





## Subtitling Preferences of Film Audiences: a Cross-cultural Survey

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### Abstract

Despite growing interest in subtitling, research on how audiences from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds perceive and prefer subtitles remains limited. This cross-cultural study explores subtitling preferences among film audiences in Iran, Afghanistan, Malaysia, China, Hungary, and India. Drawing on established subtitling standards, we developed a questionnaire completed by 297 respondents to examine preferences for subtitle format, translation strategies, cultural adaptations, paralinguistic elements, and technical aspects. Findings reveal a strong preference for center-aligned, two-line subtitles with a foreignized translation approach that retains source culture elements. Audiences also valued subtitles with clear explanations of cultural references, appreciating a foreign flavor. These insights inform the practice and teaching of subtitling across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: subtitling, reception, survey, audiovisual preferences, localization, perception

### Introduction

The widespread and increasing popularity of audiovisual products in different nations is an irrefutable fact. This upward trend has led to a "revolution" in audiovisual translation (AVT) (Díaz-Cintas, 2003, p. 193). As two of the main and most common modes of audiovisual translation, subtitling and dubbing have long been the preferred mode of multimedia content rendition in different locales. For instance, dubbing is the preferred mode of translation for polysemiotic products in some European countries, such as France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and some Asian countries, such as China and Iran (Chaume, 2013). In contrast, subtitling is received more openly by Greek, Dutch, and Croatian audiences, to name but a few (Díaz Cintas & Ramael, 2021). The dominance of one mode over another is primarily driven by financial, political, geographic, ideological, and cultural factors (Díaz-Cintas, 1999; Matamala et al., 2017). On top of these factors, Pedersen (2011) refers to language policy, genre, and the historical factors that can also affect the choice of audiovisual translation mode. With all the different factors involved, it thus becomes a daunting

task to simply label a country as a dubbing or subtitling country since it “gives a skewed view of the mediascape of that country” (Pedersen, 2011, p. 4). In addition, the development of video-on-demand (VOD) services, fansubbing, online streaming services, and the Internet has led to an increased acceptance of subtitles, even in countries that have traditionally been labelled as dubbing (Perego et al., 2016).

A fruitful area of investigation within audiovisual translation is the study of subtitling practices and users’ viewing experiences (Gambier, 2023). The significance of such research can be further highlighted by the idea that subtitling research is less developed than research on dubbing (Chaume, 2019). As a practice that aims to improve the final users’ viewing experience and act as a bridge for intercultural communication, the importance of the technical aspects of subtitles cannot be ignored. Different media broadcasting companies and media service providers have developed *ad hoc* guidelines for subtitling (e.g., BBC, 2022; Netflix, 2022). Developing best practices for subtitling has also obsessed academia (e.g., Díaz Cintas & Ramael, 2021; Mangiron, 2012). In addition to such guidelines, different countries have sought to develop guidelines for subtitling, especially for deaf and hard-of-hearing (SDH) users. For instance, Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA, 2013), Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the United States (2014) and Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel<sup>1</sup> (CSA) in France (2011), to name but a few. This has led to no shortage of different sets of guidelines that are the ‘golden rules’ of the practice of subtitling.

Given the heterogeneity of different audiences (Franco et al., 2015), on the one hand, and the salient role that AV products play in people’s everyday lives on the other, addressing the preferences and filmic experiences of media consumers from different countries can prove useful. Many scholarly ventures in audiovisual translation fall within the category of *Descriptive Translation Studies* (DTS), in which studies have sought to describe the various technical, linguistic, cultural, and social aspects of AVT modalities (Khoshsaligheh et al., 2024; Magazzù, 2018; Murphy, 2010; Zoraqi & Kafi, 2023). Despite attempts to distance from perspective views and adopt descriptive approaches, research into viewers’ preferences with regard to the subtitling of audiovisual products is thin on the ground, with fewer publications turning to the audience to explore how *they*, as final users, would prefer standards and guidelines for AVT practices.

Along the same lines, the present study seeks to delve into viewers’ preferences regarding the subtitling of feature films and ends up with a holistic account of how subtitling can be better carried out in different languages as the end users would rather. Furthermore, it seeks to provide insights into the differences and similarities between different locales and offers a cross-cultural comparative account of user preferences. Consequently, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

1. Are the results of an online survey on subtitling feature films valid and reliable?
2. How are audience preferences for subtitling feature films categorized?
3. What are the preferences of the survey participants in terms of various subtitling aspects?
4. Are there significant differences in audiences’ preferences for subtitling feature films across cultures?

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<sup>1</sup> French Media Regulatory Authority

## Norms and Preferences in AVT

AVT professionals operate in a norm-governed world and, as in any other form of human interaction, their work is regulated by the expectations they are to meet either from commissioners' or audiences' perspectives (Pedersen, 2020). In case of any discrepancy between users' expectations and established practices, the localized product might simply be shunned or taken as a mistake (Marčetić, 2016). One of the major breakthroughs in directing attention to the role of user expectations and preferences could be traced back to Chesterman's (2016) concept of expectancy norms, which is related to "the expectations that viewers of subtitled audiovisual programs have with regard to what the subtitled product should be like" (p. 37). As one of the major contributing factors to establishing user-oriented research in Translation Studies, including AVT, this idea forms the founding block of reception studies in AVT (Di Giovanni, 2020), which will be discussed in more detail toward the end of this section.

