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## Education through cinema in old age: A participatory action research

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### ABSTRACT

Critical educational gerontology aims to pave the way for individual and collective transformation, empowerment, and emancipation through a participatory approach that emphasizes the active involvement of older adults in learning processes. The use of cinema as an educational tool is functional in supporting lasting learning, and promoting emotional learning among learners. This study aimed to develop a course on aging and society that actively engaged students by integrating cinema into the educational process at Tazelenme University (TU), a Third Age University model in Turkey. A participatory action research was conducted to explore the students' experiences. A participatory education program was implemented with 20 students aged 60 and over from a TU in Turkey. The program consisted of six theoretical lectures and six film screenings. After each screening, group discussion sessions were held, followed by the administration of a structured questionnaire to the students. Some TU students served as assistant researchers and contributed to the organization of the activities. After the implementation of the planned program, two focus group interviews were conducted with the participants. Data from structured forms were analyzed through content analysis, while focus group data were examined using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the film screenings supported students' active participation in the learning process and contributed to the development of their critical thinking skills. In this respect, the study offers valuable insights into designing critical and participatory methods to enhance the learning experiences of older adults in TUs in Turkey.

### Introduction

As in many parts of the world, services and interventions targeting older adults are increasingly expanding in Turkey in parallel with the aging population. In order to ensure that older individuals are actively, healthily, and independently involved in social life and to promote their biological and psychosocial well-being, the development and implementation of various models and practices within the field of gerontology has become increasingly important.

Universities of the Third Age (U3As), implemented globally, promote the social inclusion, well-being, and active citizenship of older adults (Casanova et al., 2023). In the education of older adults, a critical and participatory approach complements traditional models by empowering older individuals and enabling their transformative participation in society. Cinema, through its visual and auditory effects, narrative content, and accompanying music, serves as a powerful educational tool

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by helping participants identify with characters and engage emotionally with the storyline. Beyond this dimension, cinema represents a holistic cultural and perceptual experience that can shape the way individuals see and interpret the world. It simultaneously activates cognitive and emotional processes, enabling not only knowledge acquisition but also meaning-making and critical reflection (Casetti, 2009).

Cinema-based approaches offer several benefits for older adults, including the maintenance of cognitive and emotional well-being (Van Gerven et al., 2003), the development of self-expression (Eckert & Martin, 2018), and the enhancement of social interaction (Quinton et al., 2023). Despite these benefits, the use of cinema in U3A education remains quite limited (de Sousa, 2016; Valentini, 2015). In Turkey as well, the U3A model- specifically the Tazelenme University (TU)- has followed a top-down approach to education, and there is a lack of initiatives that aim to foster participatory and critically engaged involvement of older individuals in learning processes and there has been no prior initiative or research that employs cinema as an educational tool for older learners.

In this context, the aim of the present study is to explore the experiences of older adults participating in a co-developed course that used cinema as a tool for critically examining socio-political structures related to aging. Guided by this aim, the study addresses the following research question: How do older adults experience a participatory, cinema-based educational course, and how does this experience shape their learning, critical reflection, and sense of emancipation?

## **Universities of the third age and the Tazelenme University**

The main goal of Universities of the Third Age (U3A) is to provide individuals in retirement with opportunities for acquiring knowledge, engaging in social interaction, and achieving cultural enrichment. The development of U3As has been shaped by two dominant models: the French and the British. The French model is characterized by a structure in which university faculty deliver lectures, curricula are created within academic institutions, and the content is based on pre-determined formats. By contrast, the British model is more participatory, flexible, and nonhierarchical. It is based on a 'peer teaching' system in which the curriculum is shaped collectively according to participants' interests and needs, and the learning process is voluntary (Casanova et al., 2023; Finsden & Formosa, 2012). Over time, these models have evolved and been applied differently in various countries.

In Turkey, the first systematic U3A initiative was launched in 2016 with the establishment of the 60 + Tazelenme University (TU) under the leadership of Prof. Dr. İsmail Tufan at Akdeniz University's Department of Gerontology. Since 2021, TU programs have expanded to various Turkish universities under the coordination of the Ministry of Family and Social Services. As of 2023, in response to growing interest from older learners, Akdeniz University has launched an internship program and a graduate-level educational program within the TU framework (Tufan, 2022). The Turkish model is influenced by the French model. TU programs are designed to follow the academic calendar and span four academic years. In addition to this model, there are also other U3A programs in Turkey offering shorter and structurally diverse educational experiences for older adults.

