

An Example to the Role of Culture in Advertisements: Turkish Internet Experience in 1994-2001

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Abstract

Turkey, with its young population of more than 70 million people, is an important market for high-technology products. The penetration rates of products such as mobile phones and DVD players are higher than the average in European countries until 1999. However, at the start of the year 2000, number of Internet users was still less than one percent of the total population. In 2000, the computer and media sector launched a very effective campaign that increased this rate to five percent. We analyze the elements of this campaign and argue that it was the appropriate use of Turkish cultural elements in advertisements that affected this surge in numbers.

Introduction:

Turkey is among the European countries whose adaptation to new technology is swift (OECD 1998: 2) (Lynch 2000 :18). The rate of increase of the number of mobile phones and DVD players are indicative of this fast adaptation.

The number of mobile phone users has increased 154 % in 2000 over the number in 1999 in Turkey (Lynch 2000 :18) . The corresponding rate for Europe was 145 % (GSMWorld 00), confirming that Turkey is one of the leading countries in its geographical region in increase in mobile phone usage .

On the DVD market side, the number of DVD players per household was 3.2 % in Turkey in 1999 (Askar 2001:47), compared to 0.9 % in the European Community (Deiss 2001a:2). The rate of increase of DVD players is 375 %. The number of DVD videos sold in 1999 is 250,000. (Baki 1999). In the light of this data, it is seen that Turkey is an important market in the DVD business as well.

Despite this technological predisposition, the penetration rates achieved by mobile phones and DVD's have not been paralleled by Internet usage in the years 1993-1999. Although 97 % of Turkish households own a television receiver, the number of Turkish Internet users is still under 5 % of the total population (Askar 2001:17). According to a countrywide survey, 87.7 % of the Turkish people do not know the Internet and 31.3 % do not think that they need to use a computer. (Askar 2001:37). Although the cost of an Internet-compatible personal computer is comparable to that of a television receiver, 50.5 % of Turkish consumers think that computers cost more than televisions and mobile

phones (Askar 2001:37). These results suggest that the Turkish consumer does not understand what the Internet is and does not have a realistic estimate of its cost.

The reasons for this ignorance may be found in the educational level of Turkish consumers, especially of the lower middle income group, who form the 48 % of Turkish consumers. The average education level of these consumers is at the elementary school level (Sönmez 2000). The income level of this group is high enough to own a computer and an Internet connection.

The profile of current Internet users, on the other hand, is very different: 51.92 % belong to the upper income group and 25.32 % are university graduates (Askar 2001:17). It is apparent that the marketing strategies that were aimed at this group have not been appropriate to inform consumers in the lower middle income group.

The average person in the lower middle income group is faithful to traditions. Although he is affected by Western culture, he continues to live in the traditional Turkish way. The majority of the people in this group live in the countryside and have very limited urban living habits. 31 % of the people in this group do not need a computer and 90 % have insufficient information about the Internet (Askar 2001:36).

Recognizing that they must reach and inform this group of consumers to spread the use of Internet, the computer and media sector has launched a major effort in the year 2000. As a result of this effort, Internet use has increased 400 % and reached an important momentum. This article investigates how the Turkish consumer is encouraged to use the Internet by this advertisement effort and analyzes the role of the use of traditional Turkish culture and traditional use of humour in this development.

The Development of the Turkish Multimedia Sector between 1987-1995

Before discussing the cultural factors that would attract the general public to Internet use, we would like to review the development of the multimedia sector before the widespread introduction of the Internet beyond its limited use in scientific circles.

In 1987, Turkish people were introduced to interactive media through the use of interactive screens of Automatic Teller Machines of banks. However, the first true application was realized in 1990, through a museum project for the Topkapi Palace (Ozcan. 1993). The purpose of the first try realized for the Topkapi Palace was to access many visual and written materials within the cyberspace, to compare and to obtain new visual and written versions of those materials by a composition process. In the Topkapi Palace Project, the basic aim was to make a sophisticated interface design in order to access easily to contrasting materials such as photographs, engravings, orthographic drawings, animations etc., within the advantages of the interactive computer environment. However, since the necessary sponsorship was not found, this multimedia system was not finalized and remained only as a CD–title of 20 photographs and 10 technical drawings.

