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## 'Young Soap Opera Viewers and Performances of Self'

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### Young Soap Opera Viewers and Performances of Self

#### Abstract

The Dutch television soap opera *Good Times Bad Times* has been popular with youth audiences for many years. In this article, I discuss three 'active' ways in which young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds use this soap for identity construction, drawing on the concept of 'performative style' to analyse the results of twenty focus group interviews. One performative style revolves around questions of morality and sex, one focuses on specific soap opera characters, and one looks at the soap as a whole. By referring to these performative styles in giving meaning to the soap, the young people who were interviewed construct a particular set of performances of the self. Rather than being directly influenced by characters, storylines and representations, they seemed to use the soap for their own purposes. Both gender and ethnicity play an important role in the ways in which interviewees interpret the soap.

Key words: soap opera, performance, gender, ethnicity, identity construction

#### Prologue

In the fall of 2002, two young female characters in the Dutch television soap opera *Good Times Bad Times* [*Goede Tijden Slechte Tijden*, 1990-] fell, quite unexpectedly, in love with each other. Both characters, named Charlie and Isabella, had previously only been involved in heterosexual relationships. In the two years in which they had concurrently been on *Good Times Bad Times* (henceforth *GTBT*) a close friendship had developed between them, which, eventually, transformed into a love relationship. In the episodes in

which this transformation was shown the Dutch audience could see the two young women kissing passionately. Young people who were interviewed about *GTBT* expressed different responses to this representation of lesbian love:

ESTHER [I]: I would like to carry on about that for a while, the lesbian relationship. Because what do you think about that? About the relationship that Charlie and Isabella have?

CARON: Filthy.

JOLIJN: Ah, ugh!

CARON: Well, I find it foul to watch actually.

SELINE: Yes, it's OK with me if you are like that, but not in front of me.

BIBIANA: No, no, no... exactly!

(Interview 5)

ESTHER [I]: And what do you think about the lesbian relationship of Charlie and Isabella?

KIMBERLY: That should be allowed, shouldn't it? When you love each other? We are now living in a time and in a country where that's possible and that's allowed and then surely it has to be in series as well. Because imagine, when you're a lesbian for example... I'm not a lesbian... [the others laugh] and you're watching that type of series and you're in doubt about your feelings or whatever and then you see: 'Look, there it's possible too' and so on. (...)

VICTORIA: It isn't strange, it's not a taboo, it's not like 'ugh'.

KIMBERLY: It isn't odd.

(Interview 2)

Soap operas typically evoke discussions amongst their viewers. In some cases, these discussions take the shape of an exchange of moral evaluations. Whereas the girls in the

first quote agree that the kissing scene of Charlie and Isabella was 'filthy', 'ugh!' and 'foul', the girls in the second interview adopt a liberal stance, albeit distancing themselves from the idea of being gay. Due to their 'open' narrative structure soaps provide room for multiple interpretations (Allen, 1985: 81-84). Chris Barker (1998: 65) argues:

While soap operas raise numerous issues of personal and sexual morality they are rarely 'moralist' in the sense of positioning viewers in one moral discourse which is regarded as the only possible 'right' course of action. Both theoretical understandings and empirical evidence about the way people 'read' television soap opera suggest that the text does not 'impose' a moral regime on viewers but provides a resource for people to talk about in an 'active' and creative way.

In this article, I discuss three 'active' ways in which young viewers use *GTBT* for identity construction. I use the concept of 'performative style' to analyse the results of twenty focus group interviews. One performative style revolves around questions of morality and sex as touched upon above, one focuses on specific characters, and one looks at the soap as a whole. By making use of these performative styles in talking about the soap young people construct a particular set of performances of the self. Before elaborating on these, I first introduce the research project, the existing research into young soap opera viewers and identity construction, and the design of the interview study.

### **The research project**

*GTBT* has been popular with Dutch youth audiences for many years. The popularity of the soap seems to be shared by young people from different ethnic backgrounds in the Netherlands. A small number of studies have found that ethnic minority young people, especially girls, enjoy watching *GTBT* as much as white Dutch youth (Baardwijk, Dragt, Peeters & Vierkant, 2004: 102; de Bruin, 2001; Milikowski, 1999: 7, Schothorst & Verzijden, 1998: 44).

A common preference for one Dutch TV programme among young people from different backgrounds seems remarkable when one regards the tone of public discussions about the Dutch multicultural society in recent decades. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s ethnic

minorities in the Netherlands were granted freedom to find their place in society while retaining a cultural identity premised on their country of origin, from the 1990s on the dominant discourse has urged migrants to 'integrate', and 'adapt to' dominant Dutch culture (Prins, 2000: 28). This shift in the public debate has led to an increased application of an 'us versus them' perspective and an emphasis on the cultural specificities of ethnic 'groups'. A by now classic illustration is a national newspaper column by Paul Scheffer, who wrote that in the Netherlands everyone seems to have 'their own bar, their own school, their own idols, their own music, their own religion, their own butcher and their own street or their own neighbourhood' (Scheffer, 2000: 6). He concludes: 'To be honest, these old and new Dutch citizens know next to nothing about each other' (ibid.).

