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Affective Resilience and Ideological Critique

Young Syrians' Perceptions of International Media after Assad's Fall

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ABSTRACT

On December 8, 2024, Bashar al-Assad's fifty-four–year rule in Syria came to an abrupt end, drawing renewed international media attention to the country. For millions of Syrians, this attention felt belated, reinforcing long-standing frustrations with misrepresentation. Among them, young Syrians in Türkiye occupy a particularly complex position: geographically close to their homeland yet caught in highly polarised debates over refugees. As active audiences of international digital media, their critiques provide vital insight into both their lived realities and the trajectories of Syrian identity in exile. This study examines how Syrian refugee youth in Türkiye (ages 18–29) perceive international media portrayals of Syria's regime change and its aftermath. Drawing on twelve semi-structured interviews, it employs discourse analysis informed by Said's Orientalism, Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony, and Foucault's theorisation of subjectivity. Hall's encoding/decoding model and Cavalcante's notion of 'resilient reception' further frame the analysis of audience practices. Findings show that participants predominantly adopt oppositional readings of international media, critiquing its Orientalist framings and reductionist narratives of the new Syria. Alongside ideological critique, they employ affective strategies of resilience, such as humour, irony, selective disengagement, and the assertion of pride, when confronted with negative portrayals. Their proactive discourse underpins the formation of a cultural counter-hegemony through which youth reclaim Syrianness, resist othering, and reposition themselves ideologically. Yet identity reconstruction remains contested, complicated by fractured belonging in the diaspora and ambivalence toward Syria's evolving political landscape. This thesis contributes to audience studies by demonstrating the intertwined roles of ideology and affect in media reception, especially in relation to the agency of youth in the MENA region.

INTRODUCTION

Millions of Syrians around the world awoke on December 8, 2024, to see their country making global headlines as the 54-year Assad reign had come to an abrupt end due to a coalition of anti-regime forces seizing the capital, Damascus. Although the preceding ten days saw various Syrian cities fall one by one to the same forces advancing toward the capital, neither Syrians nor experts anticipated Bashar al-Assad's downfall to be so sudden. On the same day, Assad was reported to have been granted asylum in Russia (BBC News, 2024). The historic ousting came as different rebel factions, led by the dominant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which had controlled northwestern regions of Syria since 2015 (Hall, 2025)—made a move to exploit the regime's already weakened grip on power which had been accelerated by the reduced backing of key allies Russia and Iran (Pinfold, 2025). This unprecedented shift has generated a surge of international media coverage. From the rapidly changing public image of the new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, to the designs of statues in the new Syria, every detail has come under international scrutiny, raising questions about how Syrians themselves interpret these narratives. Amid this surge, Syrian refugees—spread across more than 130 countries (UNHCR, 2025)—find themselves under the weight of belated global attention, a spotlight that has not only arrived too late but has also amplified the misrepresentation of their community. Examining how Syrians engage with international media thus offers critical insights into their perceptions in the midst of mediated debates.

Türkiye, which hosts the world's largest Syrian refugee population—around three million according to official figures (European Commission, 2025)—offers an especially relevant setting for this research. With an average age of 21.9 (RASAS, 2024), Syrian refugees in Türkiye are predominantly young and thus more frequently exposed to digital narratives than the general population (Wee, 2017). A youth perspective offers a valuable lens for examining how digital media encounters shape Syrians' negotiations of identity, belonging, and ideological orientation. This study explores such negotiations, asking: What cultural and political discourses do young Syrian refugees in Türkiye use

to critique international media representations surrounding the fall of Assad? It employs discourse analysis of qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with 12 Syrian refugees in Türkiye aged 18–29. Central to this analysis is how these young audiences' perceive and critique the power relations embedded in the hegemonic narratives around their country's new fate.

Central to understanding the scope and motivation of this study are not only the participants' lived experiences, shaped by years of war and displacement, but also the collective memory they have inherited, as each of their historicity is vital to understanding their engagement with current media narratives. Today's Syrian youth grew up hearing from older relatives about the Socialist and pan-Arabist Ba'ath Party which came to power in Syria in 1963 through a military coup, followed by Hafez al- Assad taking control in 1971, ushering in decades marked by corruption and repression (Lefèvre, 2013). His sectarian policies in a country of rich ethnoreligious diversity contributed to the rise of armed resistance by several groups and violent clashes (Chalcraft, 2016). Their collective memory included events such as the 1982 Hama massacre, in which tens of thousands were killed (Lefèvre, 2013), as well as the systematic marginalisation of certain groups across the public, economic, and political spheres (Chalcraft, 2016).

They also personally witnessed large-scale atrocities under the rule of Hafez's son, Bashar al-Assad. Since 2011, the regime's violent retaliation against the widespread uprisings has left more than 600,000 dead, over 55,000 killed under torture in prisons, around 13 million displaced (SOHR, 2024), and more than 100,000 forcibly disappeared (The New York Times, 2024). Many young Syrians' journeys have been shaped by fleeing chemical attacks, forced disappearance of family members, economic collapse (Pinfold, 2025), the reality of 90 percent of their population living below the poverty line (UNHCR, 2025), and countless other threats.

Displacement was only the first chapter in a continuing story of hardship for young Syrians in Türkiye, where rising anti-refugee sentiment, fuelled by nationalist rhetoric and deep-rooted prejudices toward Arabs dating back to the late Ottoman period (Cevik, 2025), has sharply intensified

in recent years. As more political parties instrumentalise refugees in their propaganda (Kentmen-Cin *et al.*, 2025), Syrian identity in the country has become increasingly politicised (Şahin-Mencütek *et al.*, 2023). Discriminatory language toward refugees spreads rapidly across digital platforms (Ozduzen *et al.*, 2021) and has, on several occasions, led to severe consequences, including physical attacks and killings. The most recent and notable example occurred in 2024, when pogrom-like anti-refugee attacks spread across Türkiye (Körükmez, 2025).[1]

Therefore, among the many Syrian communities dispersed worldwide, those in Türkiye occupy a uniquely complex position—with a predominantly young population, caught between proximity to their homeland and the pressures of navigating highly polarised national debates about their presence. Understanding the critiques of Syrian youth in Türkiye thus can offer critical insights into how the abundant debates—both online and offline— has been shaping the lived realities of Syrians, and the potential political and societal trajectories for Syria, where it remains to be seen whether a new political order can take root amid renewed regional tensions.[2]

LITERATURE REVIEW CHAPTER

Building on the discussion in the introduction about young Syrians' media perceptions during a critical historical shift, this chapter begins with an overview of relevant studies and is then structured in two parts: the first reviews key discussions in audience studies, and the second situates relevant theoretical concepts (hegemony, Orientalism, power, subjectivity, ideology, and identity) within the context of this research.

[1] To learn more about the events, see Time (2024): https://time.com/6994932/anti-syrian-unrest-turkey/

[2] See United Nations (2025): https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165620

Relevant Studies

The extensive literature on youth and media increasingly addresses the intersection of digital media use and politics, engaging theoretical concepts pertinent to this study. Banaji and Buckingham (2013) explore themes such as young people's active political participation in online spaces and how their critiques of political institutions shape their understanding of reality. Drawing on research conducted in several EU countries, they examine how youth engage with political ideologies through civic participation online and how this engagement contributes to their identity-formation processes. Their findings prompt further investigation for this study, which similarly traces how Syrian youth navigate identity-formation through making meaning from digital news. Cammaerts *et al*. (2015) also examine youth engagement, exploring how digital media use shapes collective cultural formations and ideological contestations that influence young audiences' positioning within the political and media landscape in Europe. Their focus on media use, perceptions of media institutions, and the cultural and ideological dynamics of digital narratives directly informs this study, as these are among central themes of inquiry here.

These prior studies offer valuable frameworks and comparative cases that inform the analytical approach of this research. However, despite the expanding literature on youth, media, and politics, academic work addressing such cases in the Middle East and North Africa remains limited. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, which marked the beginning of large-scale displacement of Syrian people, numerous studies have examined how Syrian refugees are portrayed in the media. Most of them highlight the problematic and often reductionist nature of these portrayals (Abdelhady & Delioglu, 2022; Abid *et al*., 2017; ElShabassy *et al*., 2025; Mustafa *et al*., 2021; Rettberg & Gajjala, 2015) Notably, Syrian people have rarely been given the opportunity to reflect on or respond to the mediated representations of their culture, society, and identities. Some notable exceptions include Basturk's (2024) analysis of Orientalist representations of Syrian refugees on social media, which combined content analysis with a survey. However, unlike the focus in this study, Basturk's

quantitative sample includes participants from all age groups and was conducted before the latest regime change. In a more recent work, Tadrous *et al*. (2025) analyses Facebook posts concerning the economic policies of the new Syrian government. However, it concentrates specifically on online user sentiment regarding monetary challenges in the country following the regime change. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the growing literature on youth's political critique and engagement with media by specifically focusing on young Syrian refugees and their responses to the media's renewed attention to Syria following the fall of the Assad regime, and the accompanying transformations in their perceptions as well as lived realities, with the goal of addressing the lacuna in the literature concerning young audiences' meaning- making journeys in the MENA region.

