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**YouTube-Based Programming and the Saudi Youth:  
Exploring the Economic, Political and Cultural Context of  
YouTube in Saudi Arabia**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy

**University of Glasgow**

**School of Culture and Creative Arts**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis addresses YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia. It focuses on the bottom-up, professionally generated content (PGC) produced by the Saudi youth exclusively for YouTube between 2010 and 2016. It explores the economic, political and cultural context of YouTube-based programming and is aimed at understanding how the programme makers operate within such a restrictive political and media environment, and the interaction between the content creators, the audiences and the Saudi government.

The thesis examines the perspective of the content creators by utilizing ten semi-structured online interviews, and the view of the Saudi audience by employing seven semi-structured offline focus group interviews with twenty-nine participants in Glasgow, Scotland. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Arabic, then translated into English.

This analysis leads to the emergence of four primary themes: limited political and cultural empowerment for young Saudis offline; strong financial empowerment for the content creators; the government as the most powerful actor in the Saudi media scene; and the relevance of the content to the Saudi audience as the main driver for the popularity of YouTube-based programming.

The analysis provides insights and implications for policy and practices, arguing that the concept and practices of cultural policy are humble in Saudi Arabia and that there is an urgent need for a political decision to establish a nationwide cultural policy to promote and govern the arts and culture. This policy needs to incorporate both online and offline creativity, including YouTube-based programming.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to those Syrian children who lost their lives to chemical weapons and barrel bombs for no reason other than that their families opposed the barbaric regime in Syria.

For the record, those Syrian children lost their lives because of paralyzed Arab political regimes, the double standards of the international community and the terrorism of Assad and his allies – the Russian and the Iranian governments.

Omar Daoudi

March 2018

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To my parents, Dr. Safwan Daoudi and Mrs Nahed Zahraa:

I owe it all to you and many thanks.

You wanted me to be the pride of the family and the nation and I hope, by this point, I have fulfilled your first wish and I will complete my journey for the next one.

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Omar Daoudi

March 2018

## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

This thesis represents the original work of Omar Daoudi unless otherwise stated in the text. The research on which it was based was carried out at the University of Glasgow under the academic supervision of Professor Raymond Boyle and Dr. Melanie Selfe during the period January 2014 to September 2017.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| Abbreviation | Meaning   |
|--------------|---|
| AHDR         | Arab Human Development Reports                    |
| ASBU         | Arab States Broadcasting Union                    |
| ASEAN        | Association of Southeast Asian Nations            |
| BBC          | British Broadcasting Corporation                  |
| CMC          | Computer Mediated Communication                   |
| CNN          | Cable News Network                                |
| GaStat       | General Authority for Statistics in Saudi Arabia  |
| GB           | Great Britain                                     |
| GCC          | Gulf Cooperation Council                          |
| GDP          | Gross Domestic Product                            |
| HRW          | Human Rights Watch                                |
| ICT          | Information and Communication Technology          |
| ISP          | Internet Service Provider                         |
| KACST        | King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology    |
| KSA          | Kingdom of Saudi Arabia                           |
| LBC          | Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation                 |
| MBC          | Middle East Broadcasting Centre                   |
| MBN          | Prince Muhammad bin Nayef                         |
| MBS          | Prince Mohammad Bin Salman                        |
| MOI          | Ministry Of Interior                              |
| OPEC         | Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries |
| OSN          | Orbit Showtime Network                            |
| PGC          | Professionally Generated Content                  |
| SBC          | Saudi Broadcasting Corporation                    |
| SNS          | Social Networking Sites                           |
| SRMG         | Saudi Research and Marketing Group                |
| UAE          | United Arab Emirates                              |
| UGC          | User Generated Content                            |

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| UN     | United Nations   |
| UNDP   | United Nations Development Programme                                 |
| UNESCO | The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| USA    | United States of America   |

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## **Introduction**

This thesis explores the economic, political and cultural contexts of YouTube-based programmes in Saudi Arabia by employing grounded theory methodology, which allows the emergence of new meanings in order to better understand the process and configurations of YouTube in the context of the Saudi experience. A number of studies that have investigated Arab social media, as outlined in Chapter One, tend to be administrative in nature, focusing on the wider uses of social media platforms, embracing the positivist approach to examine complex media issues, or deliberately eschewing difficult questions because of the political sensitivity of the topic and suppression by the Arab governments.

This thesis aims to respond to this gap by contextualizing the research problem within the economic, political and cultural settings of one of possibly the most conservative countries in the world. It poses critical questions by examining YouTube-based programmes in the Saudi context of power, and the religious and cultural structures of domination and exploitation which have shaped certain aspects of the study's objects. It moves away from asking typical questions that tend to investigate the use of social media by individuals, commercial companies or government agencies, and instead explores how the use of YouTube by one of the marginalized segments of the society, the youth, has influenced online media activity, and what dynamics have surrounded this process in relation to both culture and power.

It examines the complex relationship between the state and religious institutions, and also the content creators who utilize the platform to manufacture new critical online culture. These content creators are pushing the boundaries further and creating new online interpretations of offline public events that have been subjected to state monopoly for decades. The thesis also addresses the commercial opportunities created

by the content creators, the relationship between capital and the tone of the programmes, and their effect on the local media market. In addition, it goes further by critically examining the audience's views: how they access, perceive and react to the content.

This thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the object of analysis by examining both spectrums - the content creators and the audiences - and taking into account the specificity of Saudi Arabia. The study of YouTube in Saudi Arabia can be seen as incorporating both global and local forces into one paradigm; it is an exploration of the effect of a global media platform (YouTube) in a localized and specific setting (Saudi Arabia). This thesis' aim is to generate rich explanations and analytical concepts for the growing body of literature, and more importantly to contribute to our understanding of these practices in non-Western contexts.

This thesis is motivated by three areas of interest:

- First, the heavy coverage of the Arabic and Western press and television regarding YouTube in Saudi Arabia;
- Second, personal curiosity to know how young people operate in such a restrictive media environment, where the political culture does not tolerate a wide range of voices;
- Finally, the serious lack of empirical studies that have, to the best of my knowledge, investigated this research problem (explored in Chapter One). This dearth of existing research was a significant factor in motivating me to conduct this study.

In seeking to address the first of these three motivations, a number of articles exploring the phenomenon of YouTube in Saudi Arabia have appeared in the public domain (for instance, Ayed, 2013; Britton, 2017; BBC Trending, 2016; Kerr, 2014; and Smith, 2013). These articles have provided international readers with snapshot ideas and

thoughts about YouTube-based programmes, employing a journalistic approach to deliver new stories from the conservative country of Saudi Arabia. The tone and the conceptions of some of these articles have contained elements of exaggeration, using terms such as ‘explosion’ and ‘revolution’ to describe the growth and development of Saudi content.

Others (i.e. Black, 2013 and Owens, 2012) tend to be more reasonable, investigating the subject by interviewing content creators and media and political commentators to highlight the impact of social media upon the society, but these articles have not provided sufficiently deep investigations of the issues of interest. Some have reported on the role of Saudi women in YouTube (Marshall, 2016 and Weiss, 2016), but the angle of the coverage has tended to focus on some isolated aspects of women, with little attention paid to the inter-relation of cultural and political dynamics in the Saudi context. This media visibility has created a public interest in the social phenomenon among Saudi and non-Saudi observers, but the limitations of the scale and scope of the press’ investigations have triggered academic interest to investigate this research problem in greater depth.

Secondly, personal interest was another reason to pursue the academic analysis within this thesis. The nature and the development of the content on YouTube was eye-opening because it embarked on new political, cultural and societal parameters for Saudi public discourse. The platforms of YouTube and Twitter are very prominent in Saudi Arabia, but as Boyd and Ellison (2008) maintain, distinct cultures have emerged around different social network sites despite the presence of some common features across the platforms. The novelty and widespread growth of the YouTube narrative in the Saudi context have drawn attention towards it, making it a significant object for analysis.

The production of local content by and for young people in order to address social and political topics beyond the state-monopolized information system is a new and emerging trend that deserves to be observed and analysed. Understanding this change and its implications is important to better comprehend the contemporary role of a video sharing site in the wider Saudi context.

Finally, the field of Arab media in general and Saudi Arabia in particular suffer from a lack of empirical studies because of various political and cultural factors which are discussed in Chapter One. The general empirical deficiencies of research on YouTube in Saudi Arabia serve as a catalyst for seeking to contribute to original research to this area. Although rapid changes in technology and its applications may outstrip the relevance of the analysis in the thesis, a critical and detailed exploration can be useful to establish correlations between emerging platforms, traditional media outlets and their interactions with society in the Saudi context.

## **Defining YouTube-based Programming**

Digital technologies (Srinivasan, 2017) are not neutral, but rather socially constructed by users who are guided by their own sets of beliefs, values and presumptions. More importantly, Srinivasan points out that online platforms have been built by global American and European corporations which are accountable to the commercial priorities of shareholders who are driven by their own agendas, and therefore they should not be treated as entirely neutral public spaces.

Meikle (2002 and 2016) asserts that Web 2.0 - or Version 2.0 as he described it in 2002 - is shaped by the values of corporate interests which has resulted in closed architecture, centralized control and the commodification of popular and political culture. This

behaviour has created a closed proprietary media space for users of social media. For instance, the models of corporate social media platforms such as Google (Fuchs, 2017) are based on economic surveillance, user data commodification and the unpaid labour of internet users, all of which exemplify exploitation and ideology that have shaped the structures and practices of social media platforms.

However, the structure of YouTube can, arguably, allow a degree of freedom for individuals and communities which have led to unexpected use for the public. For instance, Strangelove (2011) argues that YouTube is a virtual social space that offers domains of self-expression, community and public confession in order to represent the cultural politics of the present time.

In addition, the development of the platform has continued to be seen as a mechanism for cultural participation, identity construction and empowerment for various segments of society, including youth and women. For example, Lange (2007) highlights that YouTube is used by youth and young adults to project identity and to affiliate with certain social groups, and that content can be shared or withheld according to individual needs and social relationships.

Broadly speaking, the advance in technology has enabled ordinary people to become more visible, and consequently it has created a new class of celebrities and influencers that did not previously exist. Turner (2010) conceptualizes this phenomenon as a ‘demotic turn’; this describes the construction of celebrity and its ability to open up a new field of relations between media and culture.