In this context, the first question that comes to mind when considering the popularity of *GTBT* among young viewers from a range of backgrounds is whether people from different ethnic 'groups' interpret the soap in different ways. One famous audience study into soap and ethnicity which addresses this question is *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas* by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990). Liebes and Katz interviewed members from six ethnic backgrounds about their interpretation of an episode of the American primetime soap opera *Dallas*. Most of these groups were living in Israel, namely Arabs, Moroccans, Russians and so-called 'kibbutzniks'. Interviews with *Dallas* viewers were also conducted in the US and Japan. It turned out that each group interpreted the episode in their own unique way, comparing the soap's characters and storylines to their cultural values and knowledge. Arabs and Moroccans seemed to pay relatively more attention to family aspects, Americans and 'kibbutzniks' more often focussed on individual characters, while Russians and Japanese distanced themselves from the soap by questioning its cultural value (Liebes & Katz, 1990: 72).

Influenced by Liebes and Katz's study, I undertook a pilot study for the present project into the ways in which Surinamese, Turkish and white Dutch girls give meaning to an episode of *GTBT* (de Bruin, 2001). My conclusions were different from Liebes and Katz's in a number of ways. First, gender, a category that they do not dwell upon, seemed to play an important part in talking about the soap. The girls tended to focus on the female characters who appeared in the episode. Second, no clear-cut differences between ethnic groups emerged. On occasion ethnicity played a role in a particular interpretation and was referred to explicitly. For example, when a girl of Surinamese descent evaluated the reaction of a

mother character in the soap she made explicit comparisons to what a Surinamese mother would do in a similar situation. Third, the notion of ethnic 'groups' was debunked by diversity within groups. One 'Turkish' group, for example, consisted of four girls who all had a Turkish background, yet their personalities differed enormously. Each girl seemed to have carved out her own conception of what it means to be Turkish in the Netherlands. At closer inspection, the Liebes and Katz study turned out to be rather essentialist in its conceptualisation of ethnicity and culture and its conclusions about the way in which these categories influence audience reactions (see Harindranath, 2005).

As a result of the findings of the pilot study, the focus of the research project shifted. The aim was no longer to interview young people from particular ethnic 'groups' and analyse differences between these groups, but to talk to young *GTBT* viewers from diverse ethnic backgrounds and grasp the role that ethnicity plays in their interpretations of the soap. Gender was added as a category of interest. In the larger study presented in this article, boys were also interviewed and the role of gender in interpretations of boys and girls was analysed. The emphasis on the role of ethnicity and gender led to a focus on processes of identity construction. The theoretical framework for the project therefore consists of studies on young soap viewers and identity construction.

### **Theoretical framework**

The existing research into young television soap opera viewers stresses that young people have considerable freedom to interpret the soap text in different ways. Young viewers, David Buckingham argues, 'actively seek to construct their relationship with the programme on their own terms' (Buckingham, 1987: 154). Buckingham also found that an important aspect of giving meaning to a soap opera is talking about the programme (*ibid.*: 162-163). The young people he interviewed watched the British soap *EastEnders* because everybody at school was talking about it. *EastEnders* was a regular topic of discussion in the peer group, and to a lesser extent in families, and thereby had become an important part of the youngsters' daily lives.

The ethnographic study that Marie Gillespie (1995) conducted in the London suburb of

Southall generated similar findings. The young people she talked with about television were mainly of Punjabi background. The Australian soap *Neighbours* was one of their favourite television programmes, which led to a lot of 'gossiping' about its characters and storylines (Gillespie, 1995: 142). In the process, young people compared their own lives to those of the soap characters. Their ethnicity played a vital role in those comparisons. Some interviewees decided to distance themselves from the 'western' values of the soap and oriented themselves towards the Punjabi 'parent culture', whereas others felt involved with the soap characters' lives and used *Neighbours* to make 'translations' between Punjabi and 'western' values (ibid.: 8).

The distinction between distance and involvement is one that is found in many studies on soap viewers. Buckingham's interviewees were constantly 'shifting between an intense involvement in the fiction and a critical (often satirical) distancing from it' (Buckingham, 1987: 165). Liebes and Katz, in their study of *Dallas*, distinguish between 'referential' and 'critical' readings of the soap text. When using a referential reading viewers regard the soap as a manifestation of 'real life', which allows them to make comparisons to their own lives (1990: 100). In a critical reading viewers expose the 'constructedness' of the soap, for example by commenting on the actors' performances, which directs them to look beyond the reality of the soap text (ibid.: 114).