Audience Research

Overview

The notion that media representations are constructed meanings rather than objective realities, as articulated by Stuart Hall (1973), remains fundamental to critical media analysis. However, this does not diminish their influence compared to that of so-called objective realities. According to Hall (2013), representations shape how the media audiences see themselves and others, how they interrogate power, how they perceive and naturalise differences in society, and consequently, whom they include or exclude within that society. They also inform audiences' positionalities in relation to knowledge, among many other consequences that affect not only individuals but also broader communities. This influence, however, only occurs after representations make sense to their receivers. Before any message can produce an effect, it must first be 'meaningfully coded', and only then can it generate 'ideological or behavioural consequences' and enter into broader social relations (Hall, 2010: 47).

Hall (2010) introduces encoding and decoding, with the former referring to the production-side meaning-making process, and the latter to interpretation by the audience. Depending on positional differences between the message's producers and its audience, the encoded and decoded meanings

can align closely or diverge starkly. Even when producers offer 'preferred readings,' audiences may decode messages differently (Hall, 2010: 50), thus opening up a space for media scholars to explore the links between these asymmetries and broader social processes. The model identifies three key decoding positions: the 'dominant-hegemonic position', where the audience accepts and reproduces the hegemonic reading of the message which is initially given by the producer; the 'negotiated position', where the audience partly accepts the dominant meaning while adapting it to their own context although in small-scale; and the 'oppositional position', where the audience rejects the intended meaning and substitutes their own, opposing the encoding (Hall, 2010: 52–54). These positions are especially relevant to the analysis in this study, which will focus on the strategies young Syrians use to decode specific media messages and their positionalities in engaging with them.

Hall's (1980) main aim was to demonstrate that media studies cannot solely rely on fixed meanings, but must instead explore ideological values of meanings. Yet, there has been much expansion on his model in the decades since its introduction. Schrøder *et al*. (2003: 128) acknowledged that Hall's work served as a starting point for audience studies and reception research, however, they challenged him for not clearly differentiating between 'semiotic and ideological processes' of decoding and proposed a more comprehensive approach to studying audiences—one that focuses not only on the polysemic nature of texts or the variety of derived meanings, but also on the processes by which audiences make those meanings. Some scholars have suggested shifting the focus away from media institutions toward material systems of communication (Morley, 2009) or sets of social practices (Couldry, 2004). Meanwhile, audience researchers later discussed audience might even be 'dead' (Jermyn & Holmes, 2006) considering the rise of interactive digital media, where users have replaced the traditional audience, or argued that they now play a more vital role than ever as active users (Livingstone, 2019). Willems and Mano (2016: 9) offered a more balanced perspective, cautioning against simplistic dichotomies between the 'passive' mass media audience and the 'hyperactive' digital media user.

What Schrøder (2017) calls audiencisation—the turn to the audience in media studies— has led to a wave of reception research that draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods to address the complexities of mediatisation. This approach paid special attention to the audience that is now 'anywhere, anytime' (Schrøder, 2019: 158), and whose historicity plays a critical role in shaping mediatisation processes. Harindranath (2009: 2, 12) argued that the historicity of the audience is deeply tied to their meaning-making practices, however, audience research must also remain attentive to the 'intersecting identities' of audience members in order to avoid reductionist interpretations or sweeping generalisations—such as explaining different audience interpretations through their shared belonging to an 'interpretive community'. Therefore, through discourse analysis of semi-structured interviews with young Syrians whose experiences and multilayered identities resist reduction to a single overarching community, this study aims to recognise each participant's distinct positionality within their specific historical context.

Resistance and Resilience

Following the audience turn in media studies, a relevant extension of Hall's three-dimensional decoding model was offered again by Schrøder (2019: 162), who pointed out that 'the earlier interest in dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings can be seen today to be mirrored in the focus on, respectively, coping and resistance strategies'. These resistant strategies, employed by audience members in their engagement with media, are particularly relevant to this study, which focuses on a Global South case where the audience relatively employs such strategies to navigate the mediatisation of their everyday realities, as well as their identities, culture, and ideologies. Cavalcante (2018: 1187) refers to this as 'resilient reception,' describing it as the use of strategies 'to manage the affectively turbulent power of media and communication technologies'. He critiques Hall's model for its predominant focus on ideological decoding and resistance to hegemonic encodings, as he urges audience scholars to also consider the emotional responses of audiences during the reception process, arguing that 'media are clearly more than ideological battlegrounds', it also generates significant

affective consequences. While resistant reception operates on the ideological level, resilience operates on the affective level—both are integral to the audience's broader meaning-making process. Audience practices such as 'managing, coping, and rebuilding after distress' (Cavalcante, 2018: 1190, 1198) will be especially relevant to this study, as the interviews with vulnerable group members are expected to reveal rich emotional strategies which they used in navigating media content amid distressing personal and collective experiences.

It is also important to bear in mind as part of the inquiry that the 'historicity of the reader/viewer' (Harindranath, 2009: 10) is intertwined with their perception and affective strategies. The use of the metaphor of the audience as a 'tortoise' (Chivaura, 2006: 221 as cited in Willems & Mano, 2016: 4)—carrying its shell which consists of historical baggage and cultural norms—has proven helpful at this point. The audience's feelings during encounters with mediated representations endure and accumulate over time. This is true not only for individuals, but also for communities, who carry a 'collective archive of feelings' (Cavalcante, 2018: 1192). Amid conducting such analyses, Schrøder (2019: 163), on the other hand, warns against reducing the audience to merely a reactive subject coping with the effects of mediatisation. Instead, the audience must be seen as actively involved in the 'constitutive complexity of mediatisation'. In chaotic contexts that shape audiences' lived realities— such as regime changes and political turbulence, as seen in Syria—the role of qualitative audience research is to 'situate the audience within that chaos,' accounting for the many 'extra-media factors' that influence their affective experiences (Cavalcante, 2018: 1193).

Recently in the audience studies, particularly in relation to news media, the audience has at times been referred to as 'customers' (Husni *et al*., 2015), whose trust and choices determine the fate of media institutions. However, with the rise of personalised use of digital media, the boundary between news and non-news content has become increasingly blurred. In a study on audience expectations of journalism, it is highlighted how audiences now distinguish between traditional news outlets and individual content creators based on factors such as reliability and the capacity to provide spaces for

civic participation (Banjac, 2022). Audience expectations of news media have now become active disruptions in digital spaces. The audiences' entry into journalism's discursive realm may be 'unwelcome,' yet, they now possess the potential to function as a distinct discursive institution (Banjac, 2022: 85). This discursive contention will be reflected in the data analyzed in this study, as the participants are expected predominantly to share their perceptions of news coverage about their home country, particularly in light of its recent historic regime change. Much of their critique is likely to challenge and question the hegemonic narratives embedded in media representations. To make sense of these critiques and contextualise them within broader power structures, the following section will begin by drawing on the concepts of Orientalism and cultural hegemony to establish the theoretical framework for this analysis, before moving on to other relevant concepts.

Theoretical Framework

Orientalism and Hegemony

Edward Said first introduced the concept of Orientalism in 1978, bringing critical awareness to a term that had previously referred primarily to the study of anything related to the *Orient*[3] across various disciplines. He called attention to specific literature produced in the West that had been widely accepted as canonical, critiquing them for their flawed representations of what they defined as the Oriental world. This world, Said (2003: 12, 42) argued, was constructed as one of two 'unequal halves, Orient and Occident' which should be understood as more than a mere geographical division. The divide between what was considered 'familiar (Europe, the West, 'us')' and what was 'strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')' was a legacy of the colonial mindset, reflecting how colonial Europe engaged with what it perceived as the other. European intellectuals, Said (2003: 200) suggested, approached

[3] In this context, "the Orient" refers not to a geographic East but to a Western construct shaped by colonial narratives. European writers, assuming a fundamental East–West divide, produced stories and theories that imagined the Orient as an idea rather than a place, reducing it to a product of Western thought. Similar patterns later emerged in how dominant powers like the U.S. portrayed non-Western countries in cultural productions.

these differences as signs of 'weakness'. The binary of Orient and Occident was entirely dependent on the presumed inferiority of the former, measured solely against the postulated strengths of the latter. This dynamic was inherent to the nature of the encounter itself: any European or American engaging with the Orient would inevitably do so through the lens of their European or American identity first, and 'as an individual second' (Said, 2003: 11). Nevertheless, this did not prevent Said from deconstructing the works of earlier Western intellectuals, exposing their representations of the Orient, its people, culture, and history as 'unchanging', 'backward' and 'malleable' (Said, 2003: 95, 202). He was later criticised for relying too heavily on canonical texts in his analysis and paying less attention to the underlying Western epistemologies that informed those texts (Ahmad, 1992; Hallaq, 2018). Some of the texts Said (1978) draw examples from included the writings of Goethe and Victor Hugo, the novels of Gustave Flaubert and Joseph Conrad, political writings by Napoleon and James Balfour, and philosophical works by Ernest Renan— all reflected encounters with the Orient in ways that asserted authority and agency over it.