Launched in 2005 and acquired by Google, Inc. in 2006 (Snickars and Vonderau, 2009), YouTube enables individuals to discover, watch and share user generated content (UGC)

(YouTube About, 2017). It has gradually launched local versions in more than eighty-eight countries to expand its geographical reach, and it has attracted more than one billion global users, half of whom stream the content through mobile devices (YouTube Press, 2017). Google's ownership has shifted the platform and its commercial applications by monetizing and controlling the content in order to secure a return on its investment (Wasko and Erickson, 2009).

Although YouTube has influenced the distribution system of traditional media, it should not be perceived as a revolutionary medium, but rather as a natural evolution within the field of media because it imitates the rules of traditional media. For example, it has been influenced by traditional media in terms of broadcasting, genre of content and issues of copyright and advertising (Kim, 2012). This, Kim argues, has institutionalized the platform, shifting it from heavily focusing on UGC to professionally generated content (PGC) and embarking on the emergence of the new YouTube industry with new policy implications.

This institutionalization presents methodological and epistemological complexity for researchers because YouTube now enables a top-down approach for traditional media outlets and a bottom-up mechanism for individual amateurs and professionals. Therefore, every scholarly investigation into YouTube has to make a choice between these interpretations and frame the object of the study in a specific context and time with specific methodology because different settings can lead to different interpretations and understandings of a social problem (Burgess and Green, 2009).

This thesis, therefore, focuses on the bottom-up approach of YouTube-based programming created exclusively by PGC producers for YouTube in Saudi Arabia. It explores the economic, political and cultural context of the emergence of locally made programmes for YouTube by Saudi youth between 2010 and 2016. More importantly,

the thesis excludes from its investigation the content produced by UGC producers, such as video blogs and family diary content.

The terms ‘youth’ or ‘young people’ carry various meanings in different cultures and geographical locations. Statistically, the United Nation defines a ‘youth’ as a person between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four years. However, UNESCO has adopted a more flexible definition when implementing regional programmes in line with the definitions of different member states. For instance, it defines ‘youth’ in Africa as every person between fifteen and thirty years (UNESCO, 2017). The thesis moves away from the epistemological tension of the concept, and it adopts a flexible and broad definition of ‘youth’ for the purpose of this research.

This thesis defines YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia as the process of constructing and organizing new critical interpretations of Saudi public discourse, reflecting the thoughts of ordinary Saudi youth in the form of localized video products. These programmes have a number of features. First, they cover issues that tend to be ignored or minimized by the Saudi media mainstream. Second, they adopt new genres and formats that have not been used on Saudi television such as borrowing the format of the American programme, *The Daily Show*, and applying it to YouTube. Third, they employ simple communication methods to convey messages indirectly, particularly through humour. Finally, they employ sophisticated aesthetic video skills to produce high-end cultural products.

This has resulted in the creation of a YouTube business market in which inexperienced young media personnel have proven themselves capable of attracting the attention of the Saudi audience with an unprecedented number of views. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has become the world's top per capita user of YouTube, according to Google (Ayed, 2013).

The growth of YouTube, along with exclusive productions for the platform, has brought about new business opportunities and shaped its relationship with the traditional media and advertisement industry in Saudi Arabia. The first opportunities were for new talents who could occupy basic but essential roles such as camera operators, editors, directors, presenters and actors; this demand for professionals quickly extended to roles in sales, marketing and managing. As a result, some small firms have transferred to YouTube production houses and this has increased competitiveness as these new production houses have emerged.

For instance, one of the leading production houses for YouTube in Saudi Arabia is UTURN Entertainment, with more than two billion lifetime views (UTURN, 2016). Telfaz11 is another production house with more than one billion views (Telfaz11, n.d). Myrkott is a leading animation studio, with more than 360 million views; it produces a number of animation programmes including the popular *Masaamir* (Nails) (Myrkott, 2017).

There are other production houses and programmes with millions of views and strong social media influence, but the argument to be advanced here is that these YouTube-based programmes have created a new stream of capital in the market and new business and job opportunities for Saudi youth. In addition, some production houses have advanced their capability by merchandising the characters in their animations, an example being Myrkott's *Masaamir* (Nails). These programmes are produced by Saudi youth for Saudi youth in a country whose cultural system is relatively closed; for instance, a cinema ban remained in effect at the time this research was conducted.

Finally, as the thesis will show, YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia has undergone several phases and its tone has coincided with the political climate in the

region. For example, the content was highly critical during the Arab revolutions of 2011-2012, but the tone became softer following the counter revolutions of 2013-2014; as the region was swept with the old political regimes, content concentrated more on entertainment and soft news.

## **The Research Questions**

Some of the research questions that guided this thesis were initially constructed following the identification of the gap in the literature. However, the fieldwork allowed the emergence of new questions and it also reshaped the old constructed queries. The thesis has three research questions that focus on the perspective of the content creators and one query to address the audience.

In order to investigate the category of content creators, the following questions have been formulated:

***RQ1*** What role does YouTube-based programming play in the cultural and political context of Saudi Arabia?

***RQ2*** What is the business model of YouTube-based programming in the Saudi media context?

***RQ3*** What is the relationship between YouTube-based programming and the government of Saudi Arabia?

In addition, one question was advanced to explore the category of the audience:

***RQ4*** Why have YouTube-based programmes become so popular among young audiences in Saudi Arabia?

## **The Significance of the Study**

The significance of this thesis stems from its ability to contribute to three dimensions of various media theories that are concerned with the global, regional and national debates about media and its applications in different settings.

