

## Insights into Iranian younger audience of Persian amateur subtitling: a reception study

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## Abstract

In today's digital culture, amateur as a type of non-professional subtitling has mushroomed worldwide and has arguably challenged conventional practices of audiovisual translation. The contemporary digital mediascape has provided an opportunity for audiences to access a wide variety of audiovisual content through multiple translation modes. The aim of this study is twofold. It examines Iranian younger viewers' audiovisual translation viewing habits and preferences and explores their reception and assessment of Persian amateur subtitling. A selection of 132 Iranian participants attended the study to watch an entire episode of an English television comedy with Persian amateur subtitles. A questionnaire and semistructured interviews were used to collect data on viewers' audiovisual translation viewing habits and their reception of the subtitled episode. Findings suggest that a large number of the users prefer to watch audiovisual content with subtitles created and distributed by non-professionals. The results of the experiment indicate the viewers' positive attitudes and perceptions towards amateur subtitles. On the basis of the empirical evidence, it can be argued that the Iranian audience, who had grown up accustomed to dubbing, have now become acclimatized to subtitling. Other evidence is indicative of the viewers' positive experience and appraisal of Persian amateur subtitling.

**Keywords:** audiovisual translation; amateur subtitling; viewing habits; audience; reception.

## 1. Introduction

A long time has passed since the introduction of professional subtitling as an effective means for rendering foreign cinematic products across languages and cultures, and almost three decades since the American society of the early 1980s witnessed a resistant form of subtitling called fansubbing (Dwyer, 2019; Leonard, 2005). A pivotal factor in the emergence of fansubbing can easily be attributable to the democratization of technology that puts the act of subtitling “in the hands of the general public” (Guillot, 2019: 31). Both professional subtitling and amateur subtitling have been the focus of numerous studies over the past two decades, and there are several encyclopedia entries revolving around the two topics (e.g., Díaz Cintas, 2020; Dwyer, 2019; Guillot, 2019; Massidda, 2020), highlighting its importance in academia. While admitted as an underexplored area of investigation as early as the 1990s or still up until the mid-2000s (Gambier, 2003), subtitling reception has gained researchers’ attention in recent years (Orrego-Carmona, 2019; Perego, 2016) and scholars have started to write state-of-the-art observations on subtitling reception and perception (e.g., Di Giovanni, 2020; Nikolić, 2018).

How people watch foreign films and television series has also witnessed new changes, especially with the growing presence of various forms of subtitling worldwide. A recent survey by *Stagetext* has found that the large majority of young people prefer subtitles when watching foreign content. This is because, as the captioning charity *Stagetext* claims, “[younger viewers] can take in far more information quickly because they’re used to it” (Youngs, 2021, 15 November). Likewise, Díaz Cintas maintains that many youngsters in dubbing countries prefer to watch foreign programs with subtitles so they can hone their language capabilities (Bogucki & Díaz Cintas, 2020). Empirical studies have also shown that people from dubbing countries, such as Spain and Iran, significantly watch subtitled programs (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2022; Matamala, Perego, & Bottiroli, 2017; Orrego-Carmona, 2014). Years of exposure to dubbing since childhood, however, may affect people’s overall enjoyment of audiovisual translation (AVT) as well as their foreign language competence and awareness (Di Giovanni, 2018b).

Therefore, as Chaume (2013) rightly asserts, the map of AVT “is no longer drawn in black and white terms” (120). Although it is acknowledged that Iran has been a dubbing country since the mid-1940s, people’s AVT preferences and tastes have apparently begun to reshape with more available alternatives to choose (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2022).

To give an example, the drama miniseries *Chernobyl* (2019, broadcast by HBO and Sky UK)—which turned out to be a popular TV show both in Iran as well as elsewhere, as of this writing—has been dubbed into Persian by the video on-demand (VOD) service *filimo.com*<sup>1</sup>.

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1 <https://www.filimo.com/m/Y5aTn> (last consulted, 10 June, 2019).