A relative critic to Said, Wael Hallaq (2018) argued that Orientalism should not be treated as the problem itself, but rather as a manifestation of a deeper structural issue— one that cannot be fully captured through a cultural or text-based analysis alone. Although his critics find it insufficient, Said (2003) argued that the cultural domination, which can also be understood through the Gramscian concept of hegemony, is what makes Orientalism lasting. In his Prison Notebooks, Gramsci (1971) described hegemony as a strategy grounded in mutual conceptions of the world used by dominant political groups. Drawing from the Marxist tradition, the Italian thinker expanded the notion of hegemony beyond control over economic production, framing it as a form of 'political, moral, and intellectual leadership' aimed at forming a collective will (Chalcraft & Noorani, 2007: 3–4). The struggle for hegemony is inherently tied to that of counter-hegemony, which Chalcraft and Noorani (2007) define as a rupture in the dominant hegemony. Just as the relationship between the concepts that are widely accepted as attached to the Occident and Orient is shaped by a contest over 'varying

degrees of a complex hegemony' (Said, 2003: 5), mechanisms of hegemony and counter-hegemony are also interdependent.

Accordingly, this research will examine connections to Orientalism in the data through the lens of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Drawing on interviews with Syrian youth, it will explore whether participants perceive mediated portrayals of post-Assad Syria as problematic, whether they interpret such framing as rooted in cultural hegemony, and whether they seek to challenge it through counter-hegemonic narratives. The analysis will trace their ideological positions alongside their sense of identity, belonging, historical consciousness, and affective responses. The methodology chapter will detail the study's sampling strategy and approach to data analysis.

Ideology and Identity

When understanding Orientalism through the lens of competing collective wills over cultural hegemony in Gramscian terms, the concept of ideology becomes central too. As Eagleton defines them, ideologies reveal key moments when 'cultural practices are interwoven with political power' (2014: 8). This understanding aligns closely with the theoretical framework of this research, as analysing the audience reception of mediated representations requires uncovering the link between media production and political power. Any cultural product, whether a news article or a literary novel, becomes ideologically positioned when we examine the communicative dynamics between subjects who were engaged in the production and whose interactions involve more than just language; which also reflect interests and power relations (Eagleton, 2014). In other words, the audience's perception of embedded power relations and competing narratives will differ when encountering an official US Foreign Ministry statement on the sectarian clashes in Syria's Latakia, compared to reading a report by an individual journalist on the ground or a social media post from a local resident in the city, each displaying a range of political interests, ideological positions, and cultural affiliations.

In his extensive work, Eagleton traces the historical evolution of ideology, from predominantly negative interpretations that emphasise its 'deceptive and mystifying' nature, to later perspectives like those of Habermas and Gouldner, who approach it as a 'quasi-scientific' concept rooted in modern secular thought (2014: 5, 11). For Eagleton, ideologies often make certain beliefs appear natural and universally true by using elaborate language to present historically specific and contested ideas as timeless and unquestionable. On the other hand, Althusser (1971) discusses ideology in a way that Hall (1985) later described as notably pragmatic, emphasising how ideologies manifest in everyday life—through social practices, behaviours, language, and institutional cultures—rather than remaining confined to abstract or ideal realms. Through both material and ideal perspectives, however, ideologies can develop into systematic political, moral, or economic structures, making them the foundation of collective consciousness (Geertz, 2013). It is precisely this capacity that makes them foundational to the formation of both collective and individual identities.

Because of the universalising and naturalising effects of ideology, cultural identities can also 'stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging 'oneness' or cultural belongingness', according to Hall (1996: 3), who suggests that identities complete the unfinished task initiated by ideologies via discursive practices: the creation of attachment and belonging. The process of identification, therefore, is always ongoing and inherently tied to hegemony and discourse. As Purvis and Hunt argue, resistance emerges wherever there is power, and the nature of that resistance is 'conceived as the production of alternative discourses'—discourses that inevitably give rise to new ideologies (1993: 489, 496). Ultimately, Hall (2018) further clarifies the dependence of subaltern identities on ideological consciousness by emphasising that such groups are aware of their identities and of the differences that form the heterogeneous nature of their counter-hegemonic position. This is particularly important, as this study centers around a subaltern group. A critical perspective on ideologies helps to explain how collective consciousness is formed and how it contributes to reproducing the network of societal power relations that are, in fact, the source of peoples' subordination (Purvis & Hunt, 1993: 478). Specifically, in this research, discursive instances of counter- hegemony, viewed from a

Gramscian perspective, will be examined in the data with the aim of uncovering how these resistant discourses relate to underlying ideological structures.

Power and Subjectivity

Assessing Orientalism as a discourse in Foucauldian terms, according to Said (2003), is essential for a deeper analysis of how the Orient was patronised in various ways by Europe after the Enlightenment, which is why he called for future research to examine contemporary expressions of Orientalism through a more thorough understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power. Orientalist discourse played a crucial role in establishing certain power relations that enabled its very existence. As Foucault argued, 'there can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth' (1981: 93), which depends on the circulation of particular discourses. He presented power and knowledge as mutually dependent concepts, each operating through and reinforcing the other. According to him, individuals and peoples are subjected to knowledge through mechanisms of power, which can only be exercised through the production of knowledge. Power as a Foucauldian notion is also understood as fluid rather than something with a clearly identifiable source. It circulates continuously through social networks and cannot be easily localised, restrained, or possessed. Individuals may 'simultaneously undergo and exercise' it (Foucault, 1981: 98). Understanding the complex relationship between knowledge and power, therefore, requires examining the circulation of this dynamic interplay.

After the publication of Knowledge/Power, Foucault stated that the central concern of all his research had, in fact, always been the question of subjectivity (1982: 778). This focus on subjectivity was what led him to explore the knowledge-power relationship in the first place. Subjection, like power, operates in circular relations and cannot be fully understood when detached from mechanisms of hegemony. The very nature of subjectivity is shaped by oppositional power at everyday levels, as 'power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live' reveals what kinds of 'laws of truth'

have been imposed on different sides within society, and, consequently, what identities have emerged for those sides (Foucault, 1982: 780- 781). In other words, for Foucault, to truly grasp power relations, one must examine the formation of subjectivity to reveal the resistance and how individuals 'attempt to dissociate' themselves from those relations (1982: 780). In a Gramscian sense, what constitutes what we have come to call counter-hegemony is the formation of a collective will that 'struggles against the privileges of knowledge' and the 'mystifying representations imposed on people', which is why the 'means' of power —whether state coercion, the economy, surveillance, or language— (Foucault, 1982: 781, 792) and the forms of resistance are central to such analysis.

METHODOLOGY CHAPTER

Ontology and Research Questions

This research adopts a constructivist ontological position, acknowledging that knowledge is socially constructed in a relationship with individuals' understanding of lived experiences and actions that are primarily mediated through their sociohistorical contexts (Costantino *et al.*, 2008). The combination of such ontological position with discourse analysis allowed me to explain better how the ways audiences commonly understand the media are 'historically and culturally specific and relative' (Gill, 2000: 174). Building on this ontological stance, the study is guided by the following primary research question and supporting secondary questions.

Research Question:

What cultural and political discourses do young Syrian refugees in Türkiye use to critique international media representations surrounding the fall of Assad?

Secondary Questions:

In what ways do Syrian refugee youth reframe or resist hegemonic narratives embedded in international media?

What affective strategies do participants employ in responding to media narratives?

How do participants negotiate their identities in relation to mediated debates around post-Assad Syria?

Research Design

Sampling

The audience I focused on belonged to a marginalised group that had rarely, if ever, been given the space in previous research to comment directly on how they are represented in the media. My aim was to give them a platform for critiquing the media coverage, rather than reiterating the already documented problematics of international media. I chose to focus specifically on youth, since, despite most Syrian refugees in Türkiye being young people, averaging 21.9 years of age (RASAS, 2024), they have been largely overlooked in the literature and are more actively engaged in digital debates.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was employed. I selected participants based on their engagement with digital media and news consumption. I already knew some and was familiar with their media interests, while I identified some others through their activity on social media and contacted them directly. Some participants were introduced to me by existing participants or through gatekeepers who helped facilitate initial contact but did not take part in the study beyond that point.

The sample consisted of 12 individuals between the ages of 18 and 29. The age range began at 18 to ensure that participants could provide consent independently as adults and ended at 29, in line with age classifications for youth adopted by international organisations such as the EU (Eurostat, 2025). Majority of the participants were from the city of Aleppo, one of the primary sources of migration in

Syria after 2011 (Bandarin *et al.*, 2022) with the rest from Damascus, Deir Ezzor, and Latakia. Participants' legal status varied, with some having acquired Turkish citizenship and others remaining under temporary protection. Their demographic details are presented in the Appendix.

Although I ensured socioeconomic diversity and varied regions of origin to an extent, I identified a limitation in my sampling due to religious and sectarian homogeneity: all 12 participants were Sunni Muslims. This not only influenced their perspectives on religious minorities—often a key topic in Syrian news—but also shaped their ideological positioning regarding the new government: a Sunni-led administration following 54 years of secularist party rule under an Alawite family's reign (Baltacıoğlu-Brammer, 2014). While not all participants expressed strong religious identities, most commented on the digital debates on ethnoreligious minority groups like Christians, Alawites, Druze, and Yazidis.[4] Despite efforts to include minority voices, I was unsuccessful, likely due to Türkiye's predominantly Sunni population. This context should be kept in mind when reviewing participants' accounts in the findings and analysis.