The nature of the research, which incorporates both YouTube as a global platform and its local Saudi employment, can be used as an analytical category to broaden media theories by offering new accounts of the implications of the platform outside the American context, the USA being the home of the platform. This analysis also acts as a contribution to the concept of de-Westernizing media studies (Curran and Park, 2000) by drawing upon the specific media experience of Saudi Arabia instead of generalizing from the experience of the Anglo-American orbit. It contributes to our understanding of the effects of global platforms like YouTube in specific localized settings to indicate the correlations between global media and local dynamics, which vary from one country to another.

Another area that the thesis contributes to is the developing Arab media field. This is a discipline that suffers from a wide range of difficulties such as a reliance on Western media theories which do not fit the Arab context, a lack of empirical research, and the absence of a strong research tradition in the region (Ayish, 1998; Hafez, 2008; and Zayani, 2012). The detailed analysis of this thesis, which generates an explanation for the changing situation and analytical concepts, aims to add empirical values to the Arab media field through the experience of Saudi Arabia.

Employing a grounded theory approach enables the thesis to produce new explanations that contribute to the body of knowledge that is grounded in the historical and socio-

political experience of Saudi Arabia. The Arab philosophical independence (Nassar, 1988) is a strategy to innovate new philosophies and knowledge that emerge from and fit into the context of the Arab specificity in order to break from the Western philosophical and theoretical superiority and to establish and enhance new Arab development in different fields. This thesis has built upon the Western methodology of grounded theory because its framework helps to yield new, original, emerging, natural output as opposed to the superficial analysis that has resulted from applying Western media theories to the Arab media field.

The third area that can benefit from this contribution is the field of media research on Saudi Arabia. The significance of this contribution stems from being the first critical, detailed and empirical investigation - to the best of my knowledge - to investigate YouTube-based programming in the country. It reflects upon the socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics of Saudi society, the struggles and the aspirations of the Saudi youth, and the subtle changes to the political mode in the country towards officials.

This thesis contributes to this category by contextualizing the research problem in its natural setting. In so doing, it moves away from, for instance, the lens of security obsession that is used to perceive Saudi Arabia and therefore shape the outcomes of such research. In addition, it yields a better understanding of a specific use of a specific platform in Saudi Arabia, avoiding the generalized and generalizing analysis of social media as the all-in-one object of the analysis.

This thesis argues that various Saudi and Western policy makers could be interested in the findings of the research. As for Saudi policy makers, the drop in the price of petroleum has created new economic circumstances (for instance, the cut in subsidies for welfare in the country) and therefore it may be a new opportunity to re-organize the

political and cultural dynamics in the light of new economic and technological forces that affect the country.

Another example is the poor structure of the cultural industry in Saudi Arabia and whether, with a better policy framework, the state can capitalize on the professional media productions of young people along with other cultural activities to establish a new entertainment industry for its population. Such a move could be developed gradually to create a Saudi cultural industry that can feed into the cultural and economic activities of Saudi Arabia.

With regard to Western policy makers, the current significant position of Saudi Arabia in the global energy sector has granted the state an influential place in global economic activities. More importantly, the recent emergence of Saudi Arabia as a regional power in the Middle East, its involvement in Yemen against Iranian-backed militia, the crisis in Syria and the regional tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran and, more recently, with Qatar are all other factors that have brought Saudi Arabia to the regional and global forefront.

The thesis will provide detailed insights into the intra-dynamics of the country, especially between young people and the state. It showcases the online and offline change which has occurred in Saudi Arabia through YouTube-based programming and how such internal dynamics might influence the foreign policy and the face of Saudi Arabia in the coming decades.

## **The Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters.

**Chapter one** is concerned with reviewing and critiquing the existing research in the field to identify the main trends, concepts, approaches and methodologies in order to stimulate the construction of the thesis. It reviews the historical development of the field, starting from the broader context of Arab television before moving on to the introduction of the internet and social media platforms. It adopts this mechanism to present the prominent role of the state and the political system in shaping media behaviour in the region. The chapter identifies the Western theoretical influence over the Arab field, the technological determinist approach to the study of social media platforms in the context of the Arab uprisings, and the lack of critical studies that are specifically aimed at YouTube-based programmes in Saudi Arabia.

**Chapter Two** examines the qualitative approach of the thesis before moving on to explain the methodological considerations demanded by this study, describing the use of semi-structured online interviews with content creators and face to face focus group interviews with the diasporic audience in Glasgow. After that, the transcribing and the translation process are illustrated, and then the data management and the analysis of the findings are explained.

**Chapter Three** critically analyses the relationship between the absence of authorized offline public cultural and political places and the flourishing of YouTube programmes, especially between 2010 and 2012. The formation of these programmes has been driven by the desire to discuss public issues from the youth perspective. Issues of representation, motivation and empowerment have been conceptualized to reflect on the findings. In addition, the gender struggle emerged as a prominent theme due to the huge

cultural pressures faced by female Saudi presenters as a result of their public appearance on YouTube.

**Chapter Four** discusses the business model of YouTube-based programming, and how it has created new business opportunities for Saudi content creators. It explains the different stages of the business models both prior to and after the intervention of YouTube. Chapter Four also examines the role of YouTube based-programmes in affecting the behaviour of advertising throughout the different stages, and the dynamic relationship between YouTube-based programmes and advertising.