Surprisingly however, another VOD service, *namava.ir*<sup>2</sup>, offers an entirely different Persian dubbing for this miniseries. The story does not end here; a cursory glance at *subscene.com* shows that *Chernobyl* has been subtitled by at least five groups of amateur subtitlers. Alternatively, if people have a hard time downloading the pirated version of the series and its subtitles, they could simply watch it online with hard subs at *didestan.com*<sup>3</sup>. Overall, this reflects how the AVT landscape in Iran has developed and changed, and television channels are no longer the exclusive source of broadcasting foreign cinematic programs as countless new agents have now entered the Persian AVT field and capitalize on their own independent capitals. This hidden competition is well explained by Orrego-Carmona (2018: 323), who writes that today's media companies know that they should "keep up with the pace of the audiences' expectations and promote innovation to cater for their users". It is therefore envisaged that users have been provided with diverse alternative forms of AVT, but the question remains whether Iranian young viewers are more likely to choose subtitled versions over the dubbed ones, which gives rise to the first purpose of this study. We hypothesize that a sizeable proportion of the respondents choose subtitling over dubbing since Persian subtitles are made available online faster than one might usually expect (Khoshsaligheh, Ameri, Shokoohmand, & Mehdizadkhani, 2020) and Persian dubbing still suffers from vast politically and culturally motivated enforcement of censorship (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2016). Despite the acceptance of Persian subtitles by young people, non-professional subtitling has received criticisms and complaints from professionals in the AVT industry (e.g., Hassankhani, 2011; Jalili, 2001; Motamedi, 2011; Naficy, 2011). Solely because Iranian non-professional subtitlers are viewed as aficionados with no training in AVT, sacrificing quality and focusing on the fast and immediate release of subtitles. The scant literature on the reception of amateur subtitling suggests that viewers appear to be more tolerant toward these subtitles (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2021; Di Giovanni, 2018b; Orrego-Carmona, 2016) despite the negative tag attached to them.

Recognizing that very little research has been carried out in the area of amateur subtitling reception, we aim to tap into the reception of a selection of Iranian young viewers concerning one subtitled episode of the American comedy *Young Sheldon* (2017, broadcast by CBS). Therefore, this paper addresses these questions:

- How do Iranian younger viewers prefer to watch foreign cinematic productions?
- How do Iranian younger viewers perceive and respond to low-quality features of non-professional subtitling?

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2 <https://www.namava.ir/%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85/1/23087> (last consulted, 10 June, 2019).

3 <https://www.didestan.com/video/M82aK43V> (last consulted, 10 June, 2019).

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Non-professional/amateur subtitling

Non-professional subtitling scholarship has developed since the late 1990s onwards with remarkable works by both translation researchers (Díaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Pérez-González, 2007) and scholars coming from sister disciplines of film studies and communication studies (Leonard, 2005; Nornes, 1999), albeit on a much smaller scale and with the prime focus on anime subtitling. Non-professional subtitling is a relatively new area within the field of translation studies which examines and looks into the interplay of fandom and subtitling. Since the early empirical studies on non-professional subtitling—severed as inspiration for future research—a rich scholarship on the issue has begun to take shape, and is looming, of course (see Massidda, 2020). Despite having acquired a large degree of acceptance in translation studies, non-professional subtitling still suffers from a shortcoming; there is no consensus on how to define and name this phenomenon, which is why there is a multitude of names available in the literature. Despite this shortcoming, no remuneration, little or no training, no respect for the standards of professional practice and copyright infringement have been the noted hallmarks of non-professional subtitling (Antonini, Cirillo, Rossato, & Torresi, 2017). The definition made by Antonini et al. (2017), to some extent, matches the Iranian cases; however, Ameri and Khoshsaligheh (2019) report that Iranian non-professional subtitlers are, at times, translation students or graduates and they are paid—although substantially little—for their work by the piracy film websites. Additionally, their work is not supervised by any Iranian authorities, as this is an underground and unauthorized activity, aiming to “circumvent windowed release strategies and other forms of geoblocking” (Dwyer, 2019: 441). For the sake of clarity, in this study, we call them amateur subtitling.

For the purpose of this study—which is reception and audience—we would like to bring to the fore the quality of amateur subtitling because it can supposedly affect the reception. A large body of research both nationally (e.g., Hassankhani, 2011; Jalili, 2001; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017; Khoshsaligheh & Fazeli Haghpanah, 2016; Motamedi, 2011) and internationally (Bogucki, 2009; Díaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Massidda, 2015) suggests that amateur subtitling barely adheres to established norms and standards practiced and encouraged in the commercial subtitling industry, and translation and technical errors are frequently found in these products. Another body of research (Dwyer, 2012; Orrego-Carmona, 2015), in contrast, suggests that non-professionals can “offer a quality comparable to official (DVD) releases” (Hatcher, 2005: 520). The reason seems to be complex, but, Jiménez-Crespo (2017a: 181) and Massidda and Casarini (2017: 68-69) assert, modern fansubbers have started to present works which barely defy commercial subtitling standards, but rather tend to follow them closely. Yet, the Iranian unauthorized subtitlers are rarely aware of the professional know-how of subtitling. Unlike the dubbing practice in Persian (see figure 1), as illustrated in figure 2, Iran does not have a solid subtitling tradition (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2019; Khoshsaligheh et al., 2020).