## **Critical geragogy and the participatory approach**

U3As contribute positively to the biopsychosocial well-being and lives of older adults in various ways. However, several scholars have criticized the tendency to make overarching assumptions that any form of later-life education will universally benefit all older individuals in the same way (Creech & Hallam, 2015; Formosa, 2010; Formosa, 2002). Simultaneously, debates have emerged around the necessity of including older adults as active agents in their own learning process, as this is seen as a prerequisite for their emancipation. Critical geragogy is an educational approach that views the education of older adults not as a passive learning process, but as an active one that promotes their participation in social transformation by raising awareness of their social

and political roles and enhancing their critical thinking skills (Glendenning, 1992). The learning approaches of Jürgen Habermas and Paulo Freire converge around the themes of critical thinking, dialogue, and emancipation. Both thinkers view learning not merely as the transmission of knowledge, but as a process through which individuals become aware of power relations embedded within social structures and, through this awareness, foster personal and collective transformation. According to Habermas, social theory should be liberated from positivist approaches and grounded in emancipatory knowledge (Habermas, 1968). From this perspective, learning occurs through communicative action, where individuals negotiate meaning, become aware of their social actions, and thus create the foundation for transformation (Habermas, 1984). Paulo Freire's concept of 'critical pedagogy' aligns closely with Habermas's notion of emancipatory knowledge. Freire conceptualizes 'learning through dialogue' as a process of self-recognition and liberation for the oppressed. He redefines learning as a participatory, interactive, and transformative act (Freire, 1972). Drawing from this theoretical foundation, critical geragogy views the learning of older adults not simply as the acquisition of skills but as a process of social participation, self-awareness, and empowerment against ageism and age-based discrimination (Formosa, 2012). The participatory approach embedded within critical geragogy supports the active involvement of older individuals in the educational process and encourages their contribution to knowledge production (Formosa, 2002).

The participatory approach is a method that ensures the active involvement of individuals and stakeholders in decision-making processes and encourages them to contribute as equal partners throughout the process (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). In later-life education, participatory approaches provide powerful tools to strengthen individuals, increase social participation, and make educational processes more effective (Leach & Jankowski, 2024). Today's technological infrastructure, online platforms, and interactive learning tools enable wider participation and offer new opportunities for achieving the goals of critical geragogy.

### **The use of cinema as an educational tool in later-life learning**

With the advancement of digital technologies, cinema has increasingly become a widespread alternative educational tool beyond traditional movie theaters. Due to its dramatic and narrative structure and its simultaneous use of visual and auditory elements, cinema supports learners in developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills, creating imaginative solutions, and concretizing abstract knowledge, thereby improving learning retention (de Sousa, 2016). Because it fosters empathy with characters, cinema also promotes emotional learning. Film screenings can enhance cognitive well-being by evoking memories and also encourage social interaction among individuals (Shaw & Hallam, 2020).

There are studies in the literature that have used film screenings in the training of professionals working in aging services to improve their attitudes toward older adults (Ayranci et al., 2022; McCleary, 2014). Other research has highlighted participatory video and life filming methods, which allow older adults to express their lived experiences through visual storytelling (Gustafsson et al., 2018; von Faber et al., 2020). In addition to these methods, some studies incorporate visual elements such as photographs and films into aging and participatory research (Quinton et al., 2023).

In this study, based on the principles of critical geragogy, the course structure (including lectures, film screenings, and group discussions) aimed to: (1) support TU students in examining their social-political and economic situations in society; (2) provide a critical perspective on social processes and foster new ways of thinking; (3) facilitate transformation by encouraging older adults to develop ideas and actions in response to social issues; and (4) empower older adults by enabling them to actively participate in the learning process through film screenings and group discussions, thereby moving beyond traditional teacher-learner roles and encouraging creative engagement.

## Method

This study adopted a qualitative participatory action research design. Participatory action research is a flexible methodology that equalizes the roles of learner and educator and combines action with reflection to enable emancipatory practices. The three stages of action research include: planning the action; implementing the action; and engaging in reflection, in which both the educator and the learners participate equally in the research and reveal the transformative impact of the intervention (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014). The study was conducted within the cultural and educational context of Türkiye, where learning relationships are traditionally hierarchical and educator-centered. By implementing participatory action research in this setting, the study challenged conventional power relations in education and to position facilitators and participants as co-learners engaged in reciprocal dialogue as it highlights how participants gradually moved from being passive recipients of knowledge to active contributors within a shared and reflective learning process. Accordingly, the stages of the study are outlined below.

