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Analyzing the Encoding/Decoding of the Transnational Audiovisual Discourse of ISIS in Netflix's *Caliphate*

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Abstract: Reception studies have become an essential element in the audiovisual translation research. In fact, the transnational turn in the study of media audiences has led to a reciprocity between reception studies and audiovisual translation research. This study aims at conducting a semiotic analysis of the Arab viewers' reception of the Arabic subtitling of Netflix's Swedish series *Caliphate*. Hence, the study poses the question of how the Arab audience incorporate the dominant audiovisual discourse about ISIS, which is semiotically encoded by Netflix through the medium of subtitling. To better understand Netflix's dominant ISIS discourse, the study examines the socio-political context involved in the framing of this televised discourse. The study is product-oriented since it investigates the reception of Netflix's ISIS audiovisual discourse by transnational audience. This investigation is conducted through applying Hall's (1973) Encoding/Decoding model. The model assesses how audiences play an active role in decoding the media messages and discourses that target them. Decoding takes place within a milieu of ideological, political, social and economic contexts. The interplay between these contexts defines how audiences can choose to either incorporate or to resist the ideologically-driven messages delivered to them in the form of audiovisual discourses. This study proves that as part of the broader transnational audience, Arab audience subscribes to a preferred reading of the ISIS audiovisual discourse formed by Netflix.
Keywords: Audiovisual Discourse - Caliphate-Decoding-Encoding-ISIS-Netflix-Reception Studies-Stuart Hall -Transnational Audience.

<u>**Introduction**</u>

The rise of Netflix as one of the most influential media networks worldwide signifies the emergence of a new type of audiovisual discourse. The network that operates in 190 countries and has around 220 million subscribers relies in its content creation on the architecture of a transnational audiovisual discourse. This kind of discourse suits the global character of the network, whose shows are translated through subtitling or dubbing into five to seven languages by the network itself and to many more by independent individuals and groups from all around the world.

Before the rise of Netflix and transnational media networks, the media scene was dominated by centered (linear) media. There are three main features that draw a distinction between centered media outlets and decentered ones. First, centered media was characterized by a media content that was primarily directed towards and concerned with a local and national audience. On the contrary, decentered media, especially the networks with a transnational appeal like Netflix, target a global audience. Second, the cultural context of the centered media shows was defined in line with the concept of national identity, while transnational media functions within a global context on both the cultural and the ideological levels. To elaborate, Vertovec (2009) claims

> Transnationalism describes a condition in which, despite great
> distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders

(and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensifed and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common – however virtual – arena of activity. (P.199)

This shows how transnationalism has functioned as the main pillar of modern global media outlets in general, and of Netflix in particular. Third, in terms of media practices, centered media producers were more powerful than their audience. This is opposite to the present media scene where audience exercise more power and control over the media content delivered to them.

Netflix and the Age of Transnational Media

As mentioned before, Netflix's rise marked the emergence of transnational media outlets. Before the appearance of transnational media, TV was viewed as a tool of ideological dominance. This is due to the fact that power lied with media producers. Media production operated in a linear manner, where programs were produced to be presented to a local audience within a specific time schedule set by the producers. Illustrating the national frame within which media operated, Chalaby (2005) says

For much of its history, television has been closely bound to a national territory. Broadcasters exchanged programmes and set up international associations, but operated within national boundaries. Their signal covered the length and breadth of the country, from the nation's capital the remotest parts of the countryside. Foreign broadcasters were not allowed to transmit on national territory and attempts to do so were seen as breaches of sovereignty. Television was often tied up with the national project and no other media institution was more central to the modernist intent of engineering a national identity. (P.1)

Furthermore, Turner (2009) states that during the age of centered linear media, televised broadcasting was seen as part of the national, cultural or developmental policy objectives of governments. However, internet allowed for a new type of media. This new type of media gave audience more freedom, and more power and control over the media content.