Referential readings open up possibilities for identity construction. Gillespie's research shows how the 'translations' that young Punjabi Londoners make between the soap *Neighbours* and their own lives lead to the formulation of 'new ethnicities' (1995: 11). These translations were predominantly related to interpersonal relationships, such as relationships between neighbours, family members or partners in a love relationship (ibid.: 162-174). For example, the young people interviewed valued the freedom that young soap characters were given by their parents to make their own decisions. They used the equal relationships between parents and children in *Neighbours* to, albeit very carefully, critique the relationship they had with their own parents. In this way, *Neighbours* played a role in the formulation of ideals regarding their own lives.

Research by Chris Barker also shows that the soap *Neighbours* can fulfil a role in the lives of ethnic minority youth in Britain. Barker emphasises that in talking about the soap young people actively construct identities: 'Teenage talk about soap opera is constitutive of

identity in that young people negotiate through talk shared understandings about how to 'go on' in their society as persons within social relationships' (Barker, 1997: 612). For the Black and Asian girls that Barker studied, a range of identity experiences came into play. Ethnicity was crucial, yet was cross-cut by gender when the girls talked about storylines concerning relationships and sexual behaviour (ibid.: 619). The girls adopted moral stances, especially when talking about sex, by drawing on both vernacular and more authorised and approved discourses. Characters who were involved in what was referred to as 'inappropriate sex' were, on the one hand, blamed for their actions, yet, on the other, were forgiven for the same actions. Barker (1998: 71) concludes that this 'double' interpretation provided the girls with a means of dealing with their own moral and ethical dilemmas around sexuality. This interpretation of a soap opera is not only used by girls with ethnic minority backgrounds. David Buckingham and Sara Bragg (2004: 17-18) interviewed white young people in the UK. Their interviewees found the sexual content of soap storylines particularly fascinating and, similar to the girls whom Barker interviewed, engaged in moral evaluations of characters' sexual behaviour (ibid.: 164).

As mentioned above, soaps in general invite young people to engage in moral debate. They do not impose a moral regime on viewers but, due to their large number of characters and interweaving storylines, present a range of moral positions that viewers can take up. This grants viewers a considerable amount of agency in interpreting the soap text. As Buckingham concludes in relation to his interviewees: 'the children appeared to be able to apply their own moral and ideological frameworks to the programme without feeling that it was encouraging them to adopt different ones' (Buckingham, 1987: 177).

### **The interview study**

For the present study twenty focus group interviews were conducted. A total of 95 young people participated. They were selected via secondary schools in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the two largest and most ethnically diverse cities in the Netherlands. Their ages ranged from twelve to eighteen years old. Out of 95 young people, 73 were girls and 22 were boys. The reason that more girls than boys were interviewed is that girls expressed more willingness to participate in the study. This gender imbalance can be

explained by the fact that usually more girls than boys watch soaps, and on top of that boys seem generally less willing to admit that they watch them (see Gillespie, 1995: 146). The majority of young people who were interviewed were from one of the four most frequently occurring ethnicities in the Netherlands: 23 were Turkish, 20 Moroccan, 15 Surinamese, and 20 white Dutch. The remaining interviewees were from a range of other ethnic backgrounds, such as Indonesian, Antillean, American, Ghanaian, Scottish and Romanian. The groups consisted of four to six young people. Eleven groups consisted of girls only, three of boys only and six were gender mixed. All but four groups were ethnically mixed.

The interviews were conducted by students whose MA theses I supervised: Annerieke Bijeman, Peggy Gemerts, Monika Isaak and Esther Langerhorst. All four were women in their early twenties at the time and two have an ethnic minority background. The interviews were conducted at schools, most of them during class time. Before the interview commenced interviewees watched an episode of *GTBT*. Episodes were selected by the interviewers and had been aired shortly before the time of the interview. Watching an episode before the start of the interview enhances discussion, and moreover allows interviewers to get a direct sense of how interviewees interpret particular representations (see Liebes & Katz, 1990: 6). A short topic list was used to give direction to the interviews. Using this list as guidance, specific questions were formulated about the episode and *GTBT* in general during the interview. The interviewers were instructed to ask open questions to give the interviewees the opportunity to tell their own stories (see van Zoonen, 1994: 136-137).

The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. All informants were assigned pseudonyms and appear with their pseudonym in this article. The transcripts were analysed using coding procedures from the grounded theory approach. Three forms of coding were could be distinguished: 'open', 'axial' and 'selective' coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, all occurring concepts in the transcripts were mapped out and put together in thematic categories, which led to an initial idea of what interviewees had to say. Second, interviews were compared to each other along the lines of these categories. This 'axial' coding elucidated ways in which interviewees talk about *GTBT* and the roles that gender and ethnicity play in interpretations. Third, one core category, a 'central phenomenon around which all the other categories are integrated' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: 116), was



searched for. The concept that emerged from the data was 'performative style'. Using this concept, processes of identity construction in relation to *GTBT* were analysed.