### *Stage 1: program planning and participant characteristics*

In previous years, TU students had actively participated in film screenings and discussions organized by the authors on special occasions, which inspired the idea of using cinema as a learning tool in older adult education and implementing a participatory learning model through cinema. In parallel, the traditional nature of TU education and the lack of a course addressing social issues revealed the need to propose a new course model for TU settings in Turkey. In this context, a course titled ‘Understanding Society through Cinema’ was designed by the authors . . . and . . . The course focused on historical, political, and economic transformations in Turkey, with key themes such as the war period and the founding of the Republic, the transition from traditional society to modernity and democracy, military coups, rural-to-urban migration and individualization, consumer society and cultural transformation, and identities and aging in the neoliberal era. The course structure included theoretical lectures, film screenings, and group discussion sessions related to the corresponding themes. A two-week break was scheduled after each lecture, film screening, and discussion session to allow participants to read about the next topic and to prevent fatigue from frequent screenings. The entire course consisted of six theoretical lectures and six film screenings followed by discussion sessions and was implemented over six months, from November 2024 to May 2025.

At the TU, advanced-level courses were offered for graduates wishing to continue their education beyond the undergraduate program. Participants registered for a course designed as a participatory and interactive learning experience, as stated in the protocol shared prior to registration. Participation was entirely optional, and students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any academic or personal consequences.

In the first session, it was explained that the course would follow a participatory approach with a critical perspective on aging and society, where all participants held equal roles alongside instructors. The course was introduced as part of a participatory action research project aiming to develop a new educational model for Tazelenme Universities. The research purpose and process were explained clearly, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Throughout the process, the instructors fostered an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, encouraging open dialogue and shared decision-making in line with the principles of participatory action research. Two students volunteered to act as assistant researchers, facilitating communication between instructors and students, collecting feedback, and assisting with data collection and documentation.

### *Participant characteristics*

Twenty U3A students aged 60 and above, who had completed undergraduate TU education and were continuing with the two-year postgraduate program at a . . . . . university in Turkey, were included in the study by enrolling in the course (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of participants.

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Education level	Profession	Year in TU
P1	76	Male	High School	Electrical and Electronics Technician	6
P2	80	Female	University	Teacher	6
P3	59	Female	High School	Retired	7
P4	67	Female	University	Accounting	8
P5	76	Female	University	Teacher	6
P6	77	Male	University	Mechanical Engineer	6
P7	75	Female	High School	Nurse	8
P8	74	Female	University	Teacher	6
P9	76	Male	High School	Retired	6
P10	70	Female	University	Teacher	8
P11	87	Male	University	Military	6
P12	69	Female	University	Retired	6
P13	72	Female	University	Teacher	6
P14	71	Male	University	Banker	9
P15	66	Female	Secondary School	Retired	6
P16	71	Female	High School	Chemist	6
P17	72	Female	University	Teacher	7
P18	72	Male	High School	Electrician	7
P19	73	Female	University	Teacher	7
P20	84	Female	University	Teacher	7

### ***Stage 2: program implementation (action) and data collection***

Each theoretical session lasted at least two hours and included interactive discussions, followed by a film screening and group discussion the next week. These sessions were conducted by the authors, with one specializing in the sociology of cinema and the other in gerontology. The remaining authors were responsible for managing the research process and collecting data. Two U3A students who were enrolled in the course volunteered to serve as assistant researchers.

### ***Administration and analysis of structured questionnaires***

After each film screening and subsequent discussion session, participants were given structured questionnaires to express their opinions on the course format, content, and the selected film and completed questionnaires were collected by the assistant researchers and digitized. The demographic characteristics of all participants who attended the course and completed the structured questionnaires are presented in [Table 1](#).

### ***Feedback on course structure and content***

Participants' feedback on the course structure and content was analyzed using the content analysis method. Content analysis involves focusing on a specific topic and context, identifying and condensing meaning units within the data, and subsequently coding these units to form subthemes and themes (Prasad, 2008). Two of the authors, . . . and . . . , independently identified and coded meaning units, then compared and discussed their results to reach a consensus on the final themes and subthemes. The themes, subthemes, and codes derived from the participants' content analysis regarding the films are presented in [Table 3](#).

