality of marriage and there appears to be a belief that these shows have fundamentally changed people's faith in the institution of marriage. Pınar Melis Yelsalı (2025: 833) states that over the last twenty years, the AKP has moved from a "public-progressive" position towards a "public-conservative" direction, and that this path has been shaped by an authoritarian orientation (Yelsalı Parmaksız, 2025: 833). While this period of change seeks ways to reinforce conservative family roles, the construction of meaning created by television through cultural representations reveals tensions in the representation visible in material expectations on marriage shows. The statements of actors above indicate that the popularity of marriage shows had an impact on the seriousness, duration, and quality of marriage, and that there is a belief that matchmaking shows fundamentally changed people's belief in the institution of marriage. The negative effects of marriage/matchmaking shows on the family institution are highlighted, and the importance of producing programs that support the family as a closed space for negotiation is emphasized. Marriage shows were frequently on the agenda of political and institutional actors between 2016 and 2017, parliamentary research commissions were set up, and meetings were held with producers, presenters, and academics. Drawing from the study, it can be said that debates over cultural representations that reinforce normative family patterns have begun to take center stage in the power struggle. Discourses emphasizing the need to reinforce patriarchal structures in representations that particularly refer to intra-family relations are gaining importance and actors are shifting from a confrontational position

to a conciliatory one, centered on *familism*, through the commissions that have been established.

Conclusion

Marriage shows as a distinct genre have been highly watched, intertwined with their local cultural dynamics–albeit sometimes in contradictory ways–through the host, and have been one of the quintessential daytime shows for a decade. The fact that *matchmaking/marriage* shows topped the list of women's programs with the highest number of complaints addressed to RTÜK and that they were subject to numerous sanctions is closely related to how elements such as family, morality, values, roles and traditions are represented. The fundamental point which the AKP government continues to strengthen and shape its family policy on is the preservation of the paternal structuring of male-female relationships. While the roles attributed to women and men reinforce the bond women establish with home and the burden of care within it, they are woven into a social construct where the man is seen as the head of the household economically. This social construct is also supported by the institutions of high influence in daily life, such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs. Marriage shows are programs where the financial expectations of the participants as potential bride and grooms predominate. However, what is sought to be created in the ideal family is a reproduction of female and male roles at a level attributed with sanctity. The "misrepresentation" in marriage shows necessitated an intervention in the program and began to be manifested as sanctions in the actors' statements. In the years 2016 and 2017 in particular, there emerged a consensus in newspapers, television programs and parliamentary minutes as to the view that marriage shows corrupted the family, and thus the shows were taken off the air.

This study attempts to expand the argument that the removal of a reality show from the airwaves is not merely a matter of compliance with broadcasting principles, but also reflects how this decision is intertwined with social, political, and cultural dynamics. To question this claim, viewer complaints were examined alongside the discourse of institutional and political actors regarding marriage shows between 2016 and 2017. The discourse of political and institutional actors revealed a common consensus that marriage shows had "crossed the line." This consensus was complemented by the support of television viewers, actors, and participants on social

media. The agreement reached by political actors, namely the AKP, MHP, and CHP, to remove the program from the airwaves was a *contentious* agreement aimed at mobilizing RTÜK officials through parliament and public opinion. The CHP agreed with other actors on the removal of the marriage show from the airwaves and took a stance that the violation of gender equality should be used as a justification for this removal. Although a conflict arose among political actors regarding the timing of the sanction and the implementation clause, marriage shows were ultimately removed from the airwaves by a decree issued during the state of emergency. The actors' discursive consensus is linked to the current government's "neoliberal-conservative patriarchy" policies, which seek to strengthen the family as an inclusive umbrella in all areas. The family is sought to be strengthened in many layers of society as a way out and a safety net in terms of social security, domestic care work, and the gender regime. One of the most powerful means of this strengthening is *representation*. It is obvious that marriage/matchmaking shows on television will open the door to uncontrollable commentary, undermining seriousness, and having a materialistic influence rather than promoting the idea of the ideal family, and it is also clear that any attempts to quickly close these "mischievous fractures" will only further censorship.

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