Whereas centered media was characterized by nationalism, which, as Mihelj (2011) points out, acted as both a specific type of discourse and a principle of legitimation, decentered media is distinguished by its focus on cultural diversity and pluralism. To elaborate, Jenner (2018) demonstrates two important points in relation to the transition from centered to decentered media. This first point is

the re-considerations of identity in the 1990s, which focussed more on cultural diversity and pluralism and brought with it changes in representation. The second point is an increased amount of options for viewers, who may easily shift between Welsh, Arabic and English-language programming. This suggests a conceptualisation of television that is, on the one hand, increasingly transnational. On the other hand, there is also a distinct move towards different modes of representation and increased demands on PSB in Europe to represent immigrant groups and construct 'the nation' with an emphasis on diversity and pluralism. (P.204)

Apparently, the rise of transnationalism led to the emergence of universal media networks. Netflix is seen as one of the biggest representatives of transnational media.

Since Netflix positions itself as a transnational media outlet, it highlights the significance of accessibility and immediacy. Plothe and Buck (2019) show how both these features are instrumental in Netflix's media production. The media content Netflix produces is broadly accessible worldwide at any time of the day across global time zones. Another feature that shapes Netflix's production is what Jenner (2018) describes as the 'grammar of transnationalism'. Arguably, Netflix's productions include textual features which make texts appealing and comprehended globally and not confined to a single nation or region. This is opposite to the concept of grammars of nationhood, where Mihelj (2011) shows that media organizations develop sets of norms and ways to successfully represent the national identity of the local audience they address. The last feature that influences Netflix's media production is the domestication of its media production through translation. Although Netflix is a transnational media network that targets a transnational audience, there is a language barrier that the network still has to overcome.

The Netflix Audience: Transnational Audience and Audiovisual Discourse

It is conceivable to comprehend the dynamics of audience formation. This cannot be attained except through the concept of audienceship. According to Li (2009), audienceship is distinguished from audience in that the former is mainly concerned with the context for the viewing process, while the latter is involved with the context of the viewer. In defining audienceship, audience is not viewed from a personal or individualistic perspective, but rather through the scope of the specific practices and processes that contribute to the formation.

The deterritorialization of media was done with the aim of addressing a global audienceship during what Athique (2016) describes as a "sudden shift towards a transnational media order" (p.66). This shift is broadly identified on the grounds of a new global media frame. Castells (1997) explains that the globalization of media has led to the de-nationalization of information. As a consequence, there had to be a change in the perceptions of viewing and defining media on the one hand, and audience on the other. In contrast with the traditional view of televised media as a tool for engineering and reflecting national identity, transnational media focused on developing content that suits the global nature of its audience. This is why it is essential to begin with defining the transnational audience since the comprehension of this type of audience paves the way for understanding of the transnational audiovisual discourse.

In the age of transnational media, audience is seen as active agents. This view, as Appadurai (1996) puts it, is due to the empowerment of the audience, or the media consumers. This empowerment has taken place as a result of the expansion of media access and control over content enjoyed by media consumers. In her demonstration of this new transnational turn is media audience, Hill (2018) explains,

> attention is paid to the transnational turn in media audiences for global formats and local series, signalling an increasing range of audio-visual content available to consumers, fans and publics, including translations, subtitling and fan subbing of fiction and non-fiction television and social media. In relation to transnational audience engagement with screen culture there is an increasing significance of distribution contexts, and place and time, to researching media audience. (p.4)

Hence, researching audience is vital as the standpoint for investigating transnational media discourse.

According to Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), audiences are largely shaped and influenced by social and cultural transformations, new technologies, work patterns and media content. This explains how transnational audience both constructs and is constructed by what Couldry (2012) labels the decentered media. Decentered media, which is represented by Netflix in this research, depends on three major elements in its conceptualization, perception and creation of its transnational audience. These elements, as Jenner (2018) elaborates them, are quality, genre and a global system of values. Highlighting these elements allows for fully discerning and understanding Netflix's transnational audience and the transnational audiovisual discourse that is designed to target it (audience).

Quality and Genre

There are many instances that show how Netflix foregrounds quality and genre for the purpose of attracting fans on a universal scale. (Algorithm of genre ch7) One way through which Netflix seeks to highlight quality is its production of works that have serious topics such as political thrillers and documentaries. Another mean for producing high quality shows is through historical drama. The production of *The Crown* marks Netflix's employment of history as a method of attracting global audience. History here functions as a media genre. It is no viewed from the scope of a national history confined to a specific nation, instead it is perceived from the scope of a media genre that aims at gaining more viewers globally. To explain why *The Crown* enjoyed a huge global success Jenner (2018) explains

> As the international success of Downton Abbey indicates, British history can sell in transnational territories where British history is not 'our' history. The Crown is largely concerned with palace intrigue and the story of a young woman who is trying to assert herself as a public figure and in her relationship with her husband, who struggles with the power his wife holds. This aligns it with Downton Abbey and The King's Speech, which often focus on more 'private' concerns over broader political contexts. (p.228)

Jenner (2018) demonstrates that a similar treatment of history takes place in Netflix's American fantasy drama *Stranger Things*, in which fantasy elements are utilized in order to avoid reference to American domestic or foreign politics in the 1980s.