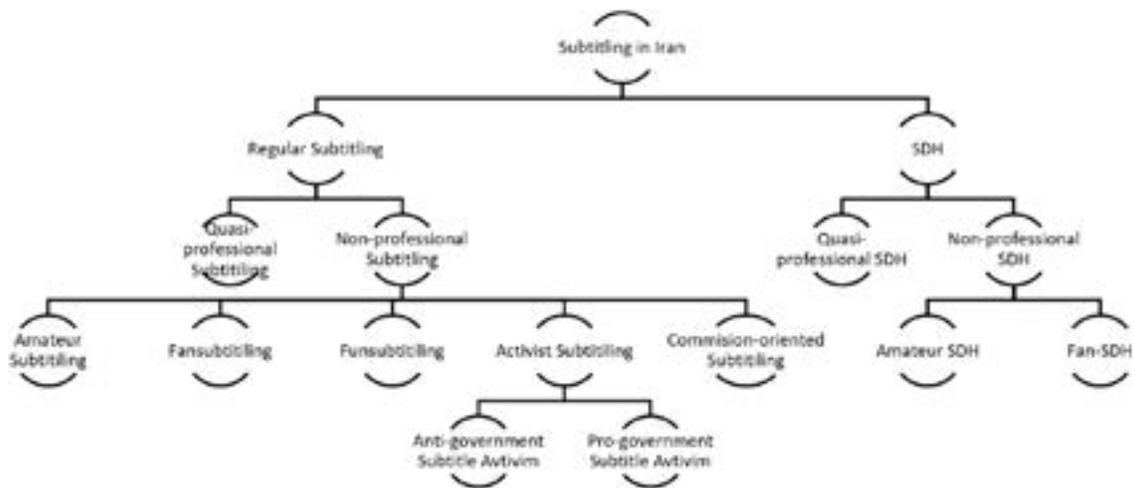
**FIGURE 1**

Dubbing typology in the Iranian mediascape (Khoshsaligheh, 2022)



**FIGURE 2**

Subtitling typology in the Iranian mediascape (Khoshsaligheh et al., 2020)



For Dwyer (2012: 237), however, “the lack of stable quality standards defining the non-professional translation environment accounts for the latter’s impetus and subversive potential”. It is worthwhile to consider that erroneous subtitles—abundant in Persian cases—likely result in increasing the cognitive load because “the viewer must overcome the error in order

to comprehend and integrate the presented information” (Doherty & Kruger, 2018: 189). We assume that Iranian viewers may find it difficult to discern mistakes and errors in the subtitles because of their poor knowledge of the language of the program—they watch it with subtitles as they are not well familiar with the original language—and the lack of any exposure to professional subtitling to create a baseline for a comparison. The next section more specifically deals with reception studies in the realm of amateur subtitling.

## 2.2. Reception of amateur subtitling

Compared with other types of translation, say literary translation or business translation, AVT has been a forerunner in researching actual audience and their reception of translation. Early studies on AVT reception were conducted by scholars of cognitive psychology in the early 1990s (Di Giovanni, 2018b), even though the reception of subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) had reportedly preceded standard subtitles reception, dating back to the early 1970s (Romero Fresco, 2018). This has emerged out of the curiosity of researchers for understanding how viewers perceive, receive, and understand subtitles, as, in 1995, Kovačič called for more research on this area. Over the past decade, the gap had begun to be gradually filled with empirical evidence within the AVT discipline (Di Giovanni, 2020).