**Chapter Five** explores the regulatory context of YouTube-based programmes to see whether the programmes operate within a constructive regulatory framework (or not) and the attitude of the content creators to this. After that, it moves on to investigate the reactions of the Saudi government to the content and what strategies have been employed to deal with the programmes as the content creators perceive them.

**Chapter Six** shifts the focus to twenty-nine participants who took part in seven semi-structured focus group interviews to seek to understand why YouTube-based programmes gained popularity and how the Saudi audience perceived and interpreted those programmes.

**Chapter Seven** concludes the thesis by synthesising and highlighting the empirical findings in relation to the research questions before moving on to discuss the implications of the findings for practice and policy. After that, the limitations of the research are discussed and potential ideas for further research are suggested.

# **Chapter One: Literature Review**

## **Introduction**

This thesis examines the economic, political and cultural context of YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia. In response to the serious lack of academic research regarding YouTube in Saudi Arabia specifically and Arab social media studies in general, and to avoid investigating the research problem in isolation, the literature review will carefully and critically examine established areas of academic debates in order to provide the readers with a well-rounded background. The literature discussed in this chapter has been drawn from a wide range of fields within the literature on Arab and global media studies to help contextualize, synthesize and inform the later analysis.

The chapter consists of five main sections. First, it begins by providing an overview of the challenges associated with Arab media research as a whole, highlighting the political, cultural and social factors that hinder progress in this area. In doing so, it aims to set the stage to showcase the conceptual and theoretical struggles in the domain. In the second section, the chapter moves on to explore the academic development of the field, mapping out key academic contributions and investigating the factors that have helped establish and expand the terrain of Arab media studies. It attempts to extract major themes and concepts to guide the process of the research and to pave the path to the analysis. Third, the discussion builds upon the major theme that emerges from the second section, critiquing the controversial relationship between media institutions and states to understand the complexity of this theme. Next, the chapter analyses the academic discussions that have evolved around the business model of YouTube to understand the context so it can build upon these concepts when exploring the business model's application and use in the Saudi context of YouTube. Finally, it sheds light

upon audience discussions, contextualizing Arab audience studies within the wider borders of audience scholarship to synthesise it with the research question that focuses on Saudi young audiences.

## **The Challenges of Arab Media Research**

The Arab media industry has recently grown significantly, resulting in a stronger demand for audio-visual content compared to other developing regions (Amin, 2008), but as Sakr (2007) argues, this growth has been largely subject to the political changes in the region. The industry's growth has attracted academic attention but the field, in general, has not been highly responsive or comprehensive enough to reach deep understanding of this dynamic industry. For example, a vast amount of Arab media and cultural studies have been dedicated to Egypt due to its dominant production role until quite late in the twentieth century (Armbrust, 2012). This unfair distribution of studies, which has focused mainly on Egypt and also on Al Jazeera due to their prominent role in the contemporary Arab media and cultural context, has created narrow and limited scales and scopes for the evolving field.

This growth has coupled with methodological complexity to investigate the field because it moved from only being associated with news to being integrated with wider aspects of everyday practices. Armbrust (2012) maintains that Arab media studies enjoy lively engagement with popular culture, religion, digital activism and political economy, which introduce the field to non-conventional categories of investigation. Consequently, this has led to some serious methodological challenges and empirical weaknesses, giving rise to a culture of essays that scarcely met the requirements of peer-reviewed or refereed academic journals. Ayish (1998) agrees that research has been mainly descriptive and administrative in nature, while the theoretical research that has dominated the field of communication was inspired mainly by external sponsorship.

This has resulted in the fragmentation of the subject of the analysis, and the lack of adequate theoretical frameworks with which to examine the emerging field was amongst the reasons hindering the development of the domain (Zayani, 2012). Zayani continues by arguing that the richly complex region of the Middle East requires that the cultural, anthropological and socio-political disciplines be weaved together to conduct theoretically informed analysis of various research problems on Arab media. This can offer informative and theoretical research which contributes to the discourse and generates solid research outputs.

Another reason for the theoretical deficit in Arab media studies is the reliance on the Western media theory when investigating research problems in the Arabic context. For instance, a number of studies have sought to test Western communication theories and hypotheses in the Arab setting (Ayish, 1998), and these have yielded insufficient and superficial research outputs.

Zayani (2012) also draws attention to the absence of strong research traditions in the region as one of the factors responsible for the underdevelopment of the domain. In addition, the absence of networking mechanisms among Arab academics who operate in isolation has contributed to the struggle of the discourse (Ayish, 2008). The academic discourse has not kept pace with the rapidly evolving field because of the lack of professional Arab researchers who can theoretically contribute to this academically under-represented field.

Also, the highly sensitive attitude of authoritarian regimes towards independent researchers and their interpretations in the Arabic context are problematic, as such research can be perceived as an attempt to destabilize the political and social status quo. Consequently, and as Fandy (2007) maintains, participants fear taking part in research, especially if it connects to politics and public activities. Fandy goes on to explain that it is extremely difficult to write or speak freely about particular governments or societies

because the price paid by those who violate the political restrictions can range from imprisonment to kidnapping or disappearance or, in many instances, death.