An International Value System

To gain a transnational appeal, Netflix follows a strategy of championing and promoting values that have a global resonance. Fostering these values and principles enables Netflix to be perceived as an organization that plays an active and a positive role before the public. More importantly, it enables the network to act as an international entity whose presence transcends national borders and is not bound by national identities. The questions remains of what specifically are these values championed by Netflix. Breidenbach and Zukrigl (1998) state that there is a global reference system of values like human rights, feminism and democracy. This reference system is widely accepted and subscribed to globally because it reflects the values hailed by Western culture and by the dominant Western nations. Evidently, a global agenda including these values is often imposed by Western nations through affiliate global entities and organizations such as the UN and the European Union.

However, Netflix's promotion of global values does not mean that cultural differences are totally omitted or suppressed in its works. In fact, Mihelj (2011) elaborates that globalization cannot exist and thrive without cultural differences. Still, it can be said that Netflix's productions foreground cultural differences but within a liberal frame. Netflix's value system that engages with cultural differences appears in numerous productions by the network as Jenner (2018) explains

> The value system is depicted in series like Orange is the New Black, but also other series like Grace and Frankie, Chicas Del Cable (Cable Girls, Netfix, 2017–) or GLOW. All feature female leads operate under broadly feminist frameworks. This broad framework also accounts for the importance of cultural differences within texts. (P.230)

Clearly, Netflix employs these liberal principles in gaining international momentum. Now that the basic elements of Netflix's conceptualization of a transnational audience are explained, it is time to move to the network's transnational audiovisual discourse.

Corpus & Methodology

There has been an evolution in the field of media studies. This evolution has taken place in accordance with the shift away from centered media to decentered one. This shift necessitated a new method of researching and examining audiovisual media discourse. During the age of centered media, audiovisual discourse, as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) clarify, was investigated through a behavioral paradigm that applies quantitative methods to study the impacts of media on its audience. This research paradigm focuses primarily on the negative effects of media content on the audience. For example, it is concerned with the negative effects of pornography or violence on young and adult viewers.

Nevertheless, the appearance of modern transnational media required a new research paradigm that pays attention to the more power gained by viewers. A new research model had to be developed to focus not on the audiovisual discourse through the scope of media production, but rather through that of media reception. In the 1970s, a media paradigm was developed by the cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall. It highlights the active role played by audience in their reception of audiovisual media discourse and messages. To elaborate, Hill (2018) demonstrates

> This critical approach to media and its encoded messages pays attention to interpretation and meaning, often using qualitative methods to analyse how people decode media in multiple ways, including the incorporation of, or resistance to, ideologically framed content by powerful institutions. Abercrombie and Longhurst recognise the significance of the incorporation/resistance paradigm within media and cultural studies research, for example regarding gender and audience research. (P.5)

Hence, the encoding/decoding or incorporation/resistance model developed by Hall (1973) allows for a better understanding of the dynamic process of media production, circulation and reception. In addition, it allows for investigating the interplay between the encoding done by media producers and the decoding done by its audience.

The paper investigates the ISIS audiovisual discourse in Netflix's production *Caliphate*. The series is a 2020 production. It belongs to the thriller genre since it revolves around a looming ISIS attack on Sweden. The series is selected for analysis as it tackles themes related to the global rise of ISIS and targets a transnational audience. In addition, the series is subtitled to Arabic by Netflix, since Arab audience is considered to be part of the broader transnational audience the network addresses.