Data Collection

To highlight firsthand audience accounts, and given that discourse analysis seeks to understand phenomena through the perspectives of those who experience them (Constantino *et al.*, 2008), I used semi-structured interviews as the data collection strategy. Interviewees were given the option to choose between conducting the interview in person or online, which was intended to accommodate their comfort and safety. Interviews were conducted between May 13 and June 13, 2025. Of the 12 interviews, two were conducted online and ten in person. Seven interviews took place in Istanbul, and four in Gaziantep, Türkiye's border city to Syria. These two cities were chosen as they are commonly included in studies focused on Syrian refugees (İçduygu & Osseiran, 2022; Chang, 2025; Lazarev & Sharma, 2017) because they are home to the biggest number of refugee population in the

[4] See 2.d. in Findings.

country (İçduygu & Osseiran, 2022). One interview was conducted in English and the rest in Turkish. I initially considered focusing solely on Turkish media, assuming the participants would be most exposed to it. However, I shifted the focus to international media after discovering during interviews that the majority followed international outlets in three languages: Arabic, English, and Turkish. Interviews took an average of one hour.

Analysis

This study adopts an ontological stance that discourse constructs ever-changing meanings shaped by individuals' worldviews, aligning with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory as a framework for understanding social phenomena. Consistent with the theoretical framework outlined earlier, audience perception is approached as a process that reconstructs socially constructed elements such as identity, power, and ideology. The fluidity of these concepts, and their entanglement with meaning-making, made discourse analysis the most suitable method. Discourse, understood as the 'semiotic element of social practices' encompassing language, nonverbal, and visual communication (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999: 38), or as the social determination of language use (Fairclough, 1989), exposes how people use discursive elements to act and reorient themselves within interpretive contexts (Gill, 2000).

As Gill (2000) notes, discourse analysis is complex and slippery, which I found true as findings shifted throughout the process. The goal was not to judge the accuracy of participants' accounts, but to unpack the deeper layers of meaning in their discourses, like how they asserted or attributed agency, legitimised some actors while questioning others, and either reinforced or challenged societal norms. I examined both commonalities and differences across interviews to understand the 'social consequences' of these accounts (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 21), particularly their ideological positioning.

Purposive sampling proved effective, as participants were often 'good informants' (Høijer, 2008: 281), offering both personal reflections and insights into their social circles' interpretations of mediated

realities. Given the multidimensional, shifting nature of sociohistorical meanings, I employed 'extrapolation' rather than 'generalisation' (Alasuutari, 1995: 156–157). Importantly, silences, avoidances (Gill, 2000), and gestures —what Fairclough calls 'extras' (1989: 22)— were often more expressive than words. My notes on observations uncaptured by transcripts, such as hesitations, excited movements, or withheld tears, enriched the analysis.

Ethics and Reflexivity

Gill (2000) argues that discourse analysts must continually examine their assumptions, as meaning is co-constructed with participants during dialogic interactions such as interviews (Constantino *et al.*, 2008). While the question of objectivity has long been a subject of debate among social science researchers, qualitative research is particularly scrutinised because the researcher's subjectivity plays a significant role in shaping data and the findings. Mayan addresses these concerns by acknowledging that qualitative research 'deliberately seeks out biases' (2016: 19). I have been aware of both the potential limitations of my biases and that they were an indispensable part of my research, since, as Gill (2000: 182) notes, 'discourse analysts' talk is no less constructed, occasioned and action oriented than any other.' I managed this awareness by keeping reflective notes throughout the study and discussing my assumptions with peer researchers in a way that preserved participants' confidentiality, critically examining how my positionality might influence the research. My positionality was shaped by participants, just as theirs was shaped by me; even through unspoken elements such as gaze, appearance, the way we greeted, or the tone and wording of my questions. I believe I could navigate my positionality 'serving as checkpoints along the way' (Bourke, 2014: 1) by actively recognising it. Consequently, both the data gathering and analysis phases brought unexpected findings that challenged my presumptions.

Trust was built gradually through informal conversations upon interviews and by allowing participants to set the pace and direction of interviews, without pressuring them to disclose more than they wished. As a Turkish person, there was, above all, a dynamic in our relationship in which

I may have symbolised Turkish state authority or the Turkish nation, both of which have been sources of systematic discrimination for participants. This dynamic shaped their responses occasionally, as I observed that their statements about anti-refugee sentiments in Turkish society appeared diluted. When discussing instances of racism and discrimination from Turkish people, many seemed reluctant to share their experiences in full detail, often softening their accounts —for example, suggesting that they could understand how more than a decade of Syrian refugee presence in Türkiye might be perceived as 'too much', and that Turkish society might be justified in calling for their repatriation. In response, I sought to validate their accounts of discrimination through both language and gestures, conveying that I recognise and acknowledge their struggles, and that I stood in solidarity with them. Nonetheless, I cannot guarantee that these efforts were sufficient to fully mitigate the influence of these dynamics on the data. Therefore, the relevant findings should be read with this limitation in mind.

Unfortunately, participants were not given the opportunity to express themselves in their first language. I was only able to conduct interviews in two languages: English or Turkish—both of which may easily enforce cultural hegemony upon them. As language lies at the very core of discourse analysis, the research would inevitably be shaped by the cultural limitations of the interview language (Høijer, 2008). The fact that the participants were non-Turkish minorities being interviewed by a Turkish researcher in Turkish or English carried implications of cultural and linguistic hierarchy. While the majority of them were fluent, almost native, in Turkish, two interviewees (Omar and Saleh) occasionally struggled to express themselves on some abstract and complex topics. In these instances, I simplified my questions using more straightforward terms, allowed extra time for them to formulate sentences, and asked follow-up questions to ensure I accurately understood their intended meaning.

In line with LSE Ethics Committee's guidance, I was prepared to refer participants to accessible mental health resources if needed—though no case required it, trauma frequently surfaced during interviews. As part of my ethical responsibility, I reminded participants at the outset and when

necessary that they could skip any question or withdraw at any time. They were fully informed via the information sheet about the study's purpose, data use, confidentiality, and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used throughout in accordance with the consent agreement.

Beyond procedural ethics, I was attentive to the broader responsibilities of working with a vulnerable group. In addition to avoiding harm, I sought to represent participants' voices without instrumentalising them, presenting accounts respectfully and without oversimplification, asking participants at times to clarify meanings, and resisting interpretation solely through my own perspective. This, however, was not without difficulty. As someone who has lived in close proximity to Syrian youth throughout their years of suffering, my emotional proximity to the topic sometimes made it challenging to maintain critical distance. Listening to stories of displacement and discrimination often provoked sadness, anger, and frustration in me. To process these emotions responsibly, I kept reflexive notes and sought psychotherapeutic support, ensuring my reactions did not overshadow participants' narratives but instead deepened my awareness of positionality and responsibility.

FINDINGS CHAPTER

The findings will be presented under two main categories and corresponding sub- categories, as the patterns emerging from participants' accounts predominantly fall under two key themes: their critique of international media narratives, and their reflections on identity and belonging prompted by these encounters.

Making Meanings of Media

Global Attention Too Little Too Late

One of the earliest-emerging patterns in the interviews was participants' overall satisfaction with the increasing visibility of Syria in the international media following December 8, 2024. The majority expressed excitement that the country had finally been making global headlines over the past few months, implying that they now feel seen and heard. 'Everything will happen in front of the whole world now,' said Marwan. This increase in media coverage was perceived as a long-belated development. As a result, the current attention is welcomed, but with a bittersweet feeling. 'People started to care about us so late, so our happiness is blended with disappointment,' said Jihan.

Some participants welcomed the international media's scrutinising attitude toward the new regime, seeing it as an opportunity for both themselves and the rest of the world to become familiar with the government now in power. Yara, a media professional, believes the coverage of Syria remains insufficient, noting that it has already declined compared to the initial months. Given her profession, she was more up to date than the other participants on the changing media agenda and monitored news on a daily basis. What unites almost all participants in their reproach toward the media is that they asked similar questions: 'Now you think of us?' (Salma). 'Did we have to go through all this to be on their agenda?' (Tara)

It was not only the media coverage they thought had come too late, but also the global awareness. Salma specifically pointed out how various international organisations are only now sending teams to Sednaya Prison (OHCHR, 2024)—where hundreds of thousands of detainees, held without charges, were known to have been tortured by the Assad regime since 2011 (UN, 2025). She also noted that the conditions Syrian women now face under the new government are being mentioned in the media with concern for women's rights, asking 'Now you care about us, Syrian women?' Many participants repeatedly stated that the global attention after the regime change feels artificial for it arrived too late, after decades of Assad's oppression, when timely coverage might have changed many lives.

Participants also expressed disappointment at the delayed shock of non-Syrian friends who only now grasp the scale of Syrian suffering. Many felt disbelieved when warning about the regime's brutality in earlier years, with their accounts validated only after international media entered post-Assad Syria. This sentiment was strongest around the visual coverage of Sednaya Prison, where several had relatives imprisoned and tortured. Kubra, whose father endured three years there, recalled the bitterness of Turkish friends dismissing her earlier accounts, only to say, 'Now we see what you meant,' after graphic prison images circulated in the media. This mix of disappointment and bittersweet acceptance of belated global attention strongly shaped how they viewed media coverage and responded to my questions, often with a disappointed, reproachful tone.