### ***Focus group interviews and analysis***

At the end of the course, two focus group interviews were conducted. The students who had participated most regularly in the classes, film screenings, and follow-up discussions were invited to take part. Two consecutive focus groups were held according to their availability. Each session lasted more than two hours. The interviews were facilitated by one of the instructors, . . . , and accompanied by assistant researchers . . . , . . . , and . . . . The characteristics of the participants involved in the focus group interviews are presented in [Table 2](#). Participants were coded based on the group they attended and their assigned number.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of participants who took part in the focus group interview.

Participant code	Age	Gender	Education level	Profession
Focus group 1				
FG1-P1	70	Female	University	Teacher
FG1-P2	77	Male	University	Mechanical Engineer
FG1-P3	71	Female	High School	Chemist
FG1-P4	76	Male	High School	Retired
FG1-P5	87	Male	University	Military
FG1-P6	59	Female	High School	Retired
FG1-P7	72	Male	High School	Electrician
Focus Group 2				
FG2-P1	75	Female	High School	Nurse
FG2-P2	73	Female	University	Teacher
FG2-P3	80	Female	University	Teacher
FG2-P4	67	Female	University	Accounting
FG2-P5	72	Female	University	Teacher
FG2-P6	72	Female	University	Teacher

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the focus group data, emphasizing the contextual meanings and patterns of usage within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed with the equal involvement of all authors responsible for the analysis. To achieve familiarity with the data, the researchers repeatedly read the transcripts and actively engaged in the analytical process. Following familiarization, each researcher independently generated initial codes, which were subsequently compared and refined through collaborative discussions among the authors. The coding and data management processes were conducted using ATLAS.ti 24 software. Codes with similar meanings were grouped under broader themes, and the relationships and patterns among these themes were jointly examined. After ensuring the coherence and consistency of the themes with the dataset, representative participant quotations were selected to illustrate and confirm their validity. The final report was prepared in accordance with the COREQ guidelines (Tong et al., 2007).

The themes were also visualized through a figure (Figure 1).

**Table 3.** Topics related to screened films, explanations, and example quotes.

Film title	Meaning unit (quote)	Condensed meaning	Code	Subtheme	Main theme
Yandım Ali	"Today, I realized that society is in a similar situation" (K1)	Connection between past and present	Historical connection	Learning from the past	Patriotism
Yüz Bin Kibrit	"Democracy is always necessary for everyone" (K2)	Importance of democracy	Learning from the past	Connecting with current events	Necessity of Democracy and Education
Yoksul	"We saw the implementation of global capitalism in Turkey" (K3)	Effects of capitalism	Critique of capitalism	Destructive impact of neoliberal capitalism	Social Critique
Güneşli Batakılık	"We saw the importance of resisting to claim rights" (K15)	Importance of struggle for rights	Claiming rights	Awareness of rights advocacy	Active Citizenship, Organized Society
Abuzer Kadayıf	"The film highlighted the corruption and misuse of moral and religious values" (K12)	Corruption of values	Moral corruption	Rise in ignorance and erosion of societal values	Cultural and Ideological Transformation
Deli Deli Olma	"We saw the difficulties faced by people of different ethnicities and beliefs" (K7)	Challenges of diversity	Cultural empathy	Challenges arising from cultural differences	Respect for Differences

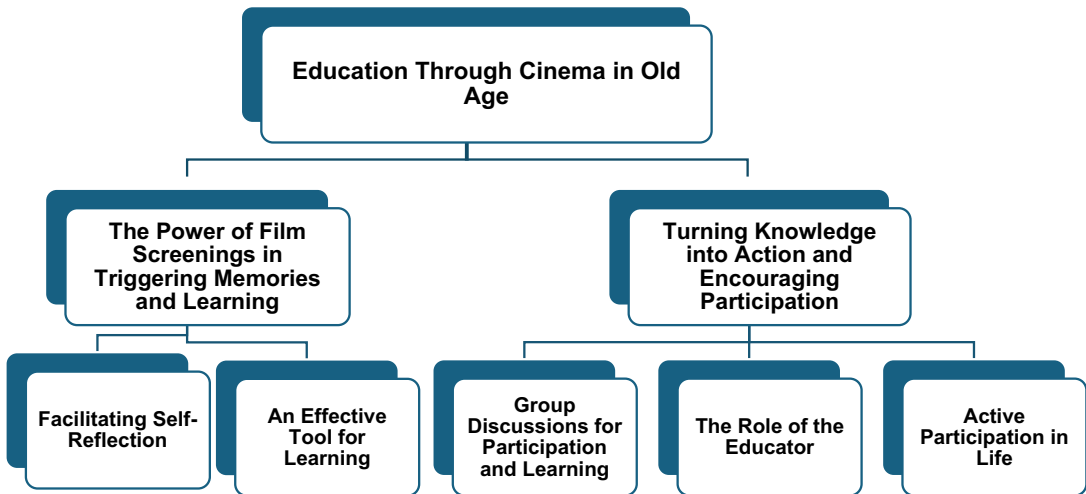


Figure 1. Main themes and Subthemes The power of film screenings in triggering memories and learning.