Analysis through Encoding/Decoding

The analysis is divided into four subsections. Each subsection includes one of the themes that are employed by Netflix in the construction of the transnational audiovisual discourse about ISIS. The first subsection tackles the scenes that refer to women's right, highlighting women abuse as a basic component of the ISIS discourse. The second subsection highlights the theme of intolerance, showing that the ISIS discourse formed by Netflix is highly intolerant and alienating. The third subsection deals with the theme of global terror. In its encoding of the ISIS transnational audiovisual discourse, Netflix focuses on portraying ISIS as a global terrorist group. The last theme that is utilized in the encoding of the ISIS discourse is the one of fanaticism. Netflix stresses this theme to reflect the ISIS discourse in a completely negative manner.

In each subsection, several scenes that reflect the tackled theme are selected for analysis. Since the analysis deals with an audiovisual discourse, the scenes are displayed in figures which include the Arabic subtitling of the scenes. Applying Hall's (1973) model, the encoding process is analyzed through firstly examining the event that is displayed in the scene. The event is explained within the dramatic context of the series in order to comprehend its significance and relation to the highlighted theme. Next, the motives of Netflix which lie behind the selection of this event for the encoding of the ISIS audiovisual discourse are discerned for the purpose of gaining a better insight into the encoding process. This way, encoding extends to cover the ideological aspect, focusing on the ideological background of the events that are being transmitted through the scenes. The encoding is thus analyzed from a dramatic aspect, focusing on the event and the dramatic context, and from a linguistic aspect focusing on the discursive features through the subtitled words that appear in each of the analyzed scenes. In addition, the discursive features extend to cover the paralinguistic dimension in the analysis. Since the investigation is conducted semiotically, both the linguistic and paralinguistic features are highlighted. These two steps mentioned above constitute the encoding process.

Decoding, on the other hand, is analyzed in terms of the reading that the event receives by the Arab audience as part of a broader transnational audience. To elaborate, the event in the subtitled scene should, according to Hall (1973), receive either a preferred, negotiated, or an oppositional reading. In Netflix's *Caliphate*, It is shown that the audiovisual discourse of ISIS receives a preferred reading in accordance with the reading generated by transnational audiences globally. This conclusion stems from the fact that the encoding process is based on attributing ISIS with negative values that are normally condemned and opposed by either entities or individuals worldwide. Hence, decoding, as

Hall (1973) states, is in a cyclical relation with encoding. The generation of meaning by audience during the decoding process is a continuum of the encoding process and a reflection to it.

Hall's Encoding/decoding Media Paradigm

Since Hall's (1973) Encoding/Decoding model is utilized in the analysis of Netflix's transnational discourse of ISIS in its production *Caliphate*, more attention has to be paid to the analytical frame of this model. Understanding how this model works is essential before conducting the actual analysis. In fact, Hall's (1973) model was developed to tackle a point of weakness in the conventional models of media analysis. According to Procter (2004), conventional models of analyzing media discourses suggest that media communication occurs in a linear manner where the media message or discourse moves in a fixed and transparent way from the sender to the receiver. This conventional model works with the assumption that audience members are receivers who passively get the message in its fixed and transparent manner. Nevertheless, Hall (1973) challenges this mass media conventional model.

Hall (1973) challenges the conventional mass media model on the grounds that meaning is not necessarily fixed, that the message is not necessarily transparent and that the audience is not made of passive viewers. Hall (1973) attributes these features of media communication to the audiovisual nature of the media messages. Media messages according to Hall (1973) are communicated through a sign system, leading to the formation of an audiovisual discourse that can be either accepted or contested by the viewers. Adopting a semiotic approach to the analysis of audiovisual media discourse, Hall (1973) emphasizes the socio-political frame within which this media discourse is constructed and received. Hall (1973) argues

> though I shall adopt a semiotic perspective, I do not regard this as indexing a closed formal concern with the immanent organisation of the television discourse alone. It must also include a concern with the 'social relations' of the communicative process.(E/D73:1)

Clearly, Hall (1973) views media reception from the scope of media consumption, where audience members actively engage with the media message. This engagement highlights the social and political dimensions of media audiovisual discourse since audience's consumption of and reaction to this discourse is shaped by their socio-political affiliations and tendencies.