There has been an emerging scholarship on the reception of those subtitles made by amateurs. The present literature on non-professional or amateur subtitling could be divided into three blocks of research. The first two groups have been experimental in nature, while the other has mainly been based on surveys. The first group has been concerned with the actual subtitles made by fans, amateurs, and non-professionals (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2021; Di Giovanni, 2018b; Orrego-Carmona, 2016), while the other group has incorporated a feature of non-professional into their investigations, for example, high reading speeds, poor line breaks, and the use of commentaries, among other features (Caffrey, 2008; Künzli & Ehrensberger-Dow, 2011; Lång, Mäkisalo, Gowases, & Pietinen, 2013; Perego, Del Missier, Porta, & Mosconi, 2010; Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018, 2019). The third group has gathered the opinions of students or cinephiles with regard to amateur subtitling (Khoshsaligheh, Ameri, Khajepour, & Shokoohmand, 2019; Orrego-Carmona, 2014). Reception studies on actual subtitles made by amateurs—which is the focus of the present inquiry—have revealed that users may have no difficulty in processing them. In other words, no significant difference has been reported in terms of professional and non-professional subtitling viewing; yet, professional subtitling turns out to present a more stable reading behavior (Orrego-Carmona, 2016), and audience experience a higher comprehension of the program with professional subtitles (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2021). In her study, comparing subtitles made by Netflix and by an Italian fansubbing group, Di Giovanni (2018b) found that the participants expressed varying attitudes toward the reception of the subtitles. It is to be noted that Orrego-Carmona and Di Giovanni used the subtitles made by “pro-am” [professional-amateur], who act in accordance with professional subtitling standards, so their quality is comparable to professional subtitling (Orrego-Car-

mona, 2016). Strangely, Di Giovanni (2018b) reported that Netflix subtitles failed to carefully follow commercial norms of subtitling. Translations, for example, were detailed with little condensation and subtitles were carelessly segmented.

### 2.3. Iranian audiovisual translation landscape

Dubbing, along with voice-over, are the main professional means for rendering fictional and non-fictional programs in Iran, whilst the official use of subtitling is very limited and it is barely used on national TV channels. Regular subtitling and SDH are now mainly yet increasingly available by Iranian local streaming services. Audio description, as the most recent trend in audiovisual localization and accessibility in Iran, is fledgling yet thriving and has been mostly attended to and provided by NGOs such as Sevina (Khoshsaligheh & Shafiee, 2021; Khoshsaligheh, Shokoozmand, & Delnavaz, in press). Dubbing has a long-standing tradition in Iran and its origin is traced back to the mid-1940s. Subtitling, on the other hand, is a very new phenomenon in the Iranian society, dating from the late 1990s or thereabouts, when pirated CDs of American and Indian films found their way into Iran (Jalili, 2001; Naficy, 2012). In the current global context, Iranian viewers are arguably more inclined to consume foreign audiovisual programs. Nonetheless, the absence of any professional subtitling system and the presence of ‘cultural-gatekeeping’ in Persian dubbing system have strongly pushed the audience into the world of piracy, where the pirated versions of cinematic programs, along with their subtitles made by individual fans or subtitling communities, are freely available. Needless to say, audiences have been fervently enthusiastic to watch their program as soon as possible and particularly uncensored. This study aims to offer empirical evidence to appraise this claim.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Design

Inspired by the review of the literature, this research aims to analyze the reception of a sample of Iranian young viewers concerning a subtitled American sitcom episode. The present study employs a pre-experimental design because it draws on the elements of experiments but does lack a control group. More specifically, it is called ‘one-shot case study’ (Patten & Newhart, 2018) as a group of viewers are exposed to amateur subtitles, followed by a subtitling reception questionnaire and semistructured interviews. This type of experimental design has already been used by O’Hagan and Sasamoto (2016) and Tamayo, de los Reyes Lozano, and Martí Ferriol (2021).

### 3.2. Participants

The sample for the present investigation consisted of 132 freshmen at an Iranian university who were studying veterinary ( $n = 25$ ), mathematics ( $n = 28$ ), information sciences ( $n = 26$ ), and administrative management ( $n = 53$ ). The contributing volunteers were all native speakers of Persian, including 88 female and 44 male participants. Their age ranged between 18 and

26 years old ( $M = 19.50$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ). And following the European Framework of Reference for Languages, their level of English—as the language of the stimuli—corresponds to B1 (i.e., intermediate), according to the teachers of their general English course. The participants also self-reported their level of English as follows; basic (31.8%), intermediate (56.8%), upper-intermediate (9.8%), and advanced (1.5%), which resembles the teachers’ overall assessment of the participants’ English competence as well as the report of EPI (2020).

### 3.3. Stimuli

The material used for this study was the first episode of the first season of the American comedy series *Young Sheldon*—a spin-off of *The Big Bang Theory*, portraying the childhood of Sheldon Cooper in East Texas. The episode was roughly 20 minutes long and no participant reported watching it before. In this episode, there are five main characters, namely, *Sheldon*, *Mary* (Sheldon’s mom), *George* (Sheldon’s dad), *Missy* (Sheldon’s sister), *Georgie* (Sheldon’s brother), in addition to several supporting roles, including Sheldon’s teachers and the high school principal. At the time of doing the experiment, two sets of amateur subtitles were found on <https://subscene.com> for this TV series, and one set was chosen for this study. No intervention was introduced into the subtitles and the main characteristics of the subtitles can be found in table 1, extracted by Subtitle Edit (v. 3.5.9) and Black Box (v. 1.0)<sup>4</sup>.