### **Performative styles**

The discourse informants produce in an interview can, on the one hand, be regarded as an expression of their beliefs, attitudes and feelings. Yet, on the other, it can also be seen as a means to leave a particular impression with others. Those 'others' are the interviewer and, in the case of a focus group interview, the other participants (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996: 80). During the analysis of the interview transcripts I came to realise that the ways in which young people talk about *GTBT* could be viewed as a set of 'performances'. The context of the interviews is important here. The interviews took place at secondary schools. For young people school is a place where they spend a lot of time and, to a certain extent, feel at home. At the same time, school is a space where complex social relations are at play (Pilkington & Johnson, 2003: 275). These resonated during the interviews: classmates tried to show off to one another by displaying knowledge about the soap or its characters, while friends at times aimed for shared interpretations by talking about something their mates could relate to.

Thus, talking about a soap opera in an interview setting can be viewed as a vehicle for presentations of the self. An opinion voiced in a focus group about a soap does not only tell the other people present something about the soap, but also, and perhaps more importantly, something about the person voicing the opinion. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Erving Goffman (1959) discusses how people in their everyday lives routinely act out certain kinds of performances. According to Edward Schieffelin (1998: 195):

As Goffman has suggested, human intentionality, culture and social reality are fundamentally articulated in the world through performative activity. When human beings come into the presence of one another, they do so expressively, establishing consensus on who they are and what their situation is about through voice, gesture, facial expression, bodily posture and action.

People therefore act according to the rules that apply within a particular social situation, bearing in mind the people who are facing them: 'In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards to which they and their products are judged' (Goffman, 1959: 243). In this vein, young people who participate in an interview will be engaged with what Goffman calls 'impression management'. Successful performances cannot be guaranteed, however; if performances are not carried out convincingly they can go wrong. As Schieffelin (1998: 198) points out: 'performance is always inherently *interactive*, and fundamentally *risky*'. The young people interviewed for this study responded to each other's contributions, at some times reinforcing other group member's performances, at other times questioning or even ridiculing them.

At a more fundamental level all behaviour in everyday life can be regarded as performative and implicated in identity construction. Judith Butler (1990: 142-145) emphasises that gender is essentially a construction based on repeated performances. Those performances are not the result of an underlying gender identity; rather, the notion of an underlying identity is constructed as a result of continuous performances. When interviewing young people in groups, gender performances vary according to the composition of those groups. Boys may perform a different version of masculinity in the company of other boys than in mixed gender groups; girls may perform a particular version of femininity depending on the presence or absence of other girls or boys. Karen Qureshi (2004), who studied young Edinburgh Pakistanis, found that young people use different performative scripts for displaying their ethnicity, in line with the anticipated reactions of others. She draws on Goffman when she writes that 'audience segregation – keeping observers of different presentations of 'self' separate – is a device for protecting impressions'. As we will see below, the composition of the focus groups elicited young people to present particular 'selves' to the interviewer and other group members. Sometimes these types of performances can be quite successful, at other times they evoke criticism.

In the remainder of this article I discuss the performances young people used when talking about *GTBT*, as well as ensuing identity constructions. Following Goffman's claim that the self is a 'product of the performances that individuals put on in social situations' (Branaman, 1997: xlv), interviewees' performances were classified along the

lines of three performative styles, which I will refer to as 'deconstruction', 'association' and 'moralisation'. The deconstruction style is used to look beyond the reality of the soap text, the association style zooms in on the characters while accepting the reality as presented by the soap, and the moralisation style is used to voice morally loaded judgements about what is happening in the soap. Through the use of these performative styles young people construct different 'selves': respectively a 'smart self', a 'sensitive self' and a 'moral self' (see also Van Zoonen, 2007).

### **Deconstruction**

When using the deconstruction style, young people regard the soap as a construction which can be dismantled. The informants use this style in three ways: they look at the actors behind the characters; they approach the soap as a media product; and they view the programme as belonging to a genre with specific rules and peculiarities. The deconstruction style is similar to the critical reading of soaps as distinguished by Liebes and Katz (1990: 114). Yet it is important to note that informants do not only use this style to criticise the soap as such, but also to position themselves as intelligent people. In a group context, it seems important to show one is skilled in deconstructing a soap, or, in other words, presenting a 'smart self'.

The skills of actors were a topic of discussion in almost all groups. It seemed important for informants to show to other groups members and the interviewer that they were able to criticise the actors' work. Some actors are criticised and deemed 'fake', while others are praised:

KARIMA: I think he is kind of fake, kind of fake.

NAIMA: Yes.

KARIMA: Some of them can really do a good job, so that you really, that you just cry with them... But he's just fake (...)

PEGGY [I]: And what else can you tell us about Che? (...)

NAIMA: I think he's kind of a... good looking guy, a nice guy... Yeah, but he acts

strangely, I don't know, like...

KARIMA: Scrubby.

NAIMA: Yes, scrubby, you know when, when uhm, when something happens he's not really uhm...

SORAYA: Stefano for example, he can act, or Ludo.

KARIMA: Yes.

(Interview 13)

Another way the deconstruction style manifests itself is when the soap is regarded as media product. This happens for instance when young people talk about the makers of the soap. Often these are referred to as 'they' and sometimes the production company's name is mentioned:

LONNEKE: What I found beautiful, when Hennie died, how they did all that. Hennie, uncle Govert's wife.