In the years 1990-1995, many CD titles on Turkish culture were produced but these efforts were not sufficient to spread the use of interactive media to the general public (Ozcan 2001). The principle reason for this was that the number of active computer users in the 1990's was around 300,000 in a population of 60 million (Kaynaroglu 1999 : 6). It may be argued that in those years, the cost of a personal computer with multimedia capabilities was high for a family of the lower middle income group. However, a more important factor was the absence of campaigns to inform and encourage people toward the use of this new medium. This lack of information reached all levels of the public: Turkish media companies did not exactly understand the potential of interactive media that developed with CD titles. There were no professionals educated in this field and policy makers did not grasp the importance of this new medium to take the necessary steps for its development.

While the content provider side was concentrating on producing CD titles, the emergence of Internet browsers such as Netscape made it easy to exchange audiovisual data, popularizing the Internet. This development found echo only as foreign news in the Turkish media. However, Turkish universities had started to use the Internet for academic activities as early as in 1993 (Ozgit 1995).

Early Developments in Turkish Internet

As mentioned above, the first organizations in Turkey that established web sites were universities. One of the first professionally developed university web sites was Mimar Sinan University web site and aimed to present Turkish art and architecture in a series of electronic collections such as Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture, Turkish Architecture Image Archive, and Turkish Cinema (Ozcan 1995).

The first Internet version of a Turkish newspaper and magazine appeared in 1995 (Aktuel 2000), (Zaman 2000). In that period, Internet newspapers attracted a lot of interest, especially among more than 5 million Turks who lived in North America, Europe and Australia. Turkish media companies, recognizing this demand, started Internet versions of newspapers, magazines, and television channels, and enriched the contents of their new media versions from 1997 on.

All these developments served more to the recognition of the commercial potential of this new medium by media companies than to spread the use of the Internet within the country. Unfortunately, the Internet remained a mere technological attraction in that period. One of the main factors that undermined the development of the Internet in Turkey was the absence of Internet laws and regulations: In the early 1990s, Turkish laws and regulations were not flexible enough to permit the emergence of new communication channels such as the Internet. In 1995, the first trial by Internet service providers to obtain licences was unsuccessful: The Turkish telecom had a monopoly on communication over telephone lines and the authorities interpreted this to include Internet communication. In that period, Turkish universities filled this role and provided Internet service to the general public as well as their students and personnel. Internet

service providers were granted licences only a year later. However, Turkish Telecom was now late to develop the infrastructure of the Internet in Turkey. A large majority of Internet users connect to the Internet from home on dial-up lines using slow modems. ISDN services and cable services, which are very common in Europe, became available but never gained popularity due to pricing policies. The ADSL, which led to the Internet breakthrough in the United States and Europe, is still unavailable. The Turkish Telecom is planning to make the ADSL technology, which supports real time video transfer rates, available in the second half of 2001.

Campaigns to Encourage Internet Use in the year 2000

Due to the aforementioned deficiencies in the infrastructure, the number of Internet users had remained low until the year 2000 as seen in Table I. In the beginning of 2000, Internet service providers and media companies started a campaign to popularize Internet use.

The companies had identified four reasons that deterred the growth of the Internet:

1. Suitable content for the lower middle income group, which consisted mostly of elementary school graduates who did not speak a foreign language, was unavailable.
2. The lower middle income group was not convinced of the necessity for this new medium.
3. Marketing strategies that targeted the middle income group had not been developed. The infrastructure was weak.

In order to overcome these problems, major media companies started out by forming partnerships with multinational companies: The Dogan Media Group with Time-Warner and Dogus media group with NBC. They strengthened their infrastructure by setting up satellite connections and by designing top-notch web sites.

In parallel to the work on the infrastructure, new marketing campaigns were designed the project the image of "easy Internet". The Dogan Media Group-Time Warner partnership chose the name e-kolay.net ("e-easy") for their ISP (E-kolay 2001).

The major part of this offensive was the advertisement strategy. Advertisement campaigns to popularize the Internet chose messages that conformed to Turkish culture. Witty messages that contained Turkish cultural elements targeted the lower middle income group and advertised the use of Turkish web content; Internet banking and Internet shopping sites.