**TABLE 1**

Overall information of the Persian subtitles

Number of subtitles	457
Total words in subtitles	2448
Number of one-line subtitles	374
Number of two-line subtitles	83
Number of subtitles with more than two subtitles	0
Number of fast subtitles (exceeded 15 CPS)	148
Number of long subtitles (exceeded 40 characters per line)	17
Total character per second	12.27
Total duration of subtitles	00:16:08

4 In another study (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2021), we used the same TV show for examining subtitling reception through a true experiment. However, different sets of subtitles were used; professional subtitles for the control group and amateur subtitles for the experimental group. The participants were exposed to German dubbing of the sitcom so that they can only rely on the subtitles to understand the show.

### 3.4. Instrumentation

The questionnaire developed for this study contains three sections: participants' demographic information (four items), film enjoyment (four items), and subtitling enjoyment (ten items), and it was in Persian (see appendix). The initial version of the questionnaire was developed by benefiting from the scale of Perego, Laskowska, et al. (2016). The questionnaire was subjected to comments and revisions of four AVT researchers to ensure the validity of the scale. The final version of the questionnaire was piloted on eight participants to establish the fluency and clarity of the language and items. The main items were presented on a 7-point semantic scale (see appendix). Following Cronbach's alpha, the reliability of the questionnaire was measured 0.89, which is a high value.

### 3.5. Data collection and analysis

The data were collected during five viewing sessions. In each session, the students of the same major were invited. The participants were first briefed on the research protocols; however, the exact purpose of the study was not revealed until the end of the session. There was no mention of the language, genre, and AVT modality of the video. After watching the first episode of the American comedy series *Young Sheldon* on a big screen with amateur subtitles<sup>5</sup>, the participants filled in the subtitling reception questionnaire. Each meeting lasted no more than 40 minutes. After the experiment, five participants from each group were randomly invited for an in-person interview to share their views concerning the subtitled program. The mixed data contributed to the depth of the overall conclusion, and the quantitative data complemented with the qualitative findings can enrich our understanding of subtitling viewing and reception in Iran. The data were analyzed in SPSS (v. 22) and descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyze the findings and draw conclusions.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Preferred mode of AVT

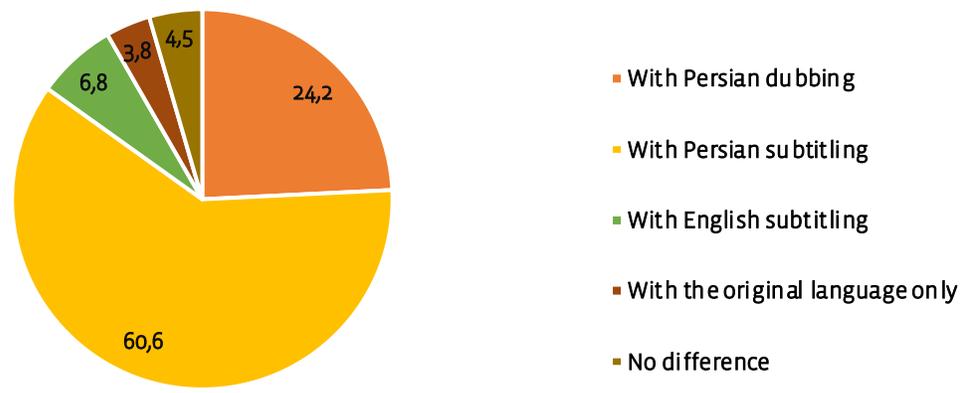
In response to the first research question, participants' preferred mode of AVT is reported in figure 3, where subtitling (60.6%)—amateur subtitling to be exact—appears to be the most common means for watching foreign fiction among the participants, followed by dubbing (24.2%). This finding is in accordance with the growing use of subtitling in other dubbing countries (Matamala & Ortiz-Boix, 2018; Matamala et al., 2017; Perego, Laskowska, et al., 2016). It should be noted, however, that our participants were chosen not to be language or translations students.

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5 It is worth noting that the language of the clip was English and it was not changed in the experiment.