As "unstable entities", norms are subject to constant variation as the result of *ad hoc* requirements from the side of the commissioners or language-specific requirements (Pedersen, 2020, p. 425). In a different scenario, audiovisual translators might have to make certain technical divergences to ensure medium appropriateness (e.g., localizing video games for mobile phones) that would entail new norms to be established to ensure usability in the target milieu (see Moreno García, 2020; Zoraqi & Arabbeigi, 2020).

Within AVT, norms are partly embodied in the guidelines developed for going about the task of dubbing or subtitling. A point that needs to be made with regard to these guidelines is that they are not necessarily applicable to all contexts, since translators' work is heavily regulated by norms that are based on collective and informal consensus between commissioners, translators, and final users about what is expected from translators (Pym, 2010).

The concept of norms has been challenged by the emergence of new phenomena due to the latest technological developments. The proliferation of fan translation activities, (e.g. as fansubs), that go against the grain and evince norm-breaking behaviors that eschew the established conventions for the translation of audiovisual products, entails even another rethinking of the concept of norms in AVT in relation to the technical constraints of the practice (Gambier, 2009). Along the same lines, Sokoli (2009) seeks to adapt Chesterman's expectancy norms (2016) to the context of audiovisual translation and defines it as ". A further exception lies in the conception of norms in such lesser-researched areas as accessibility research, where the conventional descriptive-to-prescriptive movement is not followed, and the developed guidelines are not necessarily based on descriptive research (Martí Ferriol, 2020).

The concept of norms can gain prominence in media audiences and reception studies. Such studies are concerned with "ways of understanding how and why people respond or participate in the media and what they do with screen culture" (Hill, 2018, p. 3). Researching media audiences and how multimedia products are received by audiences can complement the existing research on multimedia products and help verify the meanings interpreted by scholars to be conveyed through images. Furthermore, it can remove the idiosyncratic interpretations of individual researchers on what is best for the audience and bring to the fore the filmic experience of media consumers (Austin, 1983).

The study could also have implications for the conceptualization of "imagined audiences" in audiovisual translation. The concept of "imagined audience" refers to the mental conceptualization of the audience they are interacting with (Litt, 2012). Reliance on imagined conceptualizations of the people with whom we

interact is even higher when considering it in the context of mediated communication (Litt, 2012). Combining insights from audience research and reception research could prove useful in concretizing the context of audience reception and moving from speculations regarding imagined audiences to who the actual audience is and what their expectations are.

Studies addressing the reception of audiovisual translation have been gaining momentum in recent years in different locales. In the Chinese context, Li (2024) addressed the reception of Chinese subtitling and dubbing through a large-scale survey. The findings of the study revealed that young Chinese audiences are more in favor of subtitled products, while older audiences are more inclined to dubbed versions. This study can prove prominent in laying the ground for conducting further studies in terms of applying further nuances in researching audiovisual translation preferences. A particular advantage of such studies lies in detailing how varying user profiles play a role in shaping the broader AVT landscape in different locales. An instance would be the Polish context, where Flis and Szarkowska (2024) conducted a survey study on 1300 Polish viewers and signaled to a shift in AVT preferences as a voice-over country to a subtitling one, especially due to the emerging preferences of Gen Z and millennials.

An important aspect that is yet to be addressed in the broader literature of audiovisual translation, however, is how the lingua-cultural background of users could contribute to their preferences regarding the consumption of audiovisual material in terms of translation. Additionally, a systematic cross-cultural study addressing how the preferences of users from different locales fare in relation to each other is an important avenue of research that is pursued in the current work. How we have sought to address these two objectives is laid out in the following section.

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

Given the aim of our study, which focused on studying the consumption preferences of subtitled audiovisual products in different locales, the survey was considered the most appropriate tool. What makes survey research a more suitable option for our purposes is its usefulness in dealing with descriptive research objectives (Muijs, 2022). The questionnaires were distributed online.

### *Instruments*

The instrument, titled "The Questionnaire of Subtitling Preferences," was developed by reviewing relevant literature, including recent empirical studies conducted internationally (e.g., Božović, 2019; Matamala et al., 2017; Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018) and in Iran (e.g., Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2022; Khoshsaligheh et al., 2020), as well as seminal texts on subtitling.

A variety of possible instances of translation practices in subtitling were gathered to create a pool of examples from which questionnaire items could be selected.

The online version of the questionnaire was developed using Google Forms and distributed on various social media platforms, namely, Telegram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and WeChat. It was made available from December 7, 2022, to April 27, 2023. Each one of these platforms were utilized to ensure reachability to

participants from different locales as each one of these platforms is popular in certain contexts while less so in some others.