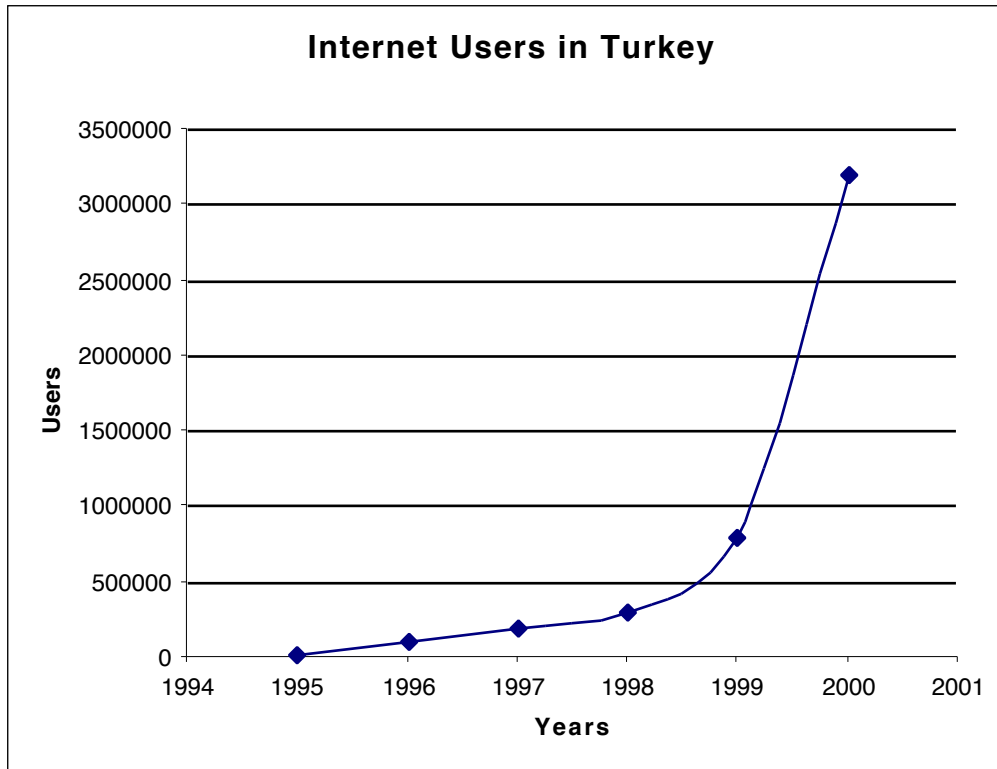


Figure 1- Increase in the number of Internet Users in Turkey .
(Ozgit 1995) (Akgul 1996,1997, 1998, 1999, 2000)

In order to determine what these cultural elements were, we scanned the 450 Internet advertisements in the top selling Turkish daily newspaper *Hurriyet* during the year 2000. (Ozcan 2001). We have found that on average, more than one advertisement per day appeared on the paper. 50 % of the advertisements are for Internet service providers or for ISP-computer packages. 14 % advertise electronic banking and 11 %, shopping on the Internet.

The cultural focus is most prominent in the advertisements of content: 16 % of the advertisements target the male-dominant lower middle income group: A large majority of the content advertisements are for car enthusiast web sites, finance web sites and for web sites based on favorite leisure activities of the males of this group such as football and backgammon.

The advertisement films portray characters from the lower middle income group. Most popular actors of Turkish Cinema have been cast in these roles in a humorous scenario. The most often used characters are housewife, naive youngster, office boy, and nit-witted blonde. In a comedy setting, the message is "Even I can use the Internet, so why not you?"