**FIGURE 3**

Participants' preferred mode of AVT



Overall, subtitling is gaining more and more popularity among young people who have grown up with dubbing because subtitling is oftentimes linked to “general openness and curiosity for different languages and cultures” (Matamala et al., 2017: 431). Di Giovanni (2018b) is, however, of the view that such a conclusion should be treated cautiously as participants, even the youth, may reconsider AVT modality of their choice. This means that they may switch to choose dubbing over subtitling if faced with subtitles that limit their comprehension of the original program because they have enjoyed the easy comprehension of dubbed foreign-language films. Speaking of piracy, Orrego-Carmona (2018) believes that viewers watch more cinematic programs because piracy has presented an unlimited access to new releases at a low price. It should be clarified that the main providers of subtitling in Iran are mostly unauthorized amateur subtitlers. The state television channels still broadcast their programs with dubbing; however, VOD services are now heading toward subtitling even though dubbing is still their priority. It can be envisioned that the use of subtitles keeps expanding in Iran.

#### 4.2. Film appreciation

The result in terms of the TV show enjoyment indicates that participants found this TV show exciting. The mean score for the video enjoyment—on a semantic scale of 1 (boring) to 7 (exciting)—was 5.06 ( $SD = 1.28$ ). In other words, the personal judgment of 91 percent of the viewers consisted mainly of *neither boring nor exciting to exciting*. When the participants were asked to rate their willingness to watch other episodes of the TV show—on a 7-point semantic scale ranging from 1 (unwilling) to 7 (willing), they showed enough interest with the mean score of 5.29 ( $SD = 1.77$ ), suggesting that only 7.6 percent of the group were by no means willing. The other interesting result is that more than two-thirds of them were interested in following the TV show with Persian subtitling rather than dubbing. In general terms, the participants found the video exciting and would like to follow it with subtitling. To be cautious, however, the preference of Persian subtitling over dubbing is not necessarily a pure priori-

tization of subtitling over dubbing from a technical view, but rather due to uncensored and fast subtitles made by amateurs.

### 4.3. Subtitling dependence

This item measures the extent to which the participants read the subtitles to understand the program on a semantic scale of 1 (never reading) to 7 (always reading). Given that the participants' level of English proficiency was not adequately high enough to allow them follow the video through the audio, it is highly likely that they read the subtitles. They reported that they read the subtitles to understand the content of the program with a mean score of 5.33 ( $SD = 1.56$ ), suggesting a high dependence on subtitles. Only 1.5 percent of the group indicated not reading the subtitles at all. It is particularly noteworthy that, when watching a subtitled program, spectators are inclined to look at subtitles since captions distract their attention away from the screen to themselves (Kruger, Sanfel, Doherty, & Ibrahim, 2016) and research has also documented viewers' automatic-look at the subtitles appearing on the screen, due to the dynamic as well as noticeability nature of subtitles (Bisson, Van Heuven, Conklin, & Tunney, 2014; d'Ydewalle, Praet, Verfaillie, & Rensbergen, 1991).

### 4.4. Subtitling naturalness and reading

This item measures to what extent the viewers have found the translations natural and in accordance with the conventions of Persian. The viewers found the translations natural with the mean score of 5.00 ( $SD = 1.57$ ) based on a 7-point semantic scale ranging from 1 (strange) to 7 (natural). Amateur subtitling is commonly associated with a source-oriented approach (Díaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Dwyer, 2017; Massidda, 2015; Nornes, 1999; Pérez-González, 2014); accordingly, errors as a result of source-text interferences are expected. Although the subtitles used for this study had a number of errors, it turned out that the viewers did not notice them, perhaps because they understand quality from another perspective (Lång et al., 2013: 84; Orrego-Carmona, 2019: 374). It should not be deemphasized that viewers could tend to prioritize "cost, speed, usability or access to content in long tail languages" over translation quality (Jiménez-Crespo, 2017b: 572). Or probably 'thresholds of acceptability' (Chaume, 2012) or 'tolerance thresholds' (Romero Fresco, 2019) in terms of naturalness were not crossed. To explain it more clearly, the Iranian audience appears to be more tolerant toward unnatural translations in subtitles. Borrowing the notion of "suspension of linguistic disbelief", it could be pointed out that the participants may tend to ignore unnatural translations so as to enjoy the film and immerse themselves in it (Romero Fresco, 2009, 2019).

The other item measures to what degree the viewers have found reading of the subtitles difficult or easy. They found the reading of the subtitles easy with a mean score of 5.33 ( $SD = 1.48$ ) on a 7-point semantic scale ranging from 1 (difficult) to 7 (easy), which means two-thirds of the participants had little difficulty in reading the subtitles.