(Interview 8)

BIBIANA: What did Charlie give to Barbara again, in the previous episode, when she said 'there, get that, put it under your shirt', what was that?

JOLIJN: A little figure or something?

CARON: Something blue...

JOLIJN: It consisted of two parts, didn't it?

BIBIANA: Yes, I want to know what it is.

ESTHER [I]: I don't know either.

CARON: Ask Endemol Productions.

(Interview 5)

*GTBT* is also deconstructed as belonging to soap genre, which involves a specific set of rules and oddities. Interviewees note that a lot of outrageous things happen in soaps and that consequently characters are subjected to a staggering number of troubling experiences. Some informants feel annoyed by this, whereas others state that this is inevitably part of the soap genre

EVELIEN: Yes, too many things happen at the same time. Like that with Jef and Barbara and then something else played a part in it and it's all so random.

BERT: Yes, but that's soap

EVELIEN: Yes, that's true, but it's all so unrealistic.

DANA: You know a lot of people and all around things are happening, but this is just so much and so intense. (...)

BERT: But else it wouldn't be a series, would it?

(Interview 1)

The deconstruction style offers young people the opportunity to demonstrate that they can 'read' the constructedness of the soap. They argue that *GTBT* is a media product which is influenced by particular genre rules; it is fabricated by Endemol; and soap characters are in fact actors who are not always good at their jobs. By displaying these forms of knowledge young people position themselves as 'knowing' subjects; they show to the interviewer and the other interviewees that they are media savvy.

### **Association**

When using the association style, young people focus on the soap characters. As was the case with the deconstruction style, the informants use this style in three different ways. They evaluate characters, resulting in either criticising or praising characters; they empathise with characters' inner thoughts, feelings and wishes; and they imagine themselves in situations characters are dealing with by pondering what they would do

when faced with a similar situation. In 'associating' themselves with the characters in these ways, they construct a 'sensitive self'. The term 'association' is derived from Gillespie's (1995: 148) study. Her interviewees, rather than 'identifying' with characters, 'associated' themselves with characters, situations and feelings in the soap.

The informants in this study expressed a preference for young characters and a dislike for 'old' characters on the soap. This differs from what Buckingham (1987: 164) found regarding the British soap *EastEnders*. The young people he interviewed were not very interested in young characters and denounced their representation as 'unrealistic', but experienced a voyeuristic pleasure in looking at the 'adult' behaviour of grown up characters which in their own lives they could not get access to. Grown-up characters in *GTBT*, however, were regularly disapproved of:

MONIKA [I]: And which characters do you not like?

MIRA: Those oldies.

JAMAL: Those old people.

MIRA: So, those oldies.

MONIKA [I]: And can you describe who those oldies are?

JAMAL: Mr Harmsen.

MIRA: Robert.

JAMAL: Robert, Jef. He will die, I think.

LEAH: Yeah, he'll die! [all laugh].

(Interview 7)

Evaluating soap characters offers young people opportunities to think about what kind of people they like, whereby they in fact define what kind of people they are themselves. The informants habitually reject the older characters by distancing themselves from them, and position themselves close to the young characters. While voicing these opinions the informants were in the presence of other young people, and an interviewer who was not

much older than they were. The 'youthful' context may have made a voiced preference for younger characters appropriate. The teenage character Charlie is mentioned by many informants as their favourite:

MONIKA [I]: And what do you like about Charlie, can you describe her?

HELLEN: She is cheeky, that's it.

JAMAL: She is always spontaneous.

LEAH: She's crazy. (...)

MONIKA [I]: Yes, she's cheeky?

HELLEN: Yeah, she's cheeky and she just does anything.

MONIKA: What's anything?

MIRA: Anything she wants.

JAMAL: She does what she wants, big mouth, she's all there.

(Interview 7)

On the whole, the informants spent most time in the interviews talking about the young characters on *GTBT*. When explicitly empathising with characters, informants express even more involvement in matters these characters are involved in. In the following quote the girls shift from evaluating the character of Milan, a teenage boy, to empathising with him:

ESTHER [I]: And Milan, what kind of guy is he?

AIMEE: Surly.

ROXANNE: A sucker!

AIMEE: He acts kind of tough but he isn't, really, when you look at it.

PRECILLA: I think he's a dirty little jerk [the others laugh].

ANNE: He irritates me when I watch.

AIMEE: He's ridiculous.

ROXANNE: He's really ugly.

KAREN: I think... He just acts tough, but uh, yeah...

ANNE: He wants to help her, but then he doesn't dare to say it or whatever.

(Interview 4)

The informants are not just evaluating Milan as a character, they are also interacting with each other in broaching particular assessments of him. While Precilla and Roxanne seem involved in evoking laughter from the other group members, the remaining girls start reflecting on the precarious situation that Milan is caught up in. In the episode of *GTBT* that groups watched Milan has to decide if he will help his twin sister, who he has only recently met and who is in hospital because she is suffering from a liver disease, by donating part of his liver. Interviewees speculate about Milan's thoughts about the situation:

ESTHER [I]: I'd like to talk about Milan for a while. What kind of person is Milan?