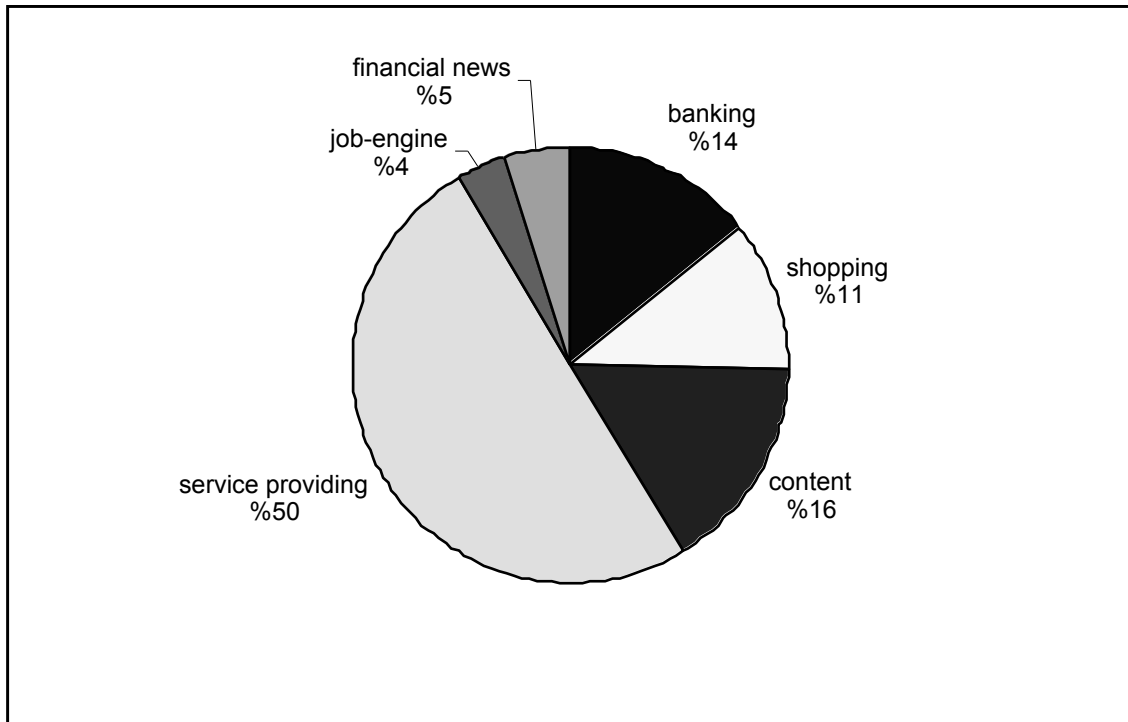


Figure 2- The distribution of Internet advertisements according to subject, Hurriyet; January 1-December 31, 2000.

Two such advertisement films have especially been successful. The first one has been directed by one of the most prominent young directors of Turkish Cinema, Sinan Cetin and is starred by the famous comedian of Turkish cinema, the late Kemal Sunal (Figure 3). The second example is the series of comedy films based on the theme "street vendors use the Internet" and has been produced by Ali Taran Creative Studio (figure 4).

In the first group of advertisement films, characters from the middle income group such as engineer, athlete, farmer, stock broker have been portrayed by Kemal Sunal. These advertisement films stress in a humorous scenario what the user can find in the Internet related to his areas of interest and how easy it is to use the Internet.



Figure 3- E-Kolay Net TV advertisement; directed by Sinan Cetin, © 2000

The second set of films for ixir.com are based on the witticism between two street vendors, a chestnut roaster and a roasted sheep intestine vendor, situated outside a soccer stadium. The humorous situations arise from the following contradiction: Although street vendors are usually uneducated and are distant from high culture, these Internet-using vendors read the Financial Times daily, are as familiar with Internet terminology as a computer engineer, and would be the envy of a music critic in their close attendance to opera and classical music events.

Those two sets of advertisement films have been shown extensively in different TV stations as given in Table I. They have aroused great interest, especially in the targeted lower middle income group. The films have been the subjects of many newspaper articles and television shows. The Internet sites of the two ISPs have received very large number of visitors. The advertised products, the Internet access kits, have been an enormous success. Figure 1 shows the dramatic increase in the number of Internet users following these campaigns: The number of Internet users, which was 800,000 in the beginning of 1999, has risen to 2,000,000 by May 2000, after the first airing of the advertisement films, and to 3,200,000 in November 2000, by the end of the campaign



Figure 4- Ixir .com TV Advertisement , produced by Ali Taran Creative Workshop, ©2000

Month	ixir.com		e-kolay.net	
	# TV spots	Total # sec.	# TV spots	Total # sec.
February	1234	62,934	-	-
March	2006	105,309	-	-
April	2017	106,901	810	39,414
May	2987	190,964	-	-
June	672	45,960	128	11,268
July	790	31,600	334	30,278
August	-	-	191	18631
September	3267	98,685	-	-
October	827	13,818	-	-
December	20	360	-	-

Table I – TV advertisement films for ixir.com and e-kolay.net in the year 2000

Analysis of the Role of Turkish Improvisational Theater in the Success of Internet Advertisements

In order to understand the reasons underlying the success of the aforementioned popular advertisement films, we need to study similar elements in traditional Turkish Culture and its common themes and messages.