#### 4.5. Subtitling distraction and losing information

This item measures to what degree the viewers have been distracted by the subtitles. The participants of this experiment seem not to have been distracted much by the subtitles as the mean score was 5.34 ( $SD = 1.40$ ) on a 7-point semantic scale ranging from 1 (distracting) to 7 (not distracting). They also appeared not to have lost much visual information with a mean of 4.97 ( $SD = 1.47$ ) based on a 7-point semantic scale ranging from 1 (losing much) to 7 (losing nothing). Therefore, the contributing viewers found subtitles effective.

It is believed that viewers are at times distracted when reading subtitles and may miss visual information (Kilborn, 1993; Koolstra, Peeters, & Spinhof, 2002) because they have to “simultaneously process and integrate information coming from different sources” (Perego, Missier, & Bottiroli, 2015: 2). Empirical research pertaining to subtitling reception, nevertheless, points out that many spectators are capable of processing subtitled programs without facing any difficulty, foregrounding the effectiveness of subtitles (Matamala et al., 2017; Perego et al., 2010; Perego, Laskowska, et al., 2016; Perego et al., 2015; Perego, Orrego-Carmona, & Bottiroli, 2016). This benefit perhaps results from the fact that viewers can efficiently analyze the information coming from two overlapping channels, namely, the dialogues and their subtitles (Lång, 2016; Miterer & McQueen, 2009).

#### 4.6. Subtitling duration and cuing

Also known as display rate, subtitling reading speed is “the rate of presentation of each sub on screen” (Díaz Cintas, 2020: 157). The reading speed can be calculated based on subtitle’s duration in characters per second or words per minute. Cueing or spotting is determining in and out times of subtitles on screen; in other words, “deciding the exact moment when a subtitle should pop up on screen and when it should leave” (Díaz Cintas, 2020: 154). Based on a 7-point semantic scale ranging from 1 (unsuitable) to 7 (suitable), the viewers in the experiment reported that subtitles had an acceptable display time and duration with the average score of 5.02 ( $SD = 1.71$ ). As to the spotting of the subtitles, similar satisfaction was mentioned ( $M = 5.8$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ). A new line of research suggests that viewers can still keep up the subtitles that overreach the standard reading speed (Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018), yet they spend more time on the subtitles than on-screen actions. On the contrary, slow subtitles could trigger rereading of the subtitles and become frustrating and unpleasant for some (Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018). Besides, viewers also appear to ignore slightly-bad synchronized subtitles, as Lång et al. (2013) have evidenced in Finland. An overall satisfaction, therefore, in terms of duration and spotting could be inferred from the result.

#### 4.7. Erroneous subtitles

In one item, the participants were asked whether they encountered any problems with the translation and subtitles. Of the 132 participants, 43 respondents answered with yes.

Further, when, in another item, they were requested to write down the problems they faced, only ten participants reported problems related to spelling, font, strange symbols in the subtitles, and mistranslations. The participants were correct regarding the problems as they were really there in the subtitles, in addition to more mistakes which were never pointed out.

#### 4.8. TV show appreciation and subtitling appreciation

Additionally, the overall mean score of the subtitling quality<sup>6</sup> rated by the viewers was 5.15 ( $SD = 1.26$ ) based on a 7-point semantic scale ranging from 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good); this indicated that a large number of the respondents enjoyed the subtitles. We also examined the effect of the genre on the subtitling enjoyment with the assumption that viewers may enjoy comedies more than any other genres irrespective of the quality of the subtitles. Simply put, the viewers might have appreciated these subtitles because the program was very exciting and pleasant to them. To determine the association between these two variables, due to the non-normal distribution of the data, Spearman's correlation was run. The results showed a significantly moderate correlation between TV show appreciation and subtitling appreciation ( $r_s(8) = .34, p = .000$ ).

#### 4.9. Interviews

The analysis of the qualitative data from the interviews helped us clarify the reasons why the participants may choose subtitling over dubbing, which generally boil down to the subtitling so-called advantages: retaining the original voices, language learning opportunities, no censorship, and the easy and ready availability of subtitles over the internet (see also Orrego-Carmona, 2014). One respondent, for example, mentioned that he has never attended any English classes and extensive watching films and TV shows with subtitles has improved his command of English. The strong association between extensive viewing and language learning has been evidenced by a number of studies (e.g., Rodgers & Webb, 2020).