While the belated global attention was welcomed, participants were eager to share the issues they felt should have been on the agenda, topics they believed were more deserving than those currently dominating the media. Their critique was directly aimed at what they saw as the undue focus on relatively trivial issues, such as the viral handshake incident with German FM Baerbock (The New Arab, 2024) or questions about alcohol laws (BBC, 2024).[5] They largely agreed on the news platforms they used after the regime change. While some followed both digital and TV coverage, most relied solely on digital sources—especially WhatsApp and Telegram channels, where they received direct updates from friends, relatives (including HTS fighters), and civilians on the ground. These sources, often sharing rapid visual updates, were viewed as the most reliable. Participants frequently compared them to international news, viewing many forms of international news coverage as less

[5] In each interview, I began by asking participants to recall media content that had elicited affective responses. I also introduced selected examples based on either their potential to provoke critical reflection or their high levels of online engagement. Some examples emerged organically when participants independently referred to the same items—such as the early *BBC* interview with the president or debates on refugee repatriation—which I then incorporated into subsequent interviews as salient cases. Likewise, the *WSJ* article on Syria's female central bank head was included for its critique-triggering language, while the *DW* video of the handshake incident was chosen due to its notable online circulation. This approach accounted for participants' varying levels of media engagement: some independently recalled content, while others engaged more readily with the examples I provided. Links to the referenced content are available in the appendix.

deserving of attention than the issues unfolding on the ground, and interpreting this asymmetry simply as bias.

"It's all because 'they' hate 'us' Muslims"

While most participants primarily consumed media in Arabic, Turkish, and English, they consistently drew a clear and significant distinction between Western mainstream media outlets and others, particularly in terms of tone and ideological stance, identifying Western media through examples such as the BBC, CNN, Deutsche Welle, and The Wall Street Journal. They noted that even when these outlets published content in non-Western languages, their coverage often evoked a sense of being othered, which, in turn, shaped their ideological positioning as an audience.

Most of them adopted an us versus them binary in their comments on international media coverage regarding their country, its people, and culture. Sarah clearly believed that it was 'Syrian culture itself being judged' by the Western media, saying: 'They want to destroy us, but that won't happen easily ... they won't succeed.' She often mentioned news about the new Syrian president, focusing on how mainstream media highlighted his group HTS's past alliances with the Islamic State (ISIL) and al-Qaeda, both designated terrorist organisations in many countries (Pinfold, 2025). What disturbed her more was not the president's history being on the agenda—as she was also uncertain about her stance on him—but rather the association of the Syrian people with political figures by the media. 'They see us all as ISIS. They shouldn't. We suffered from ISIS the most,' she said repeatedly.

Jihan was commenting on the online discussions surrounding Syrians' celebrations of the fall of the Assad regime during the first days, as the diaspora across the world took to the streets to celebrate the historic moment (Al Jazeera, 2024). She expressed how they were marginalised online simply for celebrating this development, as some comments questioned how they could rejoice over the opening of torture prisons. 'Yes, we are weird,' she says with a laugh, responding to the comments that accused them of being a 'weird' community. Many participants (Kubra, Sarah, Zahra, Hadi) explicitly attributed the root of such marginalisation and othering to ideological reasons, primarily identifying

Islamophobic ideologies as the cause of biased and deficient coverage. Zahra perceived the representation of its people as part of an already-existing 'stereotypical representation of Muslims' which usually adopts an accusing tone, saying Syria is often brought under suspicion and Syrians constantly feel need to explain themselves as they 'value women in the country' or 'don't attack the minorities,' and adds with an ironic smile: 'That's how the system works in the world.'

The very early BBC interview (2024) with al-Sharaa was mainly addressed by the participants with a high interest, sometimes through my questions and sometimes even before I brought it up. Jihan thinks the interview questions were clearly 'derogatory' and Marwan thought the interviewer was asking only what he wanted to hear. Some participants, while commenting on the interview, has made similar statements that they think the concerns of 'Westerners' over the rights of Syrian society is away from being sincere, saying 'they are the reasons why we went through all this' (Jihan) and asking why is 'the West' checking up on Syrians' rights 'while it might well have been funding the oppression' they have been through until now (Salma). For many, these narratives were rooted in ideological discrimination, particularly Islamophobia.

Unpacking the Language

Participants did not only critique the general media narrative around the new Syria, but also made detailed comments on word choices, framing, and the use of language. One of the main sources of frustration among many of them was the labeling of the 2011 events in Syria, when the general public rose up against the Assad regime and mass violence followed (Üngör, 2023).

> *One of the things that pissed me off the most was when they would call it a war instead of a revolution. We don't call it the civil war because we weren't fighting each other. We were fighting a government that was killing us. It's very different, I think, from a civil war. A civil war is two factions inside a country that are fighting each other on almost equal terms. (Yara)*

One of the examples I have presented to the participants for commenting was an X post by The Wall Street Journal that goes:

Syria's new rulers elevated a woman to run the country's central bank, as the U.S. and other Western governments watch how the Islamist rebels who toppled the Assad regime treat women and others6

They thoroughly critiqued the word choice in this post. Zahra commented on it by saying:

Some of them (media outlets) are still consciously not calling it the new Syrian government but 'Islamists', 'extremists,' or 'Hayat Tahrir al-Sham' ... Even saying 'rebels' has a negative connotation. Instead, you could say 'revolutionaries' or 'freedom fighters.' We know the West plays around with such names a lot, it wants to control narratives.

She added that this naming not only despises the struggle of Syrian people, also implies a parallel between HTS and Taliban, therefore implying a parallel image between Afghanistan and Syria, when it comes to women's rights. Hadi, similarly, reacts to the same post with an emotional approach:

There are so many problems, from top to bottom, where should I even begin? What does Syria's 'new rulers' mean? 'Islamist rebels,' whoa! As if ISIS has come and taken over Syria. Absolutely unacceptable. I would take whoever wrote this article and beat them. These words demonstrate their denial and disdain for the revolution. It's as if a few Islamist rebels came and took it. It's throwing away the entire struggle Syrians have waged. Disrespectful!

Commenting on the same WSJ post (2024), Yara pointed out the double standards the language used in the coverage exposes:

It's funny, right?' (Laughs.) *'Like you'd never see a headline saying 'the US president assigned a woman, a random woman, in the government.' But who's that woman? Why did he assign her?*

[6] See Appendix.

Almost all participants who commented on the post found the way it ended problematic, by blaming 'the US and other Western governments' for imposing surveillance on issues like women's rights—a stance they called 'patronising,' 'impertinent,' and 'Orientalist.' They saw this approach in Turkish media too, especially due to the implied Turkish government's role in the regime change.[7] Comments under pro-government coverage praised Türkiye's role so highly that some humorously suggested Türkiye might soon annex Syria.[8] Yara believes Turkish media enabled these comments by framing Türkiye as the key actor, dismissing the Syrian people's struggle and resilience, adding that 'The same Turkish media was also reporting that Syria was normal under Assad and we could go back.' Jihan was making fun of this debate, asking with a sarcastic smile, 'If you, as Türkiye, had this ability, why did you wait so long then?' While Zahra criticised pro-government Turkish media for this stance, saying 'We have been fighting for this for 14 years, they only focus on the last 11 days,' Salma thinks it was mostly the leftist Turkish media that did this negative coverage.

Such a narrative—one that reduces the Syrian struggle to the final days before the regime change and attributes agency to external actors—effectively strips the Syrian people of their own agency in their struggle. It denies the legitimacy of the new government, enforces this denial through naming practices, and questions the capacity of local powers to govern and self-determination. According to the participants, such portrayals reduce the complexity and agency of the Syrian people, presenting

[7] Since 2011, Türkiye has played an increasingly strategic and opportunistic role in Syria, leveraging Assad's fall both militarily and diplomatically. It has sought to entrench its influence in northern Syria by supporting the opposition forces like SNA and targeting the Kurdish-led SDF through a sustained military presence. The Turkish government maintains close ties with HTS and promotes a "unified Syria" narrative –one that serves various goals, including preventing federalisation, limiting Kurdish influence, and facilitating refugee repatriation (Pinfold, 2025).

[8] See, for example, one of many posts on Turkish X during the early days of the regime change saying that "Türkiye ousted the Assad regime despite Russia and Iran. 82 Aleppo, 83 Damascus," implying that Aleppo and Damascus are to be incorporated as the 82nd and 83rd provinces of Turkiye: [@fbsk1834], (2024, December 10). X. https://x.com/fbsk1834/status/1865675174466711928?s=46

them as a homogenous and weak entity. This, in turn, triggers them to seek opportunities to explain themselves and their struggle.

Identity, Belonging, Ideological Positioning

Return to Syrian Identity

A major pattern among almost all participants was expressing with no doubt that December 8 has led them to be more confident about their Syrian identity. 'Being no more a refugee' (Salma) and turning into being 'just a guest' instead (Yara), allowed them to say where they belong to 'freely' (Tara), and 'proudly' (Amir). Especially bringing up the racism they had been through in Türkiye, some of them said how they had given up on saying in public that they are Syrian because of the discrimination and stereotypical etiquettes that could follow.

There was nothing as Syrian before (in Turkish society). (Hadi)

I was not able to say I'm Syrian freely before, now I can say that. There's a state behind me, there's somewhere I can go back to if I want. Now I can proudly say I'm Syrian. (Amir)

I feel like we are not being insulted anymore and now I can freely say where I belong to. (Tara)

Yara believes their newfound freedom to express suppressed identities stems not only from the regime's fall but also from the international attention the Syrian struggle has gained:

Suddenly you can say you're Syrian more easily. Because everyone is talking about Syria and people started getting excited about Syrians suddenly, and two, like I said, the idea that it doesn't matter what they do, you have somewhere to go back to. And three, you yourself are happier that you are Syrian ... Suddenly the place that I'm working at wants to do news about Syria ... I was happy that Syria was coming back to the headlines.