Choosing to make the questionnaires accessible through online social media platforms and opting for convenience sampling was partly justified by the fact that we did not have strict inclusion criteria in mind and the analysis was dedicated to individuals who had had prior experience of consuming localized audiovisual products in their own locale, on the one hand, and them residing in their home country, on the other.

This was mainly due to the idea that we intended to make sure the individuals are actually reporting their preferences in relation to the locales of interest (that is, China, Iran, Afghanistan, Hungary, India, and Malaysia) and not the country that they were residing on at the time of their response (e.g., a Chinese immigrant in the United States). This was made sure by explicitly informing the participants that they are expected to respond by having their home country in mind and not their current place of residence.

The questionnaire was comprised of two parts: demographic information and subtitling practices and preferences. The first part of the questionnaire focused on gathering demographic information and included items on the respondents' home country, native language, age, and gender. The second section of the questionnaire addressed subtitling preferences and practices and included 31 items on the translation of culture-specific items, (non-)auditory non-verbal items, multilingual content, taboo language, song translation, humor translation, translation approach, rendering of suprasegmental features of speech, and formal features. A five-point rating scale [1 (completely disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (no opinion), 4 (agree), 5 (completely agree)] was added. In the main phase, the originally designed closed-ended questionnaire was used to collect and analyze the quantitative data. To establish content validity, the initial draft of the questionnaire items underwent revision and received feedback from several scholars. Based on their recommendations, certain items were eliminated or rephrased to avoid redundancy, ambiguity, or irrelevance. To ensure face validity, a few participants who held MA and PhD degrees in translation studies were asked to review the items and assess their comprehension of each item to ensure appropriate readability and clarity. Consequently, some items have been revised accordingly.

### *Participants*

The research sought and benefitted from the contribution of over 300 volunteers, but after data screening, the final sample included 297 participants with a mean age of 25.90 from Afghanistan, China, Hungary, India, Iran, and Malaysia. The participants were almost evenly distributed across six countries: China ( $n=96$ ), Hungary ( $n=65$ ), Iran ( $n=66$ ), India ( $n=23$ ), and Malaysia ( $n=22$ ). The rationale behind the selection of these six countries is primarily concerned with the fact that these locales can provide rich insights for cross-cultural comparison between countries from Asia and Europe. This, in turn, enables us to account for cross-cultural differences between Asian countries themselves as well as between countries from Asia and a European country. Additionally, the countries reflect a mix of subtitling and dubbing traditions, from dubbing-oriented markets like Iran (Pakar & Khoshsaligheh, 2022) to mixed-practice regions like China (Li, 2024). This selection enables a robust comparative analysis of subtitling preferences across varied geopolitical, cultural, and technological contexts.

In terms of sex, the number of female respondents ( $n=219$ ) was significantly higher than that of men ( $n=78$ ). This discrepancy in the distribution of male and female respondents can be explained by differing media consumption habits between men and women. Women are more inclined to spend more time on social media and watching audiovisual products, while men are more likely to spend their free time on gaming activities (Twenge & Martin, 2020).

Having presented a demographic overview of the research participants, the following sections are concerned with the viewing preferences for audiovisual materials in different locales. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to answer the first research question. The initial EFA paved the ground for answering the second research question, which addressed the categorization of audience preferences regarding subtitling. Upon identification, audience subtitling preferences are described using descriptive statistics based on the identified categories. Lastly, to address the fourth research question (i.e., whether there are significant differences in subtitling preferences across the five groups of different nationalities), One-way ANOVA was used.

## Results

### *Typology*

To address Research Question 1, using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), the 31 items of the third section of the questionnaire were analyzed in SPSS version 27. To ensure the suitability of our data for conducting EFA, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was conducted to ensure sampling adequacy. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was .71, which is suggestive of the adequacy of our sample size (Kaiser, 1974). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) was also run, which reached statistical significance ( $<.001$ ), supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix.

Principal Axis Factoring analysis revealed the presence of 10 factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1. Therefore, to rule out the subjectivity involved in the observation of screen plots (Wood et al., 2015), parallel analysis was also used to ensure the appropriateness of the maximum number of factors to be extracted for further analysis.

According to the results of the Monte Carlo parallel analysis, comparing the eigenvalues, six factors with eigenvalues exceeding the corresponding criterion values for the randomly generated data matrix of the same size were retained. These factors contributed to 42.70% of the total variables in the questionnaire.

Promax rotation was performed to aid the interpretation of these six factors. The highest load factors are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 : Pattern Matrix**

Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3		Factor 4		Factor 5		Factor 6	
Formal features		Lingo-cultural preferences		Translation strategies		Paralinguistic features		Second-order information		Technical preferences	
Item	Factor loading	Item	Factor loading	Item	Factor loading	Item	Factor loading	Item	Factor loading	Item	Factor loading
N03	.60	N13	.83	N09	.50	N24	.60	N17	.64	N10	.48
N21	.57	N12	.68	N06	.49	N25	.54	N16	.56	N08	.40

N22	.51	N14	.67	N20	.44	N23	.48	N26	.42	N29	.34
N02	.41			N15	.36	N30	.41			N11	.30
				N01	.32	N19	.33				
						N27	.31				
Cronbach's alpha: .58		Cronbach's alpha: .76		Cronbach's alpha: .51		Cronbach's alpha: .61		Cronbach's alpha: .50		Cronbach's alpha: .50	

As suggested in Table 1, while it is true that the acquired alpha value for most of the categories is less than the recommended optimal threshold of 0.7 or greater (Field, 2017), it has to be noted that the study was conducted across different geographical contexts with differences in ways beyond the solely heterogenous preferences that they have had. On that grounds, the participants' responses could diverge from each other in more than one way, hence the limited reliability values acquired. Indeed, as pointed out by Taber (2018), "the values for Cronbach's alpha apply to the particular sample responding on a particular occasion and should not be assumed to be a fixed feature of the scale or instrument." (p. 1283).