Viewing media communication process in a circular form instead of the conventional linear one has led to considering media reception as an act of consumption where viewers take part in the production and the reproduction of the meaning embedded in the media audiovisual discourse. In elaborating this process of media consumption, Procter (2004) explains that, "for Hall 'consumption determines production just as production determines consumption' (P.255). In fact, Hall (1973) suggests that the encoding and decoding of media audiovisual discourse is done within the frame of over-determined and autonomous moments. To elaborate, Hall (1973) claims that encoding and decoding are over-determined, in Althusser's words, since they are not influenced by a single factor or

aspect like the economy, but they are rather influenced by varying factors such as the economic, political, social, ideological and religious ones. In addition, encoding and decoding are autonomous in that they are not influenced by a single specific factor.

To clarify the active process of decoding media audiovisual discourse by audience, Mambrol (2020) poses the example of the media coverage of the 9/11 attack against the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. Mambrol (2020) explains that while media coverage of the event was the same worldwide, displaying it as an act of terror that draws sympathy from audience, the reactions to the event were not identical globally. It is shown that audiences in countries which include an anti-American sentiment on the public level did not view the event tragically like audience in the US and in Western countries did. Hence, decoding audiovisual media discourse is subject to the cultural context of the audience, including the audience's ideological, social and political affiliations and conditions.

According to Hall (1973), encoding media audiovisual discourse occurs due to the occurrence of the material media event or media production. However, the media event is not the sole element shaping the encoding of media audiovisual discourse since this discourse is also influenced by the numerous discourses and narratives relevant to the media event. Furthermore, Mambrol (2020) shows that institutional-societal relations of production integrate with the audiovisual discourse to form the process of encoding. In other words, for media events to reflect or signify meaning, they are encoded discursively through a set of codes or system of signs including for example videos, eyewitness accounts, and media narratives.

The ISIS discourse architected by Netflix in the Swedish series *Caliphate* is analyzed in this paper through the encoding/decoding model. This is done to demonstrate that in its encoding of the ISIS discourse, Netflix targets a transnational audience. Although the series is subtitled into Arabic, the analysis shows that the reception of the Arab audience and its decoding of the ISIS audiovisual discourse in the series is in line with the broader reception of the same discourse by the transnational audience.

Analysis

Based on Hall's (1973) analytical model of media communication, decoding audiovisual discourse is an active process involving the audience's social position. Decoding can lead to either a preferred, a negotiated, or an oppositional reading of the audiovisual discourse. The aim of this part of the research is to illustrate how Netflix in *Caliphate* encodes a subtitled audiovisual discourse which targets generating a preferred reading by its transnational audience.

The preferred reading of media messages is generated through a discourse that is described as a common sense discourse. Common sense discourses are spontaneous and unconscious ideological messages produced by the dominant cultural and social order, including powerful media network entities such as Netflix. In fact, the audiovisual discourse about ISIS in *Caliphate* gains its global hegemony from the dominance of the global anti-ISIS sentiment. Moreover, decoding is done hierarchically

where viewers subscribe to the dominant meaning and reading architected by the encoders.

In its encoding of a subtitled audiovisual discourse about ISIS, Netflix focuses on four themes that enjoy a global resonance in order to fit its transnational audience. Netflix has woven its ISIS audiovisual discourse around the themes women's rights, tolerance and coexistence, global terror and fanaticism. Each of the four themes is embedded within the global discourse of human rights promoted by the West.

Women's Rights

Apparently, the theme of women's rights is so prominent in Netflix's *Caliphate*. ISIS is depicted as being an extremely radical terrorist group whose ideology is based on discriminating and suppressing women. This part analyzes encoding/decoding of the theme of women discrimination in *Caliphate*. Each scene is analyzed semiotically and discursively to cover the paralinguistic features as well as the linguistic/discursive ones.

Screen Capture (1): "Caliphate", episode 7, min 18.06

Arabic Subtitling	Translation to English
تقول انك تحتاجين لمحرم, و انه يجب عليك ان تتزوجي	She says you need a 'Mahram', and you have to get married.

In the above frame from the seventh episode, Lisha, the younger sister of Sulle, is taken to Raqqa, the stronghold of ISIS in Syria, after she has been brainwashed by ISIS affiliates in Sweden. There, she is put in what seems to be a guesthouse made especially to shelter women coming from other countries to join ISIS. These guesthouses or women camps have been under media spotlight since the emergence of ISIS in the global arena.