For participants, openly expressing Syrianness before December 8 came with a heavy toll: disbelief in their struggle and the harsh oppression they faced, leading to feelings of loneliness and

abandonment as global attention waned despite ongoing suffering, which they link to the poor and insufficient media coverage in recent years.

They stopped making coverage of the torture during Assad times.' (Marwan) 'For many years, this was our issue only, and we were left completely alone. Everyone was normalising with Assad until very recently. (Zahra)

And it was beyond a lack of attention or deficient coverage issue, but they thought the world refused to pay attention, even though Syrians were eager to tell: 'You feel helpless, you want them to see but they refuse to see.' (Yara)

Now, with the re-gained attention and confidence, some of the youth also feel dutiful for representing this identity in the righteous way, telling what real Syrian identity is: 'I feel like I should tell the world what real Syria is ... The ones leading us were the problem, not us.' (Sarah)

While the confidence to reclaim Syrianness is thus not only about political change on the ground, but also about media visibility, international recognition, and the reconfiguration of power and representation in the post-Assad narrative, this reclaimed identity is not the same as when the Syrian youth left their homeland—it awaits their re- creation.

Challenging the World

Throughout the interviews, a recurring pattern was the tendency to pause their critique of media coverage to clarify why the situation is not as portrayed or to explain how they, as Syrians, differ from the media's representations. Notably, their efforts were not necessarily aimed at correcting existing portrayals but at asserting that the Syrian people and their struggle are far more complex and nuanced than what the world has been told.

They (the world) should know that Syria is not like other countries. The people are different, even the land is different. People don't understand this. I want them to know this: We are not like anyone else ... We have

many different thoughts, races, religions, and sects, so you can't grasp it. Because you've never experienced what we're experiencing, and in fact, you never will. I just want people to know this. (Amir)

Participants frequently hinted at a collective identity through their discourse while critiquing international media: one that is bold and largely confrontational toward the rest of the world. Some participants expressed that they no longer care about the reductionist and homogenising narratives, because they now feel liberated and no longer need to tolerate such portrayals. Also, their belief in their ability to tell their story through their own narrative was emboldened. Their new Syrian identity is, therefore, a proactive one. For instance, Hadi started a team to fact-check online coverage on Syria after seeing the misinformation and unverified news being spread so quickly after December 8. Saleh, who is producing digital content about Syria, says with a comfortable smile:

They can talk however they like, this is a strong movement ... If they do negative or deficient coverage we do produce content too, what can they do? We have voice too!

The challenging tone wasn't limited to participants involved in media production, others also expressed strong determination to celebrate the joy Assad's fall brought Syrians. They insisted they deserved to celebrate this historic moment, despite the media's often undermining language and its demoralising effect: 'Let us have joy!' (Sarah) 'We want to have joy.' (Jihan)

Participants' criticism extended beyond Western media to the Arab world, where they perceived antagonistic and biased coverage. Several cited online commentators and outlets such as Blinx and Al Mayadeen, noting that Arab media largely reduced Syria to sectarian conflict which leaves audiences to know the country only through these divisions. Because of that, as Saleh says, and since Arabic media coverage is filled with 'suspicion' and 'negativity' towards the new government, people in the Arab world are developing biased attitudes toward Syrians. The Arab media's way of covering Syria shows they undermine the state-building efforts in the new Syria, Yara thinks. Therefore, the sense of abandonment experienced by participants is intensified and extended.

Difficulty to Belong

Since 2011, Syrians worldwide have often been portrayed solely as refugees, reducing their experience to passive suffering (Georgiou, 2018). Reflecting on the repatriation debates that emerged immediately after December 8, Yara said: 'Seeing our lives reduced to this, like, it doesn't feel like they see us as human.'

Headlines about repatriation—especially in Turkish media [9] —deeply frustrated nearly all participants, who saw the coverage as premature or deliberate (Hadi), evoking a 'feeling of being kicked out' (Zahra), 'so wrong' (Amir), and 'too early' (Saleh). Amir explained: 'They don't know how things are there (in Syria). There are no facilities for us yet. We need time.'

Alongside their collective Syrian identity, participants shared a sense of mutuality in struggling with belonging. Although they no longer identified as refugees and acknowledged Syria's liberation, their feelings of home remained conflicted. Asked what changed after December 2024, they exchanged meaningful looks and bittersweet smiles, as if the new era had confused their already complex feelings about belonging to a culture, society, or land.

'It's like two people facing each other. Salma, who grew up in Türkiye, and Syrian Salma, as if they were two different people and identities,' said Salma, explaining that one side of her longed to return to Syria, while the other was tied to the routines of 12 years in Istanbul. Saleh said he belonged to both Türkiye and Syria, Omar leaned towards Türkiye, and some felt more belonging to Syria after Assad's ouster. For all, belonging remained unresolved, shaped by years of vulnerability as refugees.

[9] While most participants frequently referenced "Turkish media," they did so in generalised terms without naming specific outlets. In practice, both pro-government channels (e.g., TRT, A Haber) and opposition media (e.g., Sözcü) addressed repatriation from the outset of the regime change.

Discrimination and state coercion in Türkiye further undermined any stable attachment, as living under temporary protection status left Syrians at risk of sudden measures, such as deportation (Çetin, 2021), a measure Turkish authorities frequently enacted (HRW, 2022). Zahra described how her belonging collapsed after her father was deported, while her family remained. 'You could be sent back anytime ... be beaten before you were sent (by the Turkish police),' said Marwan.

Yara said the governing party, AKP, has already 'changed sides' in her view. For Jihan, belonging to Türkiye was shaken when President Erdoğan invited Assad in 2024 to restore relations (Reuters, 2024). Thus, Syrian diaspora youth in Türkiye navigate a fractured sense of belonging, destabilised before the regime change and resurfaced with renewed repatriation debates.

Negotiating the New Order

Another key theme across the interviews was participants' political positioning toward the new Syrian government, which varied notably. While some (Hadi, Marwan, Saleh) voiced clear support and optimism, others were more cautious, expressing hope while calling for a balanced stance from both the media and the public.

We can't help but pin our hopes on him, see him as an example, see him as a leader, but they target and lynch him ... We can criticise, but constructive criticism is necessary, especially in politics ... Some people are making him into a hero right now, even approaching sanctification, which I find wrong. (Salma)

With some participants, I observed a complex and sometimes ambivalent positioning toward the new government. On one hand, they expressed a sense of alignment, internalising media portrayals that framed the government as representative of Syrian identity and, at times, feeling compelled to explain or justify its actions and policies. On the other hand, this alignment was not absolute; it was shaped by natural ties to HTS members and by personal experiences of the revolution, which produced pride in the movement but also discomfort with the way it was represented. As Zahra put it:

We don't see them (HTS) as a very different group; we see them as ourselves. They are us, we are them, not different people, not people who came from outside ... Knowing the people who played a major role in Syria's freedom firsthand, I naturally feel bad about the misrepresentation of them. (Zahra)

Why should I be responsible for what the government does? Yes, I had faith in the revolution ...I may have supported it from day one. But I'm not responsible for every move the government makes. (Zahra)

Participants often connected their stance on the government with sectarian divisions. The new Sunni-led administration, following 54 years of secularist rule under the Alawite Assad family (Baltacıoğlu-Brammer, 2014), promotes national unity rhetoric amid renewed unrest and violent clashes in minority-populated regions (MEE, 2025), which were frequently mentioned during interviews, often unprompted. Many participants, raised Sunni, empathised with Sunni forces, often employing inclusive 'us' language with explanatory or even defensive tones.

'We've been exposed to a lot of fake news. Especially about the Alawites, the events in Tartus/Latakia. There might be some true news, I'm not denying it, but there was also a lot of fake news... As you know, the Alawites were in charge of Syria. That's why hatred emerged among us, I don't know. I'm not defending it, I'm not supporting it, but you can't blame anyone ... It might be selfish, but we've been suffering for 50 years. We've given a lot to get to this point. We've shed our blood. We're the majority, we deserve it.' (Sarah)

Zahra also empathised with the HTS forces while commenting on what she described as *fabricated* figures in media[10] related to the minority clashes:

'We entered Damascus without a single civilian getting hurt ... This was a great success for us. There's a group that's been suffering for 50 years, and some of them can't hold back and sometimes make wrong decisions to seek revenge. No one can deny this ... A person shouldn't be killed simply because of their sect,

[10] Amid sectarian divisions, the absence of trusted official communication in Syria fuels misinformation, fear, and insecurity. See Waters, G., & Koontz, K. (2025, May 28). https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/sectarianism-social-media-and- syrias-information-blackhole/

which isn't accepted in our religion. And yes, wrongdoings were done, but there was a media that presented this with fabricated numbers.'