### Stage 3: reflection

Each phase of the course, including the film screenings and discussion sessions, was shaped by feedback from both the participants and the co-researchers. Based on the data collected through the structured questionnaires administered after the film screenings, participant feedback on physical conditions -such as the coldness of the room and seating arrangements- was evaluated and addressed. In response to feedback regarding the length of the films, it was decided to introduce intermissions during screenings. Additionally, based on participants' suggestions that some films should be shown not only to a single class but to all TU students, two film screenings were opened to a wider audience.

The findings of the focus group interviews led to the inclusion of an additional topic and film screening on 'society and religion' based on the participants' experiences. Overall, the feedback and focus group discussions highlighted the need for a critical educational model and demonstrated the importance of this implemented program in empowering older students.

### Ethical considerations

The study was conducted with the approval of the Ethics Committee of . . . University and was carried out in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. During the research process, informed and voluntary consent was obtained from all participants. Personal identities of the participants were kept confidential, and the collected data were used solely for academic purposes.

### Findings

The findings of this study were derived from the data collected through structured questionnaires administered to participants after each film screening and subsequent discussion session, as well as from focus group interviews conducted at the end of the academic term.

## Findings from the focus group interviews

Based on the thematic analysis of the focus group interviews conducted to explore older adults' experiences with the program, two main themes and five subthemes emerged (Figure 1).

The findings indicate that film screenings served as a powerful tool for triggering both memories and learning among participants. Through the films, participants recalled traces of their past and reinterpreted these experiences by establishing connections with their earlier lives.

### Facilitating self-reflection

Participants expressed that the films provided an opportunity to revisit various stages of life, from childhood to adolescence and middle adulthood. They often associated the stories shown on screen with narratives heard from their families or with personal experiences. During the focus group discussions, participants reflected on how the films influenced their retrospective thinking. Some of their statements include:

While watching the films, we felt like we were inside them because we experienced those strikes, those coups. We witnessed the September 12 military coup, the protests, the resistance - we were victims of rights violations. (FG1-P7)

We were truly moved by seeing events that we had either experienced ourselves or heard about from our elders being reflected in the films. (FG2-P6)

Throughout the educational process, films enabled participants to reconnect emotionally and cognitively with their past, fostering a deep personal engagement with the historical and social changes portrayed. The focus group discussions revealed that this connection prompted emotional engagement with the past and encouraged profound internal reflection. Each screening often revealed moments of self-questioning and awareness. Participants did not simply agree with each other; they compared their own experiences, challenged personal assumptions, and found new ways of understanding themselves. Learning here appears as a mutual exchange that nurtures both self-knowledge and collective understanding.

Speaking for myself, it had a direct emotional impact on us because we are from that generation. We lived through those times, and perhaps even less than what we experienced was shown in the films. It truly touched us. (FG2-P3)

It was incredible – I saw it so clearly. Even though I lived through that period, I saw how much had changed from then to now. (FG2-P2)

These participant statements suggest that cinema, due to its visual and auditory nature, is an effective tool for establishing a connection between personal and societal history:

Teacher, all the films were great. First of all, because they were visual, they captured the public's attention more effectively and provided a better viewing experience. I liked all of them because each one addressed the country's problems from different time periods. (FG1-P4)

### An effective tool for learning

While cinema allowed participants to emotionally connect with past periods, it also accompanied their learning process through both visual and auditory means. Emphasizing the power of cinema in education, participants described it not only as a medium for transmitting information, but also as an effective educational tool that confronts individuals with the past and encourages the formation of emotional connections. They noted that portraying social historical issues through cinema made the past more visible and that using well-known actors to reenact these events had a stronger impact on the audience.