This culture of fear can arguably lead to financial struggles for independent research institutions and researchers because of the upper hand enjoyed by states in the region. For instance, Boyd (1982) reveals that a lack of funding and the misunderstanding of interpretations of research results affected the seriousness of the research output in Arab countries. The lack of funds shaped the reward system within Arab academic institutions, which in turn weakened the quality of scientific research.

This section has briefly summarized some significant challenges that hinder the development of the Arab media field. Key concepts and themes have emerged to characterize the novelty of the field, such as the lack of theoretically informed analysis and the struggle of the academic system, which includes the proficiency of research outputs. The reliance on Western theories in an Arabic context and, more importantly, the authoritarian nature of governments are all massive factors that have contributed to the condition of Arab media research. This reflects the need to construct theoretical and conceptual frameworks that respond to the political and cultural specificity of the region in order to build a coherent empirical analysis in line with the distinct patterns of the Arab social context.

These factors could have implications upon the construction of the literature review of this thesis in terms of its scale and its scope. For instance, it minimizes the possibility of employing Arab media studies literature that is written in Arabic. Rather, I am going to rely heavily upon media studies written in English to build an informative context for this thesis. This can lead to certain types of bias in constructing the critiques in this chapter.

In the next section, it seeks to historically critique and review the evolution of the field by examining the concepts, theories and phenomena that emerge in the literature in order to place the thesis in its context and to identify its future direction.

## **The Development of Arab Media Research**

The development of the Arab media field and its political and cultural context has been subject to a number of studies and debates by Western scholars. For example, typologies and classifications of Arab media systems have stemmed from and been influenced by early Western scholarship efforts, such as that of Sibert et al (1956), which was an early attempt to conceptualize and framework the media models. Arab media discourse benefited from critical studies that examined Sibert et al's work as it led to new research directions for de-Westernizing media studies. See, for instance, Nerone (1995); Graber (1997); Bennett (2000); Curran and Park (2000); Hallin and Mancini (2004); Yin (2008); Oates (2009); and Hallin and Mancini (2012).

One of the leading efforts to shed light upon Arab press media studies was presented by Rugh (1979). According to Nasser (1980), Rugh's book was the first serious attempt to analyse the complexity of media government relations and their effects on press freedom in the Arab World. The book filled a huge gap in the study of Arab media and has provided a helpful insight to mass communication academics and students in the West. In another publication, Rugh (2004) asserts that the basic assumption of his research was that news media institutions do not exist independently of their environments, but rather take the form and colouration of the social and political structures within which they operate. It seems that the four theories of the press – the authoritarian, the libertarian, the social responsibility and the totalitarian – shaped the philosophy of Rugh in introducing Arab media systems. Nevertheless, he clarifies that “the Arab media do not fit neatly and completely into any of these categories, but there

are elements of all four present in the Arab world” (Rugh, 2004, p. 23). He observes that “none of the existing analytical theories helps much in going beneath the surface of the Arab media systems, and in order to explain their real functioning, we must devise new theories designed to fit the cases at hand” (ibid).

Rugh suggests four new classifications that cover the variety of Arab media systems. The first is the mobilization press, which includes the Arab republics which have undergone the most political changes in recent years, such as Syria, Libya, Sudan and Iraq until 2003. The second is the loyalist system, which describes the countries which experienced linear development along traditional authoritarian lines and where private ownership is allowed; for example Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Palestine, Bahrain and Oman. The third is the diverse system that allows countries a clear degree of diversity and freedom of expression, with limited influence of governments over media outlets. The best example of this system would be Lebanon. Additionally, Kuwait, Morocco and Yemen would fit into this category even they are less independent compared to Lebanon. Finally, Rugh (2004) suggests the transitional system in which self-censorship exists, but restrictions of press freedom are widely and openly discussed. Another feature of this system is that governments attempt to influence media by using legal means such as the court. Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Tunisia and Iraq after 2003 are all examples of this system.

In contrast however, Mellor (2005) challenges Rugh's classifications and points out some shortcomings; for instance, the typology does not account for the recent situation in the Arab news media which has developed rapidly since the 1990s. Mellor further notes that the classifications are rather vaguely defined and do not draw a clear line between mobilization press and loyalist press. Also, it seems that Rugh neglects the role of journalists and journalistic culture, which might differ from one country to another. Finally, Rugh based his theory on state ownership, but recently private

ownership has been allowed in several Arab countries; therefore, it could be argued that all these roles are taken up by different media outlets in the same country.

Another criticism has been discussed relating to Rugh's typology by Abderrahmane (1986, quoted in Mellor 2005, p. 54), who provides four main criticisms. Firstly, the typology stems from Western theories of the press and lacks critical evaluation of their applicability to the Arab media. Secondly, the typology suffers from simplification and generalization. Thirdly, the typology does not reflect the cultural and social contexts surrounding the Arab press. Finally, Rugh's typology does not take into account the content of the press, focusing only on one variable: the relationship between the press and government. He was also accused of not adhering to a clearly defined methodology and of ignoring the Palestinian press.

A study by Ayish (2011) uses different typology to survey the development of television broadcasting in the Arab world since the mid-1950s, paying close attention to the effect of Arab broadcasting on politics, culture and democratization in the region since the mid-1990s. His typology of Arab television broadcasting evolution illustrates the formation phase (1954-1976), the national expansion phase (1976-1990) and the globalization phase. He concludes that communication can play a role in changing society, but it cannot lead to change as such without real life political transition.