### *Categories*

To address Research Questions 2 and 3, this section presents the results concerning the identified categories for subtitling preferences along with descriptive statistics for each category.

### *Subtitling Preferences*

In line with the six factors extracted from the EFA and extracted typology, the results of the subtitling preferences are presented in six different categories: (1) formal features, (2) lingo-cultural preferences, (3) translation strategies, (4) paralinguistic preferences, (5) second-order information preferences, and (6) technical preferences. The numbering in the following tables is not based on the item numbers in Table 1 and is presented here in numerical order.

### *Formal Features*

Descriptive information regarding audience preferences for subtitles' formal features is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2 : Consumers' Preferences Regarding Subtitles' Formal Features**

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA
(1) Subtitles should be presented in shaded boxes.	35	102	71	69	20
(2) Subtitle lines should be placed nearest to the speaker on screen.	25	96	70	71	35
(3) Subtitles should explain pauses and meaningful silent segments.	19	71	70	102	35
(4) Subtitles should be presented in color	29	86	71	81	30

As shown in Table 2, although shaded boxes can be improved to improve the legibility of subtitles (Díaz-Cintas & Ramael, 2014), almost half of the respondents either strongly disagreed ( $n=35$ ) or disagreed

( $n=102$ ) with the use of this technique, and almost a quarter of the respondents were undecided about the use of shaded boxes ( $n=71$ ). Regarding the second item, most respondents either strongly disagreed ( $n=25$ ), disagreed ( $n=96$ ), or were undecided ( $n=70$ ) about placing the subtitles nearest to the speaker who was speaking.

Explaining meaningful pauses was favored by almost half of the respondents ( $n=137$ ). Although it has been suggested that subtitles should preferably be presented in white (Díaz-Cintas & Ramael, 2014), a noticeable segment of our respondents either strongly favored ( $n=30$ ) or favored ( $n=81$ ) the presentation of subtitles in color, whereas almost a quarter ( $n=71$ ) were undecided in this regard.

### *Lingo-cultural Preferences*

This set of preferences revolved around viewers' preferences regarding the translation of language- and culture-bound items existing in localized audiovisual products.

**Table 3 : Consumers' Lingo-cultural Preferences**

Item	SD	D	U	A	SD
(5) Subtitles should keep and translate all sexuality-related taboos of the source text.	56	108	71	51	11
(6) Subtitles should keep and translate all the swear words and blasphemous language of the source text.	56	109	64	53	15
(7) Subtitles should keep and translate all drinking and alcohol-related content.	74	119	62	35	7

The maintenance of sexuality-related expression is especially sensitive in some locales. As our respondents suggested (Table 3), most respondents were either against the maintenance of such expressions ( $n=164$ ) or were undecided in this regard ( $n=71$ ). Only 72 respondents in our sample positively viewed this. Of these, 48 were from China. As one of the Chinese respondents further commented, 'Because we do not have so many religious taboos in our country, we do not have special rules in subtitle translation. It is so normal for me.'

Responses to the translation of swear words and blasphemous language in the source text were almost identical, with over half of the respondents ( $n=165$ ) being against the reproduction of such expressions in the localized product. The same stance has been taken regarding the translation and maintenance of Bacchanalian and alcohol-related expressions, with almost two-thirds of the respondents either strongly disagreeing ( $n=74$ ) or disagreeing ( $n=119$ ) with the maintenance of such items.

### *Translation Strategies*

This set of items focused on translation strategies that could be employed for the translation of source language expressions, visual-verbal elements, humorism, and informal language.



**Table 4 : Viewers' Preferences of Translation Strategies**

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA
(8) Subtitles should translate the source language expressions idiomatically (e.g., proverbs to proverbs).	4	21	63	130	79
(9) Subtitles should translate verbal content seen on screen (e.g., street signs, text messages, newspaper headlines).	4	41	40	76	76
(10) Subtitles should explain jokes or expressions when unfamiliar to the target audience.	7	42	62	125	61
(11) Subtitles should translate informal and colloquial expressions in an informal language.	5	19	63	142	68
(12) Subtitles should keep all source culture specific referenced items.	4	36	54	127	76

Regarding translation strategies, most respondents ( $n=209$ ) favored the idiomatic rendering of source language items. Half of the respondents either agreed ( $n=76$ ) or strongly agreed ( $n=76$ ) with the translation of visual-verbal elements on the screen. In addition, the explanation of unfamiliar jokes or expressions with the target culture was favored by almost half of the respondents ( $n=186$ ). As one of the respondents argued: "[Subtitles should] make content clear and easy to understand." Similarly, "I really hope sometimes they [subtitlers] explain certain terms or jargons in the subtitles, since it can help me understand the dialogues better." Regarding the translation of culturally referenced items, the respondents leaned heavier toward a more foreignized localized version. Only 4 respondents strongly disagreed with maintaining the source culturally reference items, and 36 respondents disagreed with this approach.