What I want to say is that portraying many of the events experienced by our country and society through cinema, exemplifying them, and having famous actors express them as role models shed light on all of us. Showing these events in film was very appealing to me and aligned closely with our course content – it reinforced it. (FG1-P6)

Honestly, with cinema, people can learn certain things by seeing and hearing them. Learning by seeing and hearing allows us to develop ideas about various topics. For people who are more isolated or have limited access to education, cinema can be a way to teach them certain things. (FG1-P3)

Based on these statements, it can be concluded that theoretical knowledge was reinforced through cinema as a tool for understanding and interpreting society. Moreover, cinema can be seen as a powerful medium that, through its visual and auditory elements, stimulates participants' emotions and supports the internalization of knowledge.

## Turning knowledge into action and encouraging participation

Two key elements emerged during this knowledge-building phase: (1) Group discussions that supported participation and learning and (2) The facilitator's guiding and enabling role. Participants expressed that the group setting, in which they could freely share their thoughts and learn from others' experiences, deepened their learning and helped them view social issues from a more critical perspective. The educator's guidance not only helped shape the content but also created a learning environment that encouraged participation. Furthermore, participants reported feeling motivated to share what they had learned with others, leading to opportunities for active engagement in life. Thus, 'active participation in life' emerged as a third subtheme.

### Group discussions for participation and learning

Group discussions stood out as a significant tool that both reinforced learning and enabled active engagement from participants. Discussions held during the lessons and after film screenings provided participants with opportunities to evaluate the content and share their personal experiences. In this interactive setting, participants collectively recalled past events, forming a shared memory, while also reconstructing what they had learned. This process enabled participants not only to be recipients of knowledge but also to become co-creators in the learning journey. Some participants described this process with the following statements:

I think the interactive Q&A session we have with our teacher after watching the film keeps the discussion dynamic. Everything—the roles played by the actors in the film and the events happening today—overlaps. I think the Q&A format is really great. We got to hear many different ideas and perspectives. I was very satisfied. (FG1-P6)

Having these kinds of group discussions from time to time, gathering opinions from participants-if they're debatable-is important. It doesn't always have to end on a positive note; what matters is the discussion. If you include us in this way, I believe it would be more productive both in terms of getting to know us and increasing our engagement in the course. (FG2-P2)

### The role of the educator

Another key factor that enabled participants to become co-creators in this educational process was the role of the educator. The educator acted as a facilitator, helping to establish group dynamics both during the course sessions and the post-film discussions. Additionally, participants expressed appreciation for the way the educator approached them with consideration for their age group, addressing their needs, requests, and expectations appropriately. Experiencing an environment where equality and mutual respect were upheld made participants feel valued and included in the process.

It was nice how the instructor answered our questions with a smile, without hurting or upsetting anyone in this age group, and how well they used body language. (FG1-P1)

This course was very different. The instructor really drew us into the lesson—we were living it, the film. After watching it, along with the instructor's explanations, the Q&A sessions made it feel like we were reliving those events. And having classmates who actually witnessed that era due to their age made it all the more special for us. I found this course more exciting, more creative, and more stimulating than the others. (FG1-P6)

The educator's inclusive and egalitarian approach contributed significantly to the formation of a healthy group dynamic and the strengthening of the discussion environment. This enabled participants to engage more actively in both individual and collective learning processes.

### Active participation in life

Participants described the screenings as occasions where their experiences were heard and valued. This collective atmosphere turned learning into a social act – one that affirms interdependence and mutual recognition. In this sense, film functioned as a bridge between personal growth and social connection, reinforcing the idea that learning in later life is both individual and communal.

Participants reported that they not only actively engaged in the classroom sessions but also carried what they learned into their daily lives, expanding their social interactions through knowledge sharing. Throughout the educational process, they actively participated in shaping the course content and contributed to the co-creation process through peer sharing. Over time, this engagement extended into their personal lives as they began to apply what they had learned. The films they watched, the awareness they gained, and the knowledge they acquired during this educational module motivated them to share these insights with the people around them.

It has had a very positive impact on our lives. Everywhere I go, in every group I'm in, I try to share what I've learned. I want it to spread like ripples in water. What our teacher shared with us was so valuable. We're very happy, and if possible, we'd like to continue. (FG2-P4)

We always take something in, but during this process I thought, maybe I can do something too. That's why I asked for the film list—we can talk about these films with those around us, recommend them to friends and family. Like, "Look, there's this film that covers this period, it's all available online, you should watch it." We can spread the knowledge. (FG1-P2)

In this way, this film-based learning program unfolds as a reflective and dialogical process. It enables older learners to question personal and societal dynamics, and to connect individual experience with collective understanding. The educational value lies not in the transmission of knowledge but in the transformation of awareness – a shift that makes learning both critical and life-affirming.