EVELIEN: Well, uh... a little selfish.

QAMAR: No, I think he's kind of sweet, but he doesn't want that. He wants to help her, but something stops him.

DANA: I think he's afraid.

QAMAR: I don't know what... I think he's kind of a sweet person, he just acts tough. Otherwise he wouldn't go to the hospital.

(Interview 1)

Some informants also talk about this storyline in terms of what they would do if they were in the same situation as Milan:



ESTHER [I]: What do you think about the liver transplantation?

PRECILLA: I'd want to donate my liver to my family or someone who is really precious to me, that's what I mean, but if I'd die and they can use my liver or something like that, then I wouldn't want it.

ESTHER [I]: No?

KAREN: Yeah, well I would do it.

ESTHER [I]: Yes, would you, Karen?

KAREN: Yes, when you can save other people's lives by doing it, because you're dead already.

ESTHER [I]: But like Milan does it, who donates only a part of his liver?

KAREN: Yes, I'd do it.

(Interview 4)

Evidently, this storyline about a liver transplant incites young people to imagine what they would do in the same situation. Thus, soaps can induce their viewers to reflect on situations they would not necessarily come across in their own lives. After some probing from the interviewer, the girls start a conversation in which they exchange views on the topic. This seems to be the purpose of the association style in general. Young people use this style to interactively position themselves in relation to different kinds of people and the situations they find themselves in. By displaying their insight into the human character, they show to other people what kind of person they are.

### **Moralisation**

The soap talk in the moralisation style is characterised by a strong moral undertone: young people voice morally loaded judgements about what they see in the soap. These judgements can refer to the behaviour of particular characters, as well as – either implicitly

or explicitly – the manner in which that behaviour is represented. Regarding the latter, the lack of realism of soaps is often referred to. Barker (1998: 72) found a remarkably similar mechanism at play in his interviews with Black and Asian-British girls about *Neighbours*:

Throughout the conversations the girls are engaged in moral evaluations of characters, situations and representations (...). The primary tension in the conversation[s] (...) is between the girls' own moral opinions and the need to justify such judgements against the yardstick of realism.

Like this, the moralisation style offers young people the possibility to position themselves vis-à-vis moral issues, whereby they construct 'moral selves'. The informants in this study predominantly use the moralisation style to talk about sexual relationships of characters. As mentioned in the prologue, Charlie and Isabella's lesbian love affair in *GTBT* incited a mixed set of moral evaluations. In those evaluations young people refer to the love affair and the realism of the storyline at the same time:

ESTHER [I]: What do you think about the lesbian relationship of Charlie and Isabella?

AIMEE: That's up to them.

ROXANNE: Yeah, that's up to them.

ANNE: It's up to them, but it's kind of common, really.

AIMEE: But it's really overexaggerated.

ROXANNE: I think it's really curious.

ESTHER [I]: Sorry, what did you say?

ANNE: It's kind of common.

AIMEE: It's up to everybody to know what they are, not that I have any problems with it, but in this series it comes across as really overexaggerated, really.

ROXANNE: Yes, and they're so clinging.

KAREN: And Charlie tells everything to her mother too, but you don't do that, normally.

ANNE: Nobody does that.

AIMEE: No, nobody.

(Interview 4)

The girls in this group seem to shift from morally evaluating the relationship of Charlie and Isabella to imagining what they would do if they found themselves in their situation, which hints at the use of the association style. This illustrates that young people can draw on several performative styles at the same time when discussing particular soap characters and storylines, which adds to the complexity of their soap talk.

The young people interviewed also talked about sexual relationships of soap characters in general terms. *GTBT* is a 'dyadic' soap (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 153), meaning that characters are constantly experimenting with new intimate partners and forms of relationships. Among some informants, these defining features were a major reason for criticising the soap. Most of these informants have a Turkish background. When asked why she watches *GTBT*, a Turkish-Dutch girl answers:

SERPIL: I don't really get it either, it's very strange, everybody's already slept with each other and I find that so stupid! That person is involved with that son and then with that father and then they marry and they divorce again. That sort of stuff.

(Interview 20)

To be fair, *GTBT* has used quite a number of storylines about 'extraordinary' sexual relationships over the past fifteen years. Two examples concerning young characters are the teenage girl Hedwig, who had sex with her teacher to improve her grades; and Julian and Kim, a brother and sister, also in their teens, who had only recently met each other for the first time and accidentally ended up having sex. Some girls from Turkish backgrounds heavily criticise the sexual behaviour of these characters:

ANNERIEKE [I]: And what do you think about her? [about Hedwig]

AYSEN: Messy. You know, what I found stupid about her, when she uhm... went to bed with her teacher, so stupid. I hated her then.

ANNERIEKE [I]: And why did you find that stupid?