In her first encounter with the women camp's manager, Lisha is informed that she will be forced to marriage since she has to be under the authority of a "Mahram". The word "محرم" appears in the subtitling of the scene. It is a term that belongs to Islamic Sharia law. According to Kamali (2019), the term refers to the close male relatives to women. The title assigns its male holder the status of guardianship of the female in several situations like in marriage. The title is held by men who are not entitled to marry the woman like her father, uncle, brothers and half-brothers.

Paralinguistically, Lisha is seen as both passive and helpless. She is dressed in a black dress that covers her whole body except for her face. This strict dress code is employed by the producers as part of the encoding

process to reflect the radicalism of ISIS and the group's discrimination of women's freedoms. Furthermore, Lisha's facial expressions reflect her idleness and confusion, which indicate her feeling of loss and despair under the rule of ISIS.

Clearly, the scene is part of the encoding process as it promotes the view of ISIS as a radical Islamic movement whose sole aim is to oppress women and dominate them. This element of female oppression is an instrumental aspect of the audiovisual discourse of ISIS presented in the Netflix series. This way, Netflix guarantees that this discourse would be decoded by its transnational audience as a preferred reading, hence gaining more popularity worldwide.

Screen Capture (2): "Caliphate", episode 2, min 6.45

Arabic Subtitling	Translation to English
مدان بتهم اعتداء و اغتصاب عدة نساء و سرقة و محاولة قتل	Convicted with assault, rape of multiple women, theft, and a murder attempt.

The above frame highlights female discrimination in the audiovisual discourse of ISIS from the second episode of the series. In the subtitled scene Fatima, the Swedish police investigator, is presenting a brief to her superiors about Swedish male nationals who joined ISIS in Syria. One of the ISIS members, Ahmed Mohamadi, is said to be previously convicted with rape, robbery and an attempted murder. This criminal record helps in the negative portrayal of ISIS and in the encoding of an audiovisual discourse that cannot be but condemned by audience. Therefore, the scene guarantees that decoding receives a preferred reading by audience.

In terms of the paralinguistic features, Fatima's facial expressions are pale and upset, reflecting her feeling of disgust at the atrocious crimes of ISIS members. Moreover, her tone of voice is down, demonstrating the general feeling of depression resulting from the rise of ISIS terror acts in the Western hemisphere.

Intolerance

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Screen Capture (3): "Caliphate", episode 4, min 14.33

Arabic Subtitling	Translation to English
أنت لست مسلما	You are not a true Muslim

Screen Capture (4): "Caliphate", episode 4, min 14.37

Arabic Subtitling	Translation to English
انك تكره الاسلام	You hate Islam

The theme of tolerance and coexistence lies at the heart of Netflix's audiovisual discourse about ISIS. In the series, ISIS is depicted as an intolerant movement that spreads terror and violence in the name of Islam. The two frames above are from the fourth episode of *Caliphate*. In this scene Sulle, the Swedish Muslim faculty student who is being brainwashed by ISIS, has a heated debate with her parents about the status of Islam and Muslims in Sweden. In the heated encounter, Sulle accuses her father of being non-Muslim and of detesting Islam because of his liberal and secular views and affiliations.

As far as the non-verbal features are concerned, Sulle's facial expressions are emotionless, which reflects the mixed feelings of confusion and intolerance held by her. Her tone of voice, on the other hand, is challenging and emphatic, signifying her adoption of the radical and extremist thoughts promoted by ISIS. Finally, her hand gestures in the scene are firm and aggressive, showing the extreme nature of the ISIS audiovisual discourse. Apparently, the paralinguistic features in this scene contribute to encoding the audiovisual ISIS discourse.

The scene includes the accusation subtitled into Arabic. Sulle tells her father, "انت لست مسلما". In the subsequent scene she continues by telling him, "انك تكره الاسلام". In return, both her parents emphasize that ISIS is a terrorist group that murders Muslims and non-Mulsims. Finally, Sulle states that ISIS only murders 'Murtadeen', Muslims who decide to convert from Islam. The encounter illustrates an ISIS discourse that promotes hate and intolerance. The thoughts fostered by this discourse are extremely negative and hostile to the extent that the majority of viewers would normally stand against them, what guarantees a preferred reading of Netflix's discourse within the frame of decoding media messages.

Global Terror

The theme of global terror is fundamental in the construction of an audiovisual discourse about ISIS. The group is known globally for its terror acts. Gerges (2017) explains that ISIS' terror activity was concentrated in the Middle East, coinciding with the climax of events during the Arab Spring in 2011. However, Gerges (2017) illustrates that the group shifted their attention towards targeting Western nations in the name of their war against secularism and liberalism.