#### *Paralinguistic Features*

As shown in Table 5, the identified off-screen voices were strongly favored ( $n=39$ ) and favored ( $n=131$ ) respondents, while a quarter of the respondents' stance was undecided on this item ( $n=74$ ). Similarly, less than half of the respondents ( $n=131$ ) favored the point that subtitles should note silences. Regarding the translation of discretion advice, in line with the extreme importance of this matter (Kim, 1994), the majority of the respondents either agreed ( $n=122$ ) or strongly agreed ( $n=53$ ) with the need for the translation of discretion advice at the beginning of films.

**Table 5 : Viewers' Paralinguistic Preferences**

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA
(13) Subtitles should clarify when the voice is off screen (e.g., narrator's voice).	7	46	74	131	39
(14) Subtitles should translate the discretion advice at the beginning of the film.	4	28	90	122	53
(15) Subtitles should note when no voice is heard on screen for a while.	20	82	64	100	31
(16) Subtitles should use different colors to identify different speakers.	25	85	89	75	23
(17) Subtitles should indicate background music using symbols or descriptions (e.g., epic music).	10	51	60	131	45
(18) Subtitles should add explanations for foreign concepts in brief parenthetical explanation.	8	26	65	150	48

Concerning character identification using colors, a quarter of the respondents ( $n=75$ ) agreed with this usage of colors, while slightly over a quarter of the respondents disagreed with this technique ( $n=85$ ). This polarized stance can be captured in one of the comments provided by one of the respondents: "Subtitles should use different colors to identify different speakers when the audience cannot tell the difference". To some extent, this comment represents the conditional stance toward this technique. Utilization of parenthetical explanations was favored by more than half of the viewers ( $n=198$ ). In terms of style, most respondents favored the retention of the original informal expressions and their rendering in an equally informal style.

Most respondents either agreed ( $n=131$ ) or strongly agreed ( $n=45$ ), signifying the existence of background music. While these and other similar accessibility items were mostly favored by the respondents, the comments made by some of them are worth highlighting. For instance, one of the respondents stated that "accessibility should not come to the detriment of the viewing experience."

### *Second-order Information*

This category can establish direct linkages with audience reception theories which deal with the interpretation, adaptation, transformation, and received by various audiences (Willis, 2021). In this set of items, second-order information is used to refer to information that is considered trivial in terms of the contribution they could make to the content presented on the screen. While these elements do not necessarily contribute to narrative advancement, they do, however, impact the cultural and emotional resonance of the content (Sasamoto, 2024). Thus, these items help shed light on how streamlined or creative the act of subtitling can get when ensuring how elements are received by the viewers (Romero-Fresco & Chaume, 2022). Table 6 provides the descriptive statistics demonstrated in the respondents' responses.

**Table 6 : Consumers' Preferences Regarding Second-order Information**

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA
(19) Subtitles should omit or reduce description of actions, people or objects that can be seen on the screen when not important.	16	52	77	123	29
(20) Subtitles should omit or reduce phatic expressions like greetings and goodbyes.	38	105	82	59	13
(21) Subtitles should summarize the redundant source content when possible.	3	41	85	122	46

As suggested in Table 6, over a quarter of the respondents were undecided about the omission of unimportant information ( $n=77$ ), while half of the respondents either agreed ( $n=123$ ) or strongly agreed ( $n=29$ ) that such omission is justifiable. As for the reduction of phatic expressions, a majority of the respondents either strongly disagreed ( $n=38$ ) or disagreed ( $n=105$ ) with the omission of such expressions. Slightly over a quarter of the respondents were undecided in this regard ( $n=82$ ), whereas almost a quarter of the respondents either agreed ( $n=59$ ) or strongly agreed ( $n=13$ ) with such omissions. Lastly, to condense the original message (a popular technique in subtitling to overcome the space and time restrictions inherent in subtitles), the majority were open to summarizing redundant information.

### Technical Preferences

The last set of items bore on viewers' technical preferences in terms of the number of lines, punctuation marks, and usage of labels in subtitles.

**Table 7 : Viewers' Technical Preferences**

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA
(22) Subtitles should be at most in two lines (no 3rd line).	5	21	50	127	94
(23) Subtitles should use punctuation marks (commas, exclamation, and question marks).	3	20	49	125	100
(24) Subtitles should refer use labels to indicate when different accents and dialects are spoken in the source text to avoid a standardized language for all.	10	32	85	124	46

A noticeably large number of viewers preferred subtitles to be presented in two lines ( $n=221$ ) (see Table 7). One of the respondents further commented that subtitles are "better in one line". The importance of correct punctuation was reflected in respondents' strong preference for punctuation marks ( $n=225$ ). Finally, most respondents preferred the use of labels to indicate different dialogues and accents in subtitles to avoid a standardized language for all linguistic varieties ( $n=170$ ).