Yara also raised the media portrayals of the minority events unprompted, framing them as exaggerated:

'They make it out into a sectarian conflict. They make it into the government oppressing minorities, and they don't talk about how terrible it is that these minorities are asking for external intervention. We're trying to build a country here ... (The clashes) were on a much, much, much smaller scale than you would expect. But then the media goes and exemplifies this into everything terrible happening in Syria.' (Yara)

Participants' perspectives on the country's contentious politics were also shaped by their personal histories. Sarah was from Deir Ezzor, a Sunni-majority border city with Iraq affected by Iran's policies of Shiite settlement (IRAM, 2020), while Kubra, a Syrian Turkoman, grew up in Alawite-majority Latakia (TWI, 2015), recalling experiencing racism growing. The influence of these historicities was evident, as participants frequently referenced their personal experiences while reflecting on political issues.

Nonetheless, some expressed a cautious wait-and-see approach while voicing concerns about potential religious strictness under the new leadership:

'I don't like the government being religious. Yes, it needs to be more relaxed, and it's in a particularly sensitive spot right now. I'm uncomfortable with martial law but his (al-Sharaa's) past doesn't concern me.' (Omar)

'I lived in areas that Jabat an-Nusra ruled before, like it was under their control. I wasn't hijabi. I had to wear it even though I didn't want to. And like a lot of things happened at the time ... But it wasn't as bad as people made it out ... I wasn't happy with the idea of all of Syria becoming like that. Like when some news came that some buses in Daraa where women would sit on one side and men would sit on the other ... That's not how I

saw Syria. So I hoped that it wouldn't be like that. And honestly, what he did and what he (al-Sharaa) said, it didn't seem like it would go that way. So we were crossing our fingers.' (Yara)

'Actually, I want there to be respect. So, those who want to drink (alcohol), let them drink... I mean, I really can't figure out what kind of person Ahmed is, what's his background? He's very new. I don't think we'll be Afghanistan. We won't be the Taliban either. There will be drinking and nightclubs, I'm sure, you'll see.' (Sarah)

Overall, participants' political orientations toward the new Syrian government reflected a complex negotiation of ideology and memory. Support for the government was often shaped by Sunni ideological affiliation and proximity to groups like HTS, yet it coexisted with uncertainty and concern about the state's future direction. Sectarian violence was discussed with both emotional intensity and a protective impulse, extending to critiques of international media seen as deepening societal divides.

ANALYSIS CHAPTER

This chapter examines the findings through the lens of key theoretical concepts introduced earlier, including Orientalism, cultural hegemony, power, subjectivity, identity, and affect. Drawing on the experiences of participants, the analysis traces how they resist hegemonic narratives, re-negotiate their identities, and navigate their subjectivities through affective and discursive strategies.

Politics of Othering

One of the foremost elements in tracking the participants' engagement with mediated portrayal of their country was evident in the ways they positioned themselves in relation to hegemonic narratives and the powers behind them. A clear us versus them binary division emerged across all interviews, paving the way for a predominantly counter- ideological positioning. This binary positioning led participants to adopt an oppositional reading (Hall, 2010), with only a few exceptions in their critique

of media coverage. While drawing explicit links between media narratives and lived social realities, their accounts reflected Foucault's (1981) theorisation of the knowledge–power relationship, whereby dominant discourses not only shape perceptions of truth but are also sustained through their institutionalisation as common sense. They described how media narratives, through repetition and circulation, become socially accepted 'laws of truth' (Foucault, 1982: 781) that structure public attitudes—truths that, in turn, serve to reproduce the power relations that originally produced them. For instance, Saleh believed that the negative portrayal of the new Syria in Lebanese media shapes public attitudes toward Syrians in Lebanon, while Jihan expressed concern that stereotypical representations in Turkish media will leave a lasting imprint on how Turks perceive Syrians.

Moving beyond binary positioning, they reframed international media coverage as an othering narrative, expressing feelings of being othered by hegemonic powers, regardless of who occupies that position. This sense of being othered by them was, in many instances, manifested through elements of Said's (1978) Orientalism framework, as the sentiments voiced in the interviews included being seen as weird and acknowledging this etiquette, being presumed inferior by dominant narrative, and being misrepresented as a homogenous entity lacking diversity, stable and unchanging as a whole. These examples illustrate how participants believed portrayals of the new Syria in international media echoed an Orientalist mindset and discourse. As whatever related to the Orient is seen as 'unchanging', 'strange', 'different, inferior, backward', and a 'uniform' entity in the Occident's mind (Said, 2003: 95, 42, 98, 301) all these descriptions serve to widen the gap in the Orient-Occident division. Therefore, the discourse employed by the majority of participants in critiquing international media coverage revealed a perception of being subjected to an Orientalist narrative. The binary division in their minds, between 'us' as the othered and 'them' as the othering power, had already deepened after December 2024, following the rising visibility and intensified media debates surrounding their identity.

While the division between Orient and Occident was certainly reinforced in participants' discourse, it was not limited to this framework. More notably, what they described as homogenising or patronising voices were also attributed by them to various other hegemonic actors beyond the West. While the 'us' consistently referred to the Syrian people in their discourse, 'them' shifted, ranging from Western powers to the Arab world, the Turkish society, or the international community at large. What is common among all of these powers was that they hold cultural hegemony, a 'political, moral, and intellectual' upper hand (Chalcraft & Noorani, 2007: 3–4), exercised not only through shaping mediated narratives but also through constructing realities and forming common sense, wherein hegemonic ideologies are presented as unquestionable truths (Gramsci, 1971).

Affective Resilience, Counter-hegemony

In addition to reframing dominant narratives through a sense of being othered by global powers, participants adopted a proactive stance in critically engaging with mediated portrayals. Rather than merely opposing cultural hegemony, they embraced what Cavalcante (2018) terms resilient reception, building on Hall's (2010) notion of oppositional reading to account for strategies that resist mediatisation both ideologically and affectively. Several (Omar, Saleh, Jihan, Marwan, Tara) described how, after years of vulnerability, they had learned how not to fall prey to emotionally triggering narratives surrounding their community. Their engagement thus combined ideological critique, with ideology understood as social practice (Althusser, 1971) or universalising structure (Eagleton, 2014), and affective strategies for coping with negative coverage. These strategies included ignoring misrepresentations, redirecting attention to positive emotions such as joy and pride, and asserting their right to celebrate Syria's liberation and the end of refugee status, even amid ongoing violence and uncertainty.

These emotional strategies were significant not only because they allowed participants 'to manage the affectively turbulent power' of media (Cavalcante, 2018: 1187), but also as vital elements behind their counter-hegemonic discourse. Therefore, the participants should not be seen merely as

employing coping mechanisms. Rather, they were proactively positioning themselves within the processes of mediatisation, doing what Schrøder (2019) suggests as challenging the institutional perspective in media research that often renders audiences passive.

Participants not only reflected on their meaning-making but also actively 'disarticulated and rearticulated' media messages within wider civil society (Chalcraft & Noorani, 2007: 11). This was best understood by recognising the emergence of a counter- hegemony, as defined by Gramscian theory. Although Gramsci never explicitly defined counter-hegemony, his shift from 'war of manoeuvre' to 'war of position' (Gramsci, 1971: 238) inspired later scholars to introduce the concept as intellectual struggle against hegemony—whether through forming an alternative collective will (Chalcraft & Noorani, 2007), regaining cultural power (Urbinati, 1998), or reinterpreting societal norms (Mitter, 2007). Like hegemony's 'intellectual and moral leadership' (Gramsci, 1971: 57), counter-hegemony operates through its own leadership. It was evident that the participants primarily adopted a counter-hegemonic discourse as they often spoke in a plural and representative tone, aiming to form a collective will that could take over intellectual leadership. Their enthusiasm for speaking for themselves and telling their own stories to the international public—rather than remaining solely in a criticising position—reflected what Gramsci (1971) described as the creation of a new hegemony to replace the existing one. In this way, counter-hegemony became a proactive strategy for the Syrian refugee youth in response to media narratives, serving as a means to claim their subjectivities as central to the power–knowledge dynamic.

Affective strategies were central to subjectivity-formation, shaping participants' encounters with the media. Echoing Mousoulidou *et al*. (2024), who show that social media headlines heighten negative emotions, participants' reliance on headline-based news consumption further intensified the emotional impact of coverage. Because emotions were at times withheld during interviews — requiring my repeated queries— even affective strategies employed by some participants were not always aimed at fully embracing their feelings. Instead, some often silenced or managed them.

However, these affective elements became evident through both verbal statements and nonverbal cues. When Saleh leaned back in his chair and shrugged his shoulders while saying, 'what can they do? We have voice too!' with a smirking smile, it was clear he was employing cynicism or isolation as a strategy. When Tara sighed deeply with tearful eyes while mentioning her dad's months of uncharged imprisonment by the Assad regime as 'the event which made her her,' she was engaging in a form of witnessing and sustaining trauma as an affective strategy so central that it shaped her very identity. Some vividly recalled their initial emotional reactions when revisiting specific events —such as Amir recalling his first moment of hearing about the regime change: 'The presenter on TV said, 'It's now 6:30 am, and Syria is now Assad-free.' There was beautiful, soft music playing behind it. I actually cried so much at that moment.' Other affective strategies observed included emotional numbness toward certain topics (Omar), the use of irony or humour (Mawran), spiritual or religious reframing (Zahra), asserting the right to feel joy (Salma), or suppressing negative emotions (Sarah). These emotional strategies were mechanisms through which participants shaped and asserted their subjectivities when facing dominant narratives.