Additionally, non-professional subtitling presents a more authentic view of the original program and subtitles are made available online faster; in the words of Orrego-Carmona and Richter (2018: 64), "immediacy and enlarged distribution" are two distinctive features of online subtitling. Also, for the viewers, these subtitles, even though with some flaws and errors, "are 'good enough' to fulfil their basic function" (Švelch, 2013: 308). When they were asked about the subtitles, they did not have much to share and mentioned that subtitles were good enough; only a handful of the interviewees indicated typos and oddities, the rest appeared to

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6 Given the complexity of defining quality and that viewers were not translation specialists or students, the concept of quality was not defined to them in the scale.

be less sensitive. This situation can be attributed to the length of the video (Lång et al., 2013); the respondents might have noticed something wrong in the subtitles but simply forgot it at the end of the experiment. This qualitative finding seems to be in accordance with the above-discussed quantitative results that roughly two-thirds of the users did not report any problem with the subtitles, and of those who found something wrong with the subtitles only ten actually wrote down a problem. Therefore, they did not find the translation annoying or incomprehensible, and the dubious quality of subtitles—made by unqualified translators—turned out to be acceptable to them.

This finding can be also interpreted in the context of Iran, a country with no subtitling tradition. Iranian viewers have only been exposed to dubbing and non-professional subtitling; therefore, they have grown up with such subtitles, and have now become accustomed to them, and as Khoshsaligheh et al. (2019) believe, “their context has not allowed them to develop a baseline to assess professional subtitling” (90). Therefore, they may consider erroneous subtitles appropriate. Abdi and Khoshsaligheh (2018), for instance, found that Iranian viewers do not like subtitles which are condensed. It should also be added that at the end of the experiments many respondents requested the name of the TV show as they found it pleasant enough to be put on their to-watch list even though the subtitles were nowhere near perfect enough.

## 5. Conclusions

This study set out to expand the existing research on amateur subtitling reception. In summary, there is evidence of shift in the AVT viewing habits of Iranian audiences. The younger generation appears to consume more subtitled programs. In fact, people’s awareness of subtitling has ramped up as more people are now watching their favorite program with subtitles. Based on the findings, we can reasonably argue that subtitles made by untrained amateurs are effective enough as far as the viewers had little difficulty in processing them and, on average, they enjoyed watching the subtitled program, which is in accordance with previous research in other speech communities (Di Giovanni, 2018b; Orrego-Carmona, 2016).

We acknowledged some uncertainties and limitations in our paper. Alongside the small number of participants, the use of students as a sample (Di Giovanni, 2018a: 174) restricts the generalizability of the findings. The measures used here were self-reports and ‘offline’. Online measures, such as eye-trackers and galvanic skin responses can indeed yield in-depth information. Future studies are also suggested to run true experiments where a baseline measure of viewers’ reception is created, enabling comparisons to be made more objectively. In addition, future studies could measure viewers’ reception with another TV series with a more complex plot and fast-paced dialogues, such as *The Code* (2019, broadcast by CBS) and *The Rookie* (2018, broadcast by ABC).

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## 7. Appendix: An English version of the questionnaire

### A. Demographic Information

1. Age: ... 2. Gender: female / male
3. Please specify your level of English: basic / intermediate / upper-intermediate/ advanced
4. How do you usually watch foreign films and TV shows?  
dubbed into Persian / subtitled into Persian / subtitled into English / in original language (with no subtitles) / no difference

### B. TV Show Questions

1. How did you find this TV show?  
boring 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 exciting
2. How much are you willing to watch other episodes of this TV show?  
unwilling 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 willing

3. How would you rather watch other episodes of this TV show?  
dubbed into Persian / subtitled into Persian / subtitled into English / in original language  
(with no subtitles) / no difference

4. Have you ever watched this episode of this TV show before? Yes / No

### C. Subtitling Questions

1. How did you find the subtitles (translation) of the TV show?  
strange 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 natural

2. To what extent did you read the subtitles to understand the TV shows?  
never reading 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 always reading

3. How did you find reading of the subtitles?  
difficult 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 easy

4. How did you find the duration of the subtitles on the screen?  
unsuitable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 suitable

5. To what extent did you find the subtitles distracting?  
distracting 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 not distracting

6. Did you feel you missed something from the TV show when reading the subtitles?  
losing much 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 losing nothing

7. How did you find the subtitling timing (in and out of the subtitles)?  
unsuitable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 suitable

8. Did you notice anything wrong or odd in the subtitles? Yes / No

9. Please write down anything wrong or odd you found within the subtitles.

10. How was the overall quality of the subtitles?  
very bad 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 very good