AYSEN: You don't just go to bed with someone; I mean you don't just sell yourself for grades. Is just dirty and she's got a whole trauma because of it too.

(Interview 18)

ANNERIEKE [I]: What did you think about Julian?

LEYLA: Interesting, but I found it dumb that he slept with Kim.

AYSEN: Failure, disgraceful!

ANNERIEKE [I]: Why?

LEYLA: Because they were brother and sister.

AYSEN: You just don't do that.

(Interview 18)

These girls are very straightforward in their judgements: the things that happen in *GTBT* regarding sex are outrageous. Yet at the same time, they implicitly seem to be talking about their own lives, as is suggested by the use of the word 'you': 'You don't just go to bed with someone', 'You just don't sell yourself for grades' and 'You just don't do that'. The girls use the soap to present themselves as moral experts. They actively voice their opinions in the presence of other (Turkish-Dutch) girls and the white Dutch interviewer. Their gender and ethnicity, as well as the interaction with the gender and ethnicity of the interviewer, play a role in these performances. Before trying to explain the specificity of these girls' interpretations, however, I will first analyse the role of gender and ethnicity in interpretations of *GTBT* in more general terms.

### **The role of gender and ethnicity**

Gender seems to play a pivotal role in how the moralisation style is used to talk about sexual relationships of soap characters. It was mainly girls who engaged in this activity. Most boys who were interviewed did not have much to say about sex in *GTBT*. This difference could be explained by the different position towards sex that girls occupy as compared to boys (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). A 'double standard' is at work: while boys have more freedom to experiment with sexuality, girls are generally urged to guard their sexual reputation. Possibly this double standard has motivated female interviewees, more so than male interviewees, to talk about sexuality in a moralising way.

Ethnicity also plays a distinguishing role in the use of the moralisation style. The main activity within the use of that style is the testing of the informants' own moral frameworks against those represented in the soap. The sexual behaviour of characters is judged against values that young people impose upon themselves and upon others. Those values can be related to ethnicity. At the same time it is important to stress that morality and ethnicity cannot be related in absolute ways. Young people from ethnic minority backgrounds form 'new ethnicities' (see Back, 1996, Gillespie, 1995) and previous studies into young soap opera viewers have shown that young people from similar ethnic backgrounds can make different choices in giving meaning to a soap opera. Nevertheless, it was striking that some girls from a Turkish background relatively often stated that their moral worldview was at odds with the way in which *GTBT* deals with sexual relations.

As discussed earlier, the moral evaluations of the relationship of Charlie and Isabelle in *GTBT* diverged. Some girls expressed fairly liberal opinions, while others dismissed the relationship as inappropriate. Some Turkish-Dutch girls explicitly referenced the role of the Islam in their interpretations:

MONIKA [I]: And who do you not like?

AMIN: Those lesbians [the others laugh].

MONIKA [I]: Why? What do you... what do you not like about them?

MUSA: It isn't normal.

MONIKA [I]: Can you describe what is not normal about it?

AYLINE: But you also know that...

AMIN: Yeah, it doesn't belong to our religion.

AYLINE: It doesn't, it doesn't belong to our religion. It's just not allowed to have lesbian feelings. That's why we think it isn't normal.

(Interview 11)

By using the phrase 'our religion' the girls perform a particular version of their cultural background to the interviewer, which is given weight by a reference to the interviewer's presupposed knowledge about this background. These types of performances should not be seen as a natural reflection of what a particular 'ethnic group' thinks about a subject, however. The role of religion also came up in an interview with a group of boys from Moroccan backgrounds. A young female *GTBT* character who has found out she is pregnant, is criticised with reference being made to the Quran:

PEGGY [I]: What is her character like?

MOHAMMED: Bad.

PEGGY [I]: She is a bad woman?

MOHAMMED: Yes, she want to give up her child for uhm... adoption.

AZIZ: But it's not her child...

MOHAMMED: Yes, sure.

JAMAL: But she's uhm, pregnant by someone else.

AZIZ: She was raped.

MOHAMMED: Oh, oh, oh, she was raped?

PEGGY [I]: Then what should she do?

AZIZ: Then she should...

MOHAMMED: Then... I have to study the Quran [the others laugh].

PEGGY [I]: Well, that isn't odd, is it? What should you do?

MOHAMMED: Would they have to remove it then? I don't know.

PEGGY [I]: Yes, what do you in a situation like that... [all laugh].

MOHAMMED: No, no, no, no, no, but seriously, the Quran says, uhm, whether you can keep it or not. Then I'll study the Quran and look it up.

AZIZ: Hey, there's no abortion in the Quran, man...

(Interview 14)

That is to say, Mohammed *tries* to interpret Mathilde's situation with the help of the Quran, yet his attempts provoke laughter among fellow group members. This is an example of a performance of a particular conception of Moroccan masculinity which ends up being unconvincing to its audience, and therefore goes wrong. Mohammed aims to use the soap character to show others that he is a devoted Muslim, but instead he provokes laughter and dismissal.