### Cross-cultural differences

To answer the fourth Research Question, the results of the One-way ANOVA are presented in this section per category. The numbering in the following tables corresponds to the numbering of items in the previous section.

#### Formal Features

According to Table 8, the results of the One-way ANOVA test yielded significant results for presenting subtitles in shaded boxes,  $F(5,29)= 3.30$ ,  $p = .007 < .05$ ), explaining meaningful pauses,  $F(5,29)= 3.29$ ,  $p = .007 < .05$ ), and placing subtitles nearest to the speaker,  $F(5,29)= 3.99$ ,  $p = .002 < .05$ ).

**Table 8 : ANOVA Results for Formal Features**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Item 1	20.25	5	4.05	3.30	.007
Item 2	26.11	5	5.22	3.99	.002
Item 3	20.10	5	4.02	3.29	.007
Item 4	5.62	5	1.12	.82	.534

Tukey's HSD test for multiple comparisons revealed that the mean values for item 1 were significantly different between Iran and Hungary ( $p= .002$ ). As for Item 2, the differences in means were significant between China and Hungary ( $p= .001$ ), and Hungary and Iran ( $p= .028$ ). Item 3, the most significant difference in the mean values, was observed between Iran and Hungary ( $p=.012$ ).

### Lingo-cultural Preferences

As shown in Table 9, the results of the ANOVA test revealed differences across all three preference criteria among all countries: transferring sexuality-related items ( $F(5,29) = 3.20, p = .008 < .05$ ), keeping and translating swear words ( $F(5,29) = 5.45, p = .000 < .05$ ), and maintaining and translating drinking and alcohol-related items ( $F(5,29) = 11.71, p = .000 < .05$ ).

**Table 9 : ANOVA Results for Lingo-cultural Preferences**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Item 5	18.45	5	3.69	3.20	.008
Item 6	32.71	5	6.54	5.45	.000
Item 7	53.28	5	10.66	11.71	.000

Differences in the mean values for Item 5 were the most significant between China and Hungary ( $p = .019$ ) and Hungary and Malaysia ( $p = .019$ ). As for Item 6, significant differences existed between Iran and Hungary ( $p = .007$ ), China and Hungary ( $p = .001$ ), India and Hungary ( $p = .005$ ), and Malaysia and Hungary ( $p = .003$ ). Lastly, for preferential differences regarding Item 7, the most significant differences were reported between Hungary and India ( $p = .003$ ), Hungary and China ( $p = .001$ ), Hungary and Iran ( $p = .001$ ), Hungary and Afghanistan ( $p = .001$ ), and Hungary and Malaysia ( $p = .001$ ).

### Translation Strategies

According to Table 10, significant differences were observed in the idiomatic translation of the source language expressions ( $F(5,29) = 2.30, p = .045 < .05$ ), the translation of verbal content on the screen ( $F(5,29) = 3.87, p = .002 < .05$ ), and explaining jokes and unfamiliar language ( $F(5,29) = 3.12, p = .009 < .05$ ).

**Table 10 : ANOVA Results for Translation Strategies**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Item 8	9.77	5	1.95	2.30	.045
Item 9	19.02	5	3.80	3.87	.002
Item 10	16.11	5	3.22	3.12	.009
Item 11	2.85	5	.57	.69	.634
Item 12	1.95	5	.39	.38	.860

To unveil more detailed between-group differences, Tukey's HSD test revealed significant differences in the mean values for Item 8 between India and Hungary ( $p = .007$ ), Hungary and China ( $p = .047$ ), and Hungary and Afghanistan ( $p = .030$ ). Regarding Item 9, significant differences were observed between Hungary and China ( $p = .031$ ).

### Paralinguistic Features

As suggested in Table 11, the results of cross-cultural differences yielded significant results for four of the six paralinguistic preference items: noting when no voice was heard on the screen for a while ( $F(5,29)=10.48, p=.000 < .05$ )), using different colors for character identification ( $F(5,29)=2.50, p=.031 < .05$ )), using symbols and descriptions for background music ( $F(5,29)=2.65, p=.009 < .05$ )), and clarifying when the source of the voice was off-screen ( $F(5,29)=2.37, p=.040 < .05$ )).

**Table 11 : ANOVA Results for Paralinguistic Features**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Item 13	11.18	5	2.24	2.37	.040
Item 14	7.12	5	1.42	1.68	.139
Item 15	58.06	5	11.61	10.48	.000
Item 16	14.47	5	2.89	2.50	.031
Item 17	13.44	5	2.69	3.12	.009
Item 18	8.50	5	1.70	1.97	.083

Based on the post-test results, significant differences were observed in the mean values for Item 13 between Afghanistan and Hungary ( $p=.012$ ). The mean values for Item 15 were significantly different between Iran and Hungary ( $p=.001$ ), China and Hungary ( $p=.001$ ), Afghanistan and Hungary ( $p=.001$ ), and Malaysia and Hungary ( $p=.001$ ). For item 16, significant differences in mean values were observed between India and China ( $p=.015$ ). Finally, the mean values for preference for Item 17 were significantly different between Iran and Hungary ( $p=.034$ ).