Additionally, Rinnawi (2006) highlights in his research that TV broadcasting in the Arab World can be traced to the creation of the Arab nation state. The service was limited to the borders of each Arab state and sometimes to limited parts of neighbouring countries. The general goal of the states was to use TV services as a political tool to maintain the unity of the nation under the authority of the state by dominating the national media narrative in their countries.

The political motivation was a prominent reason for developing media infrastructure and narratives to respond to internal and external challenges against Arab regimes. For instance, Boyd (1982) mentions various reasons for operating a TV service in Saudi Arabia, but the goals were clear and defined (see also Boyd, 2001). For instance, Boyd has pointed out that in late 1963, the Saudi government announced several reasons for building a national television system, including providing the country with modern technology and educational awareness, unifying the nation, and countering the Egyptian radio station that was attacking the House of Saud, the royal family of Saudi Arabia.

The external threat against the Saudi ruling family contributed to the development of Saudi media. For instance, Egyptian radio's attack against the Saudi government played a central role in progressing the media and its narrative in Saudi Arabia. In his comparative analysis research, Kraidy (2012) gives more details about how Saudi-Egyptian tension played a key role in the flourishing of terrestrial television channels in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government had "stepped into the transnational realm as a reaction to external threats". During the 1960s, the Egyptian revolution "subjected the House of Saud to a relentless onslaught of propaganda that abated only after [Egyptian president] Abdel Nasser's defeat in the 1967 war" (Kraidy, 2012. p:189). For example, the Egyptian radio station - Voice of the Arabs - described the Saudi King Faisal as the enemy of God; therefore, as Kraidy explains, the Saudi Government was motivated to develop a media strategy to retaliate. King Faisal's strategy was to establish a media focused on a global Islamic audience, in line with the King's Islamic Solidarity Policy initiated in 1966 (Rugh, 1980 quoted in Kraidy, 2012) in response to the Arab nationalism movement in Egypt.

Another work by Kraidy (2013) has signalled an interesting analysis regarding the Saudi satellite evolution and how the Saudi government developed a Pan-Arab media regime in order to "enable Saudi Arabia to project power and influence beyond the kingdom's borders" (p:28). As a result, the royal family and associated businessmen

launched the first Pan-Arab satellite TV Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), based in London in 1991. Saudi moguls, such as Prince al-Waleed bin Talal, launched a network of satellite TV channels called Rotana, as well as acquiring and investing in different Arab media ventures; for instance, a stake in LBC, a Lebanese satellite channel. Therefore, “these developments compelled Saudi authorities to expand their regional media capabilities” (Kraidy, 2013.p: 32) because their main political role was the continuity of the rule of Al-Saud, the royal family in Saudi Arabia.

The study also highlights the television policy reform which resulted in the expansion of satellite channels targeting Saudi viewers in order to deter Saudi people from other non-Saudi channels such as Al Jazeera TV, which is a Pan-Arab news channel that is funded by Qatar, the regional media rival of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, it highlights social changes associated with Saudi women with scarf who became news anchors despite huge pressure from Saudi conservatives. One critique could be that the study has a lack of measurements regarding the modernization of Saudi satellite channels’ strategy in hoping to encounter other political agenda channels such as Al Jazeera. Although the study cites a survey-quantitative method to prove the success of this strategy, a qualitative approach would have provided more in-depth clarification, especially after the Arab Spring of 2011, during which Al Jazeera was one of the main outlets to cover the uprisings in the Middle East.

As for the internet, the political and cultural constraints of traditional media have moved to online media so Arab states can remain the most powerful players in the public domain. Mellor et al (2011) tackle the evolution of the Arab media and relevant recent trends and highlight reasons for the slow introduction of the internet to the Arab public. For example, the high cost of providing the service was discussed by the various governments in order to limit the internet access for its citizens.

Nevertheless, Abdulla (2007) affirms that during the late 1990s and beyond, the Arab governments started to invest in building strong and effective telecommunications systems and infrastructure for the public as the states realized the economic potential involved in this development. For instance, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is unique in that it developed its digital infrastructure and related services rapidly to become a pioneering country amongst its Arab neighbours, especially in regard to the e-government initiative and e-commerce sector. Abdulla (2007) follows the evolution of the traditional media briefly before focusing on the history of the internet in the Arab world, then examines Egypt as a case study through the uses and gratification theory.

Kaba and Said (2014) highlight that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) had a better ICT infrastructure than the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other Arab countries. The study adopted the framework of The Global Information Technology Report 2009–2010 to measure the digital divide between these countries. This was enhanced by another report conducted by Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (2014), which analyses the development and the use of the internet in Arab countries. Their research indicates that there were more than 135 million Arabs using the internet in 22 Arab countries and more than 71 million active users of social networking technologies. Furthermore, the examination asserts that Facebook is the most popular social website, followed by Google+, YouTube and then Twitter.

The previous section critiqued the historical developments of the Arab media field by examining some of the most influential empirical studies in the domain in order to contextualize this thesis in its natural settings. Major themes and concepts have emerged, one being the Western influence over the field; Western scholars, theories and typologies established the field before several Arab academics and others, who are also based in the West, contributed significantly to the development of the field. In addition, the political motivation served as a catalyst to boost the media industry and accordingly the research in this area. Finally, the growth of academic debates was not sufficient as

Rugh (2004) argues that none of the existing analytical theories can help us understand the ever complex and growing terrains of media studies in Arabic countries.