### Findings related to film screenings

Participants' feedback regarding the course delivery primarily emphasized physical and technical conditions such as the cold temperature of the screening room, the need for intermissions due to the length of the films, and the unsuitability of the seating arrangement.

In general, participants stated that they liked the films shown. The most appreciated film was 'Yandım Ali,' a heroic film depicting the founding of the Republic. All participants who watched it reported that they liked the film. Other films that were highly appreciated included 'Yüz Bin Kibrit' (which portrays a military coup), 'Yoksul' (depicting social transformation in the neoliberal era), 'Deli Deli Olma' (highlighting issues like identity and aging during globalization), and 'Abuzer Kadayıf' (focused on societal change and popular culture in the neoliberal period). Only one participant reported not liking each of these films.

The film that received the most negative feedback was 'Güneşli Bataklık,' a dramatic film about political and social unrest in the 1970s, which four participants reported disliking. The topics that

emerged from participants' responses about the films, along with explanations and example quotes, are presented in [Table 3](#):

Analyzing participants' responses to each film shows that the emerging themes mainly reflect a critical perspective on society – such as patriotism, the necessity of democracy and education, active citizenship and an organized society, social critique, cultural and ideological transformation, and respect for differences. These recurring themes suggest that the films encouraged participants to reflect on the society they live in and are citizens of. In this context, it is believed that involving participants actively in the educational process through cinema also contributed to their social awareness and critical thinking skills.

## Discussion

This participatory action research, conducted at a TU where participants were actively involved in the learning process and cinema was used as an educational tool, yielded several findings related to critical education for older adults. The main findings, derived from the themes of the focus group interviews, highlight the role of cinema in participatory education and the emancipatory power of the course. While watching the films related to the course – which addressed periods of social transformation – participants recalled the social conditions they experienced in their earlier years, their memories were reawakened, and they tended to creatively synthesize their lived experiences with what they learned.

During the film screenings, participants identified with the characters and events portrayed, experiencing a process of emotional learning. Through the films, they revisited and reevaluated past events in relation to their own lives, and shared these reflections during the post-film discussions. In their participatory action research, Eckert and Martin (2018) showed that film education goes beyond analysis, enabling participants to explore life experiences, emotions, and relationships through activities like film viewing, collage making, and life writing. The findings of this study align with those of our research. In this context, the emotional and memory-triggering dimensions of film viewing become particularly evident.

On the other hand, cinema's ability to make abstract concepts more tangible lies in its power to present social events and phenomena through a structured storyline and familiar actors. The findings of this study show that students understood and retained the course content more effectively when it was supported by films. In line with our findings, Moskovich and Sharf (2012), in their action research, used films as an educational tool in a university-level sociology course. They found that abstract concepts and theories related to social sciences became more understandable and concrete in students' minds through post-film discussions and evaluations, ultimately becoming more lasting.

Another important finding of this study is the emergence of social transformative capacity and empowerment. Empowerment can be understood as an increase in self-confidence and self-awareness. It is also a collective process in which individuals critically comprehend their position within society and gain more control over their lives (Glendenning, 2018). Although participants stated that the topics covered in the course were not entirely new to them, they expressed that addressing these issues through a critical lens enhanced their confidence and self-awareness. Furthermore, it was observed that participants engaged in meaningful discussions and developed new perspectives on social issues through critical reflection.

The most significant aspect of this transformative capacity was that some participants showed a tendency to share the knowledge and experiences they had gained during the course with others in their social circles. Similarly, the study by Gustafsson et al. (2018) demonstrated that film-based learning approaches empower older adults by helping them develop skills in various film-related areas, participate in democratic processes, and engage in civic dialogs -findings that align closely with those of our research.

Another noteworthy finding of the study concerns the role of the educator in the course process. In all focus group discussions, the qualities of the educator were mentioned frequently. Cusack (2018) emphasizes the pivotal role of the educator in critical geragogy. Hachem et al. (2025), while also

recognizing the critical role of the educator in critical education for older adults, point out that when the educator assumes a dominant or transformational role, it can lead to a hierarchical relationship and a dependency of the learner on the teacher. To overcome this, they argue for the establishment of an egalitarian pedagogical structure in which older adults can recognize their own potential during the learning process, and where the goal of the educator is not to transform the learner but to support their emancipation.