Screen Capture (5): "Caliphate", episode 4, min 38.58

Arabic Subtitling	Translation to English
هذا ما نفعله باعداء الله	That is what we do to the enemies of Allah

In the above frame from the fourth episode, a group of ISIS soldiers are seen with their infamous black customs committing a beheading against what they call an 'enemy of Allah'. The infamous act of beheading and the negative labelling of the victim as an enemy of Allah are two popular elements of the encoding of the ISIS transnational discourse. This is due to the fact that the terrorist group has an alienating dogma that is based on the annihilation and destruction of the 'other'.

The paralinguistic features in the scene reflect the violent nature of the terror group, which contributes to the encoding of the ISIS audiovisual discourse. This is evident in the rough tone of voice of the group leader while declaring the execution of the victim. Furthermore, the face covering of the ISIS members hides any facial expressions, thus promoting the view of ISIS as an emotionless group whose savageness is apparent to everyone.

Screen Capture (6): "Caliphate", episode 2, min 12.36

Arabic Subtitling	English Translation
و من يقول ان عليك اتباع القانون السويدي و ليس الشريعة	And whoever says that you should follow the Swedish Law and not the Islamic Sharia Law

Screen Capture (7): "Caliphate", episode 2, min 12.39

Arabic Subtitling	English Translation
ليس مسلما	Is not a Muslim

Screen Capture (8): "Caliphate", episode 2, min 12.41

Arabic Subtitling	English Translation
بل هو عدو للاسلام	He is indeed an enemy of Islam

The last subtitled scene that illustrates the discourse woven around ISIS as a violent group that promotes and commits global terror acts is from the second episode. In the above frames, Sulle is seen while she is watching one of the videos that spread the ISIS fundamentalist ideology.

In the scene, a radical Imam is addressing Swedish and western viewers in what seems to be a brainwashing activity. He states that in Sweden there is a war against Islam and its teachings by the enemies of Allah. The Imam's facial expressions are unamiable, showing the tough nature of his talk in which he accuses the Swedish society and Law of being anti-Muslim. His tone of voice is equally condemning and rough as he employs it in making his accusations. This discourse of hatred and hostility is depicted as belonging to ISIS in an attempt by Netflix to encode a media message that can gain a preferred reading by the transnational audience.

In all the three preceding scenes ISIS is depicted as a terrorist group that relies on a discourse of hate and violence in widening its global terror activity. Netflix employs this discourse in encoding a media message that fits its transnational audience.

Fanaticism

The theme of fanaticism is dominant in the ISIS audiovisual discourse encoded by Netflix. In the series, Netflix highlights the fanatical ideology of ISIS in a big number of scenes. The emphasis on the fanatical ideology of ISIS serves to encode a media message that can directly be decoded within the frame of a preferred reading by transnational viewers. This explains the recurrent reference to death in the name of Islam and for the purpose of getting into heaven in the afterlife.

سيجلدوننا حتى الموت في السوق.

Screen Capture (9): "Caliphate", episode 8, min 34.42

Arabic Subtitling	Translation to English
سيجلدوننا حتي الموت	They will flog us till death

In the above frame from episode eight of the series Husam informs Pervin that under the rule of ISIS they can be publicly flogged until death in the market. Pervin's facial expressions are sad and reflect her depression in the face of the rule of ISIS in Raqqa. Husam's tone is low and quiet, illustrating the tragic end that awaits the innocent people who are ruled by ISIS. Mentioning this punishment is done within the frame of constructing an ISIS discourse characterized by brutality and savageness. In fact, Kamali (2019) illustrates that flogging is considered as a method of punishment for several crimes under Islamic Sharia Law such as adultery and slander.
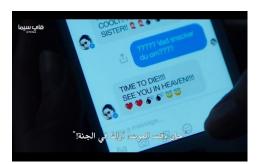

سيقتلوننا إن لم تتزوجي.