### Second-order Information

As shown in Table 12, the ANOVA yielded significant between-group differences in audience preference for omitting or reducing phatic expressions ( $F(5,29)=4.51, p=.001 < .05$ )).

**Table 12 : ANOVA Results for Second-order Information**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Item 19	11.13	5	2.23	2.07	.069
Item 20	24.24	5	4.85	4.51	.001
Item 21	5.96	5	1.19	1.34	.248

Based on the results of Tukey's HSD test, differences in mean values were observed between India and China ( $p=.012$ ), India and Malaysia ( $p=.046$ ), and Hungary and China ( $p=.009$ ) in Item 20.

### Technical Preferences

According to Table 13, regarding the comparison of mean values across locales, the ANOVA yielded significant results across all three audience preference items for technical considerations: the presentation of subtitles in two lines ( $F(5,29) = 3.84, p = .002 < .05$ ), the observation of punctuation marks ( $F(5,29) = 4.66, p = .000 < .05$ ), and using labels to identify different accents and dialects ( $F(5,29) = 3.82, p = .002 < .05$ ).

**Table 13 : ANOVA Results for Technical Preferences**

	<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Item 22	16.86	5	3.37	3.84	.002
Item 23	18.97	5	3.79	4.66	.000
Item 24	17.84	5	3.57	3.82	.002

Regarding Item 22, the results of the post-hoc Tukey's HSD test revealed significant differences in mean values between Iran and Hungary ( $p = .001$ ). For item 23, a significant difference in the mean value was observed between China and Hungary ( $p = .001$ ). Additionally, concerning item 24, the mean values were significantly different between Iran and Hungary ( $p = .040$ ), India and Hungary ( $p = .035$ ), China and Hungary ( $p = .031$ ), Malaysia and Hungary ( $p = .025$ ), and Afghanistan and Hungary ( $p = .037$ ).

## Discussion

The goal of the present study was to shed light on the subtitling preferences of consumers of audiovisual products through a cross-cultural lens. Preferences revolved around formal features, lingo-cultural preferences, translation strategies, paralinguistic features, second-order information, and technical preferences. Our results suggest that, in terms of formal features, the use of shaded boxes should preferably be avoided. This could be best explained by the situational uses of dark or grey boxes, in that they should only be used when subtitles are to be projected against a very light background (Díaz Cintas & Ramael, 2021). Therefore, viewers might not be very accepting of gray boxes because, although translucent, they might interfere with the image and negatively affect the viewing experience. In other words, they could bolster Nornes' (1999) conception of subtitles as "abusive" apparatus.

Another decision that primarily revolves around improving subtitles' legibility is resorting to different colors for subtitle presentation, which, according to our findings, was not widely preferred by the viewers. In terms of the positioning of subtitles, the respondents were slightly more inclined toward not placing the subtitle segments near the respective speaker on the screen. Viewers' preferences, as revealed by our study, are strongly in line with the suggested subtitling best practices (e.g., Díaz Cintas & Ramael, 2021).

Regarding lingocultural preferences, our results indicated a strong preference for the maintenance and translation of sexuality-related taboos, swear words, and the Bacchanalian language. Swear words and sexually laden languages are socio-culturally sensitive languages that bear important moral/ethical implications for translators as intercultural mediators. These ethical/moral dilemmas give rise to varying forms of (self-)censorship throughout the translation act (Santaemilia, 2008). This 'cleaner' form of language is reflected mostly in professional AVT (Al-Yasin & Rabab'ah, 2019; Khakshour Forutan & Modarresi, 2018; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2014) and non-professional subtitling, to some extent (Chen, 2022), the majority of non-professional translation is characterized by a tendency toward a foreignized approach to translation

and retaining the taboo language employed in the source culture (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2014; Khoshsaligheh et al., 2018).

Such retention can best be explained by the idea that users of non-professional subtitling are particularly interested in the source culture (Orrego-Carmona & Lee, 2018). Along similar lines, despite the more or less stigmatic nature of foul language in certain locales, particularly in Islamic countries in which Islamic tenets prevail and there are certain levels of intolerance to foul and sex-oriented language (e.g., in our sample, Iran and Afghanistan), the prevalence of non-professional AV practices in these locales could account for the greater preference for retention of taboo language. For instance, the Iranian audience has been suggested to be more oriented toward the consumption of non-professionally translated AV content (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2019) hence, the greater the preference of the Iranian audience for a translation more closely following the source culture. This source-oriented perspective on users' parts could also account for the greater preference for idiomatic translation of source language expressions, as indicated by the present study.