As Foucault (1982) explained, subjectivities are formed in relation to hegemonic mechanisms and, consequently, in relation to all forms of resistance as well, arguing that making sense of power relations requires understanding the fluid and evolving nature of subjectivities. In this sense, participants' discourse was predominantly assertive in claiming subjectivities—those of Syrian youth, and sometimes of the broader nation. Their challenge to the imposed knowledge was accompanied by direct suggestions for what could replace it. In some cases, this was further supported by individual initiatives, such as using media tools effectively to voice their people (Saleh) or challenge misinformation (Marwan), aimed at reshaping subjectivity, and in others, it involved suggestions for international media, such as incorporating more local voices from Syria (Kubra).

Identity in Motion

Central to the findings is the interplay between participants' perceptions and sense of identity. As they claimed subjectivities by rearticulating knowledge and critiquing hegemonic narratives, it became imperative for this study to examine identity formation—closely linked to collective will (Gramsci, 1971)— as a key component of counter-hegemonic practice. As members of a subaltern group, Syrian youth now actively re-defines the meaning of Syrianness, particularly in light of the historical shifts in their country which have profoundly shaped their perceptions of self, both individually and collectively. While identification is an ongoing process (Hall & Du Gay, 1996), participants marked a clear turning point by declaring they were no longer refugees, but only Syrians —one that not only allowed them to assert their identity more confidently but also to engage in ideological critique of the powers that had long marginalised them. As Hall (2018) notes, subaltern groups begin to articulate and affirm their identity once they become aware of what distinguishes them from hegemonic forces, often through the formation of ideological bonds. Participants frequently defined their collective Syrian identity without hesitation, by describing it as 'weird' (Jihan), 'different' (Amir), 'patient' (Sarah) or 'lonely' (Zahra).

This process of redefining Syrianness was deeply intertwined with how they were represented in, and responded to, media narratives. Their struggle against the 'privileges of knowledge' and the imposed 'mystifying representations' (Foucault, 1982: 781) became a central pillar of their identity-formation. As they shifted from being invisibly Syrian to visibly and proudly Syrian, they found the renewed global attention accompanied by misrepresentation and inaccuracies threatening to obscure the reality. They frequently expressed not only a desire to correct these narratives through their media use but also an immediate urge to speak directly to the world—to tell them what Syria and Syrians really are. While such moments of voicing real Syria reflected a strong sense of cultural belonging (Hall & Du Gay, 1996), the shifting political landscape offered little support for their ongoing identity-formation.

A defining common thread among participants was their positioning outside all political actors.This deliberate detachment not only challenged broader power structures but also reflected a form of self-othering. At times, participants distanced themselves from the new Syrian government too—though often with hesitation and ambivalence, which was rooted in the complex transformation of armed resistance groups, particularly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), whose members included participants' family and friends and who had long fought against the Assad regime. These former resistance fighters had now become the new state power, and their discourse had become the discourse of the state. This shift introduced a significant tension: participants had long supported the resistance, what all described as their very own cause, yet now found themselves grappling with the reality that the resistance had become the hegemon. They expressed a mutual desire to remain hopeful and supportive of the new state, yet their optimism was tempered by fears of renewed state coercion—echoes of the very oppression they had endured under the previous regime. Similarly, the Sunni identity, which had long been marginalised under Assad's rule through expulsion, torture, imprisonment, and discrimination, had now emerged as the dominant identity under the new state's ideology. These shifts led to a visible fluidity in participants' self-positioning, echoing Hall's (1996) notion of identity as a process that is never complete, always being constructed, while creating attachment and belonging through discursive means.

Yet this ongoing identity reconstruction was not shaped only by macro-political shifts, but also by their historicity (Harindranath, 2009). The 'collective archive of feelings' (Cavalcante, 2018: 1192) — composed of a shared past marked by expulsions, war, destruction, rights violations, and discrimination—were deeply imprinted in their collective and personal memory. Whether their family members were still alive, whether someone they knew had experienced torture or imprisonment, their lives in diaspora, their interactions with locals in Türkiye, their educational journeys, future aspirations, and longings— were profoundly influential. Not a single interview passed without these personal experiences surfacing repeatedly, particularly influencing their responses to the country's new political order. Personal historicities further complicated the sense of

belonging, producing intersections beyond the binary of life in Syria versus Türkiye. While some, shaped by direct experience of sectarian conflict, resisted the reduction of Syria to sectarian framings in the media, others expressed apprehension about the strict conservative orientation of the new leadership, fearing restrictions on individual freedoms, yet maintaining hope. A few even acknowledged the burden of the host-society while simultaneously recalling long-term experiences of racism. These negotiations across sectarian, cultural, political, and diasporic dimensions rendered their identities contested, discursively constructed, and in constant motion. While participants clearly contributed to a counter-hegemonic narrative through their critiques of international media, that same counter-hegemony became fragmented as they negotiated their political and ideological positioning within the emerging political order in the country.

CONCLUSION

Amid Syria's renewed global attention, Syrian youth now face unresolved dilemmas: whether to return to their war-torn country, how to cope with the long- term consequences of the conflict, and whether to place hope in a better future under an unfamiliar government—one marked by political uncertainty, a complex history, limited resources, and growing unrest among region's minorities.

This study explored how Syrian refugee youth in Türkiye, aged 18 to 29, perceive the international media's portrayal of the events beginning December 8 and their aftermath in Syria by analysing the discourse participants employ in their critiques through the frameworks of Orientalism theory (Said, 1978), concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), and power and subjectivity (Foucault, 1981). It revealed that participants primarily adopt an oppositional reading (Hall, 2010) toward mediated portrayals of the new Syria, employing resistant reception grounded in ideological positioning, and resilient reception through affective strategies (Cavalcante, 2018). In other words, they perceive international media's biased depiction of their country and culture as deeply intertwined with hegemonic power

relations, and their feelings of abandonment and betrayal are reinforced by the ensuing online debates. These feelings fuel their efforts to form a collective will, a key element in building cultural counter-hegemony in Gramscian terms, that challenges dominant powers by exposing their coercion (Chalcraft & Noorani, 2007). Amid years of discrimination and racism in Türkiye, Syrian youth find themselves in a crisis of belonging and face the task of reimagining their Syrian identity. The emerging counter-hegemony appears central to this process of identity reconstruction. Yet, they also find themselves navigating diverse and evolving attitudes toward the new government, a dynamic that complicates their reconstruction of Syrianness and formation of the collective will.

Additionally, participants' emerging media practices highlight the role of diasporic media as crucial spaces for identity negotiation, audience agency, and counter- hegemonic engagement—practices that are often embedded in alternative media networks that are 'important in sustaining community ties,' 'transforming identities,' and 'creating new possibilities for expression and representation' (Bailey *et al*., 2007: 71). This helps explain why, in the present case, alternative online networks—not mainstream legacy media—emerged as the most trusted and primary sources of news. As young people have increasingly lost trust in news media on social media platforms (Ehrlén *et al*., 2023), they are developing new forms of online news consumption, with meaning-making processes that closely align with their ideological positioning within complex sociopolitical realities. These new media consumption forms could significantly shape the ways younger generations in the region interpret, respond to, and participate in political developments over time.

While contemporary media studies increasingly focus on the Global South, it is still often interpreted from a Global North perspective rather than from within (Willems, 2014). Audience studies are particularly vital in this regard, as they can centre people's lived experiences rather than relying solely on external critiques of hegemonic narratives. This study sought to prioritise firsthand accounts, thereby highlighting the agency of Syrian youth at a critical historical juncture. Given the marked absence of such perspectives in existing literature, especially with regard to the MENA region, there

is a pressing need for future research to adopt similarly participant-centred approaches that engage with youth not merely as subjects of crisis but as agents of narrative. Further research is necessary to support these findings, including quantitative studies on the young Syrian audience with broader and generalisable data, as well as critical discourse analyses of international media portrayals of the new Syria, to provide supportive materials to more critical research. Sustained attention is essential also to monitor how hegemonic powers use media to exploit sensitive moments in the MENA region, further undermining the agency of peoples.

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Appendix:

Table 1: Participants' demographics.

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Age	City of origin	City of residence	Occupation	Citizenship status	Arrival to Türkiye
Tara	She/her	23	Aleppo	Istanbul	PG student	TR citizen	2012
Jihan	She/her	22	Aleppo	Istanbul	UG student	temporary protection	2016
Zahra	She/her	23	Aleppo	Gaziantep	UG student	temporary protection	2013
Hadi	He/him	26	Aleppo	Istanbul	Media worker	TR citizen	2015
Marwan	He/him	21	Aleppo	Istanbul	UG student / entrepreneur	temporary protection	2014
Sarah	She/her	20	Deir ezzor	Gaziantep	UG student	temporary protection	2014
Amir	He/him	23	Aleppo	Adana (online)	UG student / cook	temporary protection	2016

Salma	She/her	23	Damascus	Istanbul	Psychologist	temporary protection	2013
Saleh	He/him	20	Aleppo	Gaziantep	UG student / influencer	TR citizen	2014
Kubra	She/her	29	Latakia	Hatay (online)	Social worker	temporary protection	2014
Omar	He/him	23	Aleppo	Gaziantep	Construction worker	temporary protection	2012
Yara	She/her	26	Aleppo	Istanbul	Media worker	TR citizen	2016

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