Similarly, this study underscores that the participatory and critical capacity of the course largely depended on the characteristics of the lecturer, and that not just any lecturer would be able to facilitate the course in the same way. The findings revealed that the lecturer conducted the course in a democratic manner, used humor effectively, had strong command of the subject matter, and encouraged students to engage in equal and reflective discussions.

When looking at participants' preferences for the films, it was found that most participants found the films relevant and enjoyable. The most appreciated films were those that featured fluent storytelling, music that enhanced the dramatic effect, were not overly dramatic, and included strong elements of humor. The least favored film was perceived as overly dramatic, pessimistic, and didactic compared to the others. What stood out most was that the first film shown – a heroic story about the founding of the Republic – received the highest level of appreciation. This may be due to the film's theme of national heroism and the viewers' strong identification with Republican values. The findings of a study conducted with older adults in Germany also show that older adults generally prefer films that depict events from the period they lived through or historical events (Hoffmann & Schwender, 2007). In this context, if cinema is to be used as an educational tool in the future, it would be functional to consider these preferences – namely, selecting films that are emotionally engaging, fluent, supported by dramatic music, rich in humor, and not overly pessimistic or didactic.

In this study, participants played an active role in shaping the course content through group discussions held during lessons and after film screenings. Including older adults in the educational process enables them to benefit more fully from learning experiences. Similarly, Blair and Minkler (2009) emphasize that a participatory approach in older adult education – by integrating older individuals' knowledge, experiences, and life stories into the curriculum – enhances their engagement and learning outcomes.

Beyond its practical outcomes, this study also provides a theoretical contribution to the field of critical older adult education. It demonstrates that film can operate as both a pedagogical and epistemological medium: a means of collective meaning-making that bridges individual experiences of aging with broader sociocultural narratives. By engaging older learners as co-producers of knowledge through cinematic reflection, this case expands the scope of critical geragogy to include esthetic and emancipatory learning dimensions. In doing so, it highlights how creative media such as film can stimulate critical awareness, emotional engagement, and intersubjective dialogue, which are essential for transformative learning in later life. Overall, the study findings indicate that film screenings prompted viewers to reflect on the topics addressed in line with the course objectives and inspired them to generate new ideas. Following the screenings and discussions, participants emphasized themes such as education, social values, social critique, social awareness, respect for differences, and active citizenship. This reflects the approach of critical gerontology embraced by critical older adult education, which addresses social and political-economic processes (Formosa, 2002; Glendenning, 2018).

## Conclusion

This study, conducted within the context of a Third Age University (TU) in Turkey, aimed to implement older adult education from a critical perspective by using cinema as an educational tool. The most striking result of the study is that the film screenings supported a participatory approach and encouraged students' active engagement in discussions. In this sense, the study introduced a critical and participatory educational perspective into the TU model and proposed a non-traditional approach.

Using cinema as an educational tool helped maintain students' interest in the course and contributed to their consistent participation. Although there is no established standard for using cinema in Third Age education, the results of this study demonstrate that cinema is an effective tool in participatory older adult education. Film enables learners to connect biographical memories with collective histories, reinforcing the idea that later-life learning is not limited to knowledge transmission but entails critical reflection, identity negotiation, and empowerment. In this way, the study situates cinema-based education within the framework of critical geragogy, suggesting that creative and reflective pedagogies can enhance the social inclusion and agency of older adults in educational settings. However, cinema proved to be particularly effective in this case because the course focused on social problems. Given that many older adult education programs concentrate on topics such as health, social participation, and active aging, it is challenging to develop a universal or standardized procedure for using cinema across various themes.

The participatory and dialogical nature of this course was strongly influenced by the characteristics of the TU context and the profile of its participants. Most learners had prior higher education experience and were familiar with reflective and discussion-based learning, which facilitated their active involvement as contributors. While this context enabled a highly participatory process, it may also limit the direct transferability of the model to groups with different educational or socio-cultural backgrounds. Future adaptations would therefore need to consider local learning cultures, institutional structures, and participants' readiness for collaborative learning. Future adaptations would therefore need to consider local learning cultures, institutional structures, and participants' readiness for collaborative learning.

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to older education as a whole. Additionally, because cinema is a fictional medium and open to interpretation, the role of the lecturer becomes even more critical. On the other hand, it may not be feasible to expect similar levels of participation and engagement in a course grounded in critical gerontology from older adults of different socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the logic of the theoretical and practical application developed through this case study may provide a framework for educational programs to be developed for critical older adult education.

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