The heavy reliance of AV products on the semiosis of various audiovisual (non-)verbal meaning-making channels in the construction of meaning has important implications for translation (Gambier, 2023). Accordingly, our respondents leaned more toward the translation of visual-verbal elements in subtitling, which could often go unnoticed during dubbing. Additionally, the translation and explanations of jokes and expressions rooted in the source culture, the equally informal styled translation of source language expressions, and the maintenance of the cultural references of the source sociocultural setting were heavily favored. This strong preference for a more explicit role of translators could further emphasize the role of translators as cultural mediators who are supposed to bridge the gap between the two lingo-cultural contexts in question (Bassnett, 2011).

When viewed in light of our findings, it could mean that the estrangement of target viewers with the cultural norms and references of the source culture would make the viewers reliant on either (a) translators' explanations of the source culture items or (b) a domesticated approach through which viewers could relate to the cultural references made in the localized AV product.

Situating the source of speech (whether on- or off-screen voice), the translation of discretion advice, indicating background music using symbols, and using parenthetical explanations were favored by respondents. Although primarily reflected in the codes of best practice in the canons on accessibility in subtitles, these practices were viewed favorably by the participants in this study. Accessibility practices could ensure that all audiences receive the products better, regardless of the limitations they might be suffering from, particularly in terms of comprehension, readability, and enjoyment (Neves, 2018). Similarly, noting the absence of speech and avoiding character identification using colors was viewed positively considering our findings. In terms of second-order information, omitting unimportant on-screen elements and truncating redundant source content were preferable. However, it was found that phatic expressions, such as greetings, should be maintained.

Our findings on punctuation marks provide interesting insights into users' conscious and unconscious tendencies during film-viewing experiences. It has been argued that punctuation marks increase the readability of subtitles (Pedersen, 2017). Punctuation marks can also serve as signals after which line breaks should occur (Netflix, 2022); however, empirical findings have suggested that omitting punctuation marks can lead to less fixation time on subtitles and thus lead to a better viewing experience (Cui et al., 2023).

The number of lines is closely related to subtitles' readability and comprehension. Based on our findings, viewers showed a strong preference for two-liner subtitles compared to three-liner subtitles. This preference can best be interpreted in light of the extensive yet contradictory empirical findings of previous research on the cognitive load induced on viewers' attentional and processing resources as a result of subtitle line numbers. Szarkowska and Gerber-Morón (2019) found evidence for easier cognitive processing of two-liners than three-liners. Additionally, the participants who participated in their study also showed a greater preference for two-linear subtitles. Conversely, Zahedi and Khoshsaligheh (2021) provided empirical comparative evidence for the greater cognitive demand exerted on viewers' cognitive resources as a result of being presented with one-liner subtitles as opposed to the smoother viewing experience provided by two-liner subtitles. Finally, the use of labels to indicate different accents and dialects was perceived as positive. Based on the results of the ANOVA analysis, it was revealed that the AVT preferences of Hungarian audiences are significantly different from those of other countries. These differences could best be put into perspective because Hungary was the only European country included in our sample. This could suggest a difference in AVT preferences between European and Asian audiences.

Overall, the present study could provide complementary user-oriented insights and perceptions regarding the existing codes of professional practice that are currently in place and are being followed by massive broadcasting companies, such as Netflix (2022) and BBC (2022). This can be of evergreater importance when putting the potential of subtitles in transforming such subtle yet crucial aspects as ideological footprints (Imani & Jalali, 2023). In this line, such consumer-oriented insights could prove useful in determining the subjective nature of critical issues such as quality in translation, in general, and quality in subtitling, in particular (Neves, 2018; Pedersen, 2017; Szarkowska et al., 2021). Furthermore, this study could provide invaluable insights into how audiovisual products are localized to certain locales to ensure optimal reception, especially in the context of accessibility research (Shokoohmand & Khoshsaligheh, 2024). The same considerations could prove of value when considering specific features of subtitles such as typographic salience in reverse subtitling (Abu-Rayyash et al., 2024).

## Conclusion

This study was concerned with providing insights into viewers' viewing preferences regarding the consumption of subtitled AV products. The findings could provide complementary user-oriented data with respect to users' perceptions of the existing subtitling guidelines, both in terms of the didactics and practice of audiovisual translation. The findings have implications for the practice of subtitling, particularly respecting the existing guidelines, on the one hand, and the training of competent audiovisual translators, on the other. Additionally, knowledge of cross-cultural preferences can assist content creators and distributors in tailoring their audiovisual products to suit specific markets. By adapting content to cater to the preferences of different regions, they can enhance the success of their releases and increase viewer engagement in these areas. Future research can delve deeper into each of the six AV preference areas introduced in this study and provide richer perspectives, both in the production and consumption cycles.



It is beyond the scope of this study to employ qualitative research methods to delve into the reasons for viewers' subtitle preferences. This approach involves collecting feedback and opinions from participants to gain deeper insights into their perceptions and to identify specific factors that influence their preferences. Overall, by understanding viewers' preferences for subtitling styles, formal features, and the handling of cultural references, this study helps enhance the overall viewer experience. Subtitles that align with the preferences of the target audience are more likely to be well received and contribute to a positive viewing experience.

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