Since Ottoman times, people from the lower middle income group, which comprise the majority of the Ottoman public, have favored themes that present their issues and problems in humorous tones. The oldest example of this kind is "Keloglan", an ancient eastern tale, which is well known and affectionately told throughout Anatolia. The hero of this tale is a poor shepherd who falls in love with the sultan's daughter. The theme of the tale is how this poor, clumsy but witty young man impresses the sultan with his wits and marries his daughter. This ever-popular tale embodies the hopes of the poor Anatolian farmers: Keloglan, symbolizing poverty, marries the sultan's daughter and becomes rich (Walker 1968).

Similar elements are present in Turkish humor arts: The first example is the shadow puppet play "Karagoz", which, developed in the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century (And 1979). Turkish shadow puppet play, in casting characters from lower and higher classes against each other and displaying the contrasts in social and political settings in a satirical style, has ensured its popularity among the low-income classes of the Turkish public during three centuries.

A similar example which has been a favorite of the Turkish public since the seventeenth century is the Turkish improvisational theater "Ortaoyunu" (Cevdet 1973) (Martinovitch 1968). Ortaoyunu is the stand-up comedy of its time; based on improvised dialogues between two characters: an intellectual, "Kavuklu", and a clumsy, naive, but smart character from the lower classes, "Pisekar". Like in shadow puppet play, these characters humour the contrasts between rich and poor, or the intellectual rich and the uncultured poor in settings based on the socio-political events of their time. The plays presented in this format have become very popular with the Turkish populace. Today, there are theater companies that continue this tradition within the formats of contemporary theater.

The traditions, which started with Keloglan tales and continued with Karagoz and Ortaoyunu have been living with 20th century Turkish cinema. Keloglan, representing the silly, clumsy and naive everyday man from the lower classes, has been a favorite character of Turkish cinema from its earliest times. In the 1950's, two Turkish actors have become stars with modern day Keloglan characters: Feridun Karakaya with "Cilali Ibo" (Seden 1959), and Sadri Alisik with "Turist Omer" (Soner 1963). The last representative of this tradition is Kemal Sunal, who started acting in the 1980s (Egilmez 1997). Sunal, with the modern Keloglan character he played in his films, became the most popular actor of the people of the lower middle income group in the last 20 years (Sunal 1998).

According to Can Dunder, the factors underlying the enormous popularity of these comedy actors is the attitude of the characters they play (Dunder 1996). These modern-day Keloglan characters, although basically honest and naive, can harbour opportunist feelings at times. This appeals to the subconscious of the common man, who harbours similar feelings. When these characters lose, the viewer from the lower middle income group makes fun of his clumsiness and naivete, but when he wins, the viewer identifies with this ever-losing poor man and feels triumphant .

This winning formula has been used in Internet advertisements mentioned above. For the advertisements starring Kemal Sunal, the popular image built over the years of the "clumsy and naive common man" has been used to convey the messages "Internet use is important for me" and "I can become learned and rich by using the Internet". These messages reached the target by defeating the opinion "I do not need to use the Internet", so prevalent in the lower middle income group (Askar 2001). Just like mobile telephone and DVD use, Internet use was seen as an element of reaching the upper classes.

In the advertisement campaigns for ixir.com, a similar image of the street vendors reinforced the feelings that the common man could become learned and rich through using the Internet. These campaigns in the year 2000 popularized Internet use among the lower middle income group and the number of Internet users exploded as discussed.

We can conclude that the success of these campaigns is due to the appropriate use of cultural elements in the messages. The through understanding of Turkish habits, lifestyle and sense of humour, by the advertising companies and their effective use in advertisements has led to the surge in demand for Internet use.

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