Screen Capture (10): "Caliphate", episode 7, min 29.02

Arabic Subtitling	English Translation
سيقتلوننا ان لم تتزوجي	They will kill us if you don't get married

In the above frame from the seventh episode Pervin tells Lisha, the adolescent who escaped from her family in Sweden to join ISIS in Raqqa in Syria, that the latter has to get married soon or otherwise they will all get killed. The scene does not go deeper to explain why Pervin and Lisha could be under the threat of getting killed by ISIS. In other words, there is no mentioning of any specific Sharia Law rules that could justify the killing of the two women. Yet, the focus here by Netflix is on the construction of this bloody image of ISIS. This negative portrayal facilitates the decoding process, guaranteeing that it would be done within the frame of a preferred reading. The negative portrayal of ISIS is seen in the paralinguistic feature of the facial expression. Pervin's facial expression is pale and depressed, indicating her life under the fanatical authority of ISIS.

Screen Capture (11): "Caliphate", episode 8, min 46.17

Arabic Subtitles	English Translation
حان وقت الموت. أراك في الجنة	Time to die. See you in heaven

Screen Capture (12): "Caliphate", episode 8, min 47.09

Arabic Subtitling	English Translation
سنفجر أنفسنا	We will blow ourselves up

The reference to suicide attacks is instrumental in constructing a hostile and horrific discourse about ISIS. The above frames from the last episode of *Caliphate* show Kerima while texting and then calling her friend Sulle to inform her of the suicide bombing she is about to commit in a place full of innocent individuals. The scene illustrates how ISIS takes advantage of Muslim adolescents who live in the West by brainwashing them and recruiting them in terror attacks. This theme of exploitation is instrumental in the encoding of the ISIS audiovisual discourse by Netflix. It guarantees that the discourse is decoded as a preferred reading by transnational audience.

Conclusion

In the past few years, Netflix has emerged as one of the most popular and powerful media outlets around the world. The network has gained this popularity as a direct result of the recent developments in the media scene. The fact that Netflix operates through the internet medium means that the audience have the power of selecting what to watch and when to watch it. This new age of decentered media requires a research paradigm that takes into account the role of the audience in dealing with media audiovisual discourse.

This paper applied Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding paradigm. This analytical model foregrounds the role of the audience in generating meaning. While traditional media models highlight the role of media producers as the most essential in both the generation and the reception of media discourse, Hall's (1973) model focuses on the significance on the audience members and on the means through which they receive and process media discourses. Since this paper investigates the way transnational audience (Arabs as an example) receive the ISIS audiovisual discourse in Netflix's *Caliphate,* the encoding/decoding model is employed in the analysis.

Apparently, the ISIS audiovisual discourse formed and promoted by Netflix is characterized by features that gain this discourse a preferred reading by the transnational audience of *Cliphate*. It is illustrated that the ISIS discourse is characterized with women discrimination, fanaticism, terrorism and intolerance. These four aspects constitute the main pillars upon which the ISIS discourse is formulated by Netflix.

It is found that in its encoding of the ISIS audiovisual discourse, Netflix relies on the elements of genre, quality, and global human values. The reason behind the foregrounding of these elements is that they secure the decoding od Netflix's ISIS audiovisual discourse within the frame of a preferred reading. This means that Arab

audience, as part of a broader transnational audienceship, subscribe to a preferred reading of the series by incorporating the audiovisual discourse promoted by the network.

The analysis of the encoding/ decoding processes is done on two levels. The first level tackles the dramatic aspect of the selected subtitled scenes. On this level, the event in the scene is analyzed within the dramatic context. This allows for a better understanding of the media events that contribute to the making of the ISIS audiovisual discourse. Moreover, the processes are discerned on the discursive level, including both the linguistic and paralinguistic dimensions of this level.

It is found that the ISIS audiovisual discourse is dramatically woven around events that reflect the savageness and brutality of the terrorist group. For instance, the events revolve around the oppression of women, the planning of terrorist attacks in Western countries, and the radicalization of Muslims adolescents in the West. All these events serve to conceptualize and ISIS audiovisual discourse that is characterized with brutality and intolerance. In addition, the paralinguistic features in the analyzed scenes further the negative portrayal of ISIS in Netflix's *Caliphate*.

To summarize, Netflix's ISIS audiovisual discourse is constituted with the purpose of addressing a transnational audience. The role of Arabic subtitling does not transcend being a medium through which the discourse is channeled. The focus of the study is on the reception of the ISIS audiovisual discourse by the Arab audience as a representative of transnational audience.

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