It seems therefore important to take into account the function of these sorts of performances. As mentioned, some girls from a Turkish background are the most passionate in their criticism of, in their view, outrageous sex in the soap. These girls also tell the interviewer that in their own lives, they have to obey strict rules concerning sexuality and dating. Raziye talks about her brothers:

RAZIYE: They have more freedom than us, really. They very often come home late from going out and stuff.

AYSEN: Yeah, but do you know why that is, why a girl is not allowed to do that? A lot can happen to a girl, she can be raped and a boy can't. Well, yeah, it's possible, but yeah. When you're a girl you lose your virginity and then you really have a problem. When you get married and your man finds out and he will divorce you and then he will gossip and stuff.

(Interview 18)

The conclusion for these girls is that they have to be careful and constantly watch their sexual behaviour. The significance of gossip in the daily lives of some women from Turkish backgrounds in the Netherlands has also been discussed by Marlene de Vries (1988: 77-78), who in her research among Turkish-Dutch women found that the prevalence of gossip forced them to orientate themselves towards their family and domestic life instead of the outside world. Some girls who were interviewed for this study seem to use *GTBT* to discipline themselves to correct sexual behaviour:

SERPIL: Yeah, but what can you learn from *Good Times Bad Times*, really?

Nothing at all, right?

FATMA: You can.

SERPIL: No, nothing at all! That you should sleep with your brother?

ANNERIEKE [I]: But you said you can, so what can you learn?

FATMA: To, uhm, to avoid certain problems.

(Interview 20)

For these girls, moralising performances based on a soap opera can fulfil a function in presenting yourself to the world as a 'decent' girl. Qureshi (2004) points out that for the Edinburgh Pakistani young women she interviewed the presentation of self had to result in an impression of 'respectability'. Soap talk can be used for 'respectable' presentations of the self. As Serpil phrases it:

SERPIL: They show all kinds of bad things, so we as viewers can figure out:

'That's how we should *not* behave!'

(Interview 20)

## Conclusion



The study discussed in this article has shown that young people who were interviewed about the Dutch soap *GTBT* use three performative styles to interpret the soap's characters and storylines. When using the deconstruction style they look beyond the reality of the soap text. They show the interviewer and the other interviewees that they can see through the reality as created by the soap makers. Thereby they construct a 'smart self'. With the association style they talk about the characters, accepting the reality as presented by the soap. This gives them the opportunity to express their views on characters' qualities and actions and relate these, implicitly or explicitly, to their own lives. In doing so they construct a 'sensitive self'. Finally, they create a 'moral self' by voicing morally loaded judgements about what they see in the soap.

While the three styles focus on different aspects of the self, they converge in the opportunities they provide for identity construction. Identity construction is an ongoing process for young people, with identities being formed in several contexts (at home, amidst family and friends, at school, in public spaces, et cetera) and along various lines, such as age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, appearance and personality (Pilkington & Johnson, 2003, 275). For young people from ethnic minority backgrounds processes of identity construction are arguably even more complex, since they have to take into account meanings from diverse and sometimes conflicting cultural sources (Barker, 1997; Gillespie, 1995).

In giving meaning to soaps different identities are at play. The construction of a 'smart self' seems to refer primarily to age. The eagerness of informants to deconstruct the soap can be explained with reference to public debates about young people and media, in which it is often stated that they are vulnerable in the face of detrimental media effects (Buckingham, 1993: 3). Regarding the construction of a 'sensitive self', informants focussed on the young soap characters. Besides age, many other identities (gender, ethnicity, sexuality, appearance) can play a role in the use of the association style, depending on which character is talked about. The processes of identity construction in the creation of 'moral selves' seem to be the most reflective in nature. Young people do not only evaluate what is represented in the soap, but also make comparisons with ways in which society deals with moral issues. They ask themselves an array of questions: What happens here?, Did the soap makers do a good job?, How should people behave?, Where do I stand?

By talking about soaps in moralising ways, young people judge what they see in the soap against the values that they impose upon themselves and others. Because they use their own value systems as starting point, the distinguishing roles of gender and ethnicity come to the fore. While girls are generally more preoccupied with issues around sexuality, some young people from Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds make references to the Islam in their interpretations. In the use of the moralisation style the positions that young people occupy in society are at stake. They use this performative style to display their values, thereby refining and sharpening them. In that way, they look for ways to deal with moral issues which play a role in their personal lives. This illustrates the unfruitfulness of the focus on 'ethnic groups' which has been used in some previous research into soap opera audiences (Liebes & Katz, 1990). While young people at times draw strategically on their cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds, these instances can be regarded as performances. The young people interviewed for this study were invested in 'impression management' by presenting particular aspects of their personality to the interviewer and the other interviewees. Some performances were successful, while others turned against the performer and evoked laughter. Regardless of the success of particular performances, the underlying principle is that young people use the soap text to perform to others where they stand in relation to media, other people and society at large. Rather than being influenced by soap characters, storylines and representations, they use them for their own purposes.

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