I intend to build upon this empirical evidence to take this thesis into the direction of de-Westernizing research to allow the emergence of new fresh perspectives. This exploration helps to construct new analytical categories in response to YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, I am going to engage with the concept of the political motivation of media to examine if this can be applied to SNS platforms, namely, YouTube-based programming in the context of Saudi Arabia.

The next section critically investigates the academic debates on the relationship between Arab states and the media to make sense of the aforementioned themes and concepts.

### **The Relationship between Media and States**

According to Wojcieszak (2007), The Arab World had been traditionally accustomed to state controlled censorship of television because of its power to reach both literate and illiterate audiences. For example, Djankof et al (2003) examines two theories of government ownership of the media: the public interest theory in which state ownership cures market failure, and the public choice theory in which the government undermines political and economic freedom. They “found pervasive evidence of worse outcomes associated with greater state ownership” (ibid, p.344). The study also stresses that the influence of ownership and types of regulation vary significantly from one country to another. The Saudi government, for example, approves the appointments of editors-in-chief of newspapers and has the right to dismiss them, which consequently increases the influence of the state over content. Finally, they conclude that “countries with greater

state ownership of the media have less free press, [fewer] political rights for their citizens and ... less developed capital markets” (p. 373).

Gehlbach and Sonin (2014) developed a theoretical framework to analyse government control of the media in less democratic states, where media are used to mobilize citizens to take actions that may be against the public interest. Nevertheless, the study concludes that the attempt of any governments to control the media would result in several consequences; for example, it reduces the reliability of the content and therefore reduces the number of viewers. The state controlled media frameworks have emerged because of certain political and economic circumstances that have enabled the states to build a media system and therefore stay in control of the media narrative.

For example, Rugh (2004) suggests that there are various reasons for the predominance of government-owned broadcasting systems among Arab regimes. First, the cost of establishing a television system was beyond the capacity of the private sector in these developing countries. Secondly, this high cost stimulated a monopoly and because of the wide reach of television, the Arab governments had an interest in investing in this new medium to politicize it or at least to keep it out of hostile hands. Finally, because of the lack of a tradition of independence, the concept of controlling every new media instrument by the governments was common at the time.

A historical review by Yushi (2012) has recognized the close ties between government and media in the Arabic context. The study maintains that Egypt and Saudi Arabia have the strongest influence over Pan-Arab media, thus it focuses on investigating how both countries have tried to control the Pan-Arab media since the mid-twentieth century. For instance, Amin and Napoli (2000, p.181) highlight that “the broadcasting systems in Egypt are absolute monopolies, under direct government supervision”.

State control has consequences for the local media narrative and its reliability in the eyes of the local audience. For example, Lynch (2006, p.37) affirms that the “[Arab] state-run television was a dreary affair, focusing on official business and completely closed to political opposition”. This led Arab intellectual and media professionals to relocate to Europe, especially London, to produce Arab newspapers, for instance, from abroad, but it was easy for Arab regimes to ban or censor those publications within their own territories. Alternatively, “many Arab [citizens] turned to whatever foreign source might be available, whether BBC Arabic service, Radio Monte Carlo, the voice of America, or even in Jordan; Israeli Arabic language television broadcasting” (ibid, p.38).

This state control has resulted in various behaviours and censorship styles in different Arab countries which vary depending on the relevant cultural setting. Al-Obaidi (2007) highlights five censorship models for the Arab media. He developed those models based on previous media models that have been discussed above; firstly, the Islamic jurisprudence model, which applies Islamic codes and instruction - for instance, the censorship systems in Saudi Arabia and Sudan, where the media must uphold Islam and oppose atheism. The second model is the regime-worship model, in which the media is completely owned and financed by the government as it was by Syria's Assad, Libya's Ghaddafi and Iraq's Saddam. Thirdly, the traditional model exists, for example, in Algeria, Bahrain, Morocco, Oman, Jordan and the Gaza strip. Generally, this model has relaxed regulations of censorship. Fourthly, the transition model is where the media tends to be free from any government interference or restriction; for example, the Qatari government abolished the Ministry of Information. Finally, the liberal-semi-liberal model is where the liberal media could be enjoyed, such as in Lebanon.

Nevertheless, in his study, Amin (2002) found that overt censorship and self-censorship are commonplace in the Arab media, especially when it comes to the news and current affairs content. He noticed that radio and television journalism are controlled more closely than print media because of their abilities to bypass illiteracy and their appeal to

mass audiences in the Arab world. For instance, Khazen (1999), who is a well-known Arab Editor-in-Chief for Pan-Arab newspapers, implied that the most prevalent form of censorship is self-censorship. Khazen indicated that self-censorship is usually followed by state censorship and the difficulty of that is that every Arab country has its own sensitivity taboo.

The states employ various strategies to ensure that the media narrative is in line with the interests of those in power. Sakr (2003) has drawn attention to the fact that censorship in the Arab world was not only achieved through direct intervention of the state, but also by more fundamental and less visible means, such as by regulating ownership, distribution and the entry to the profession of journalism. Arab states could use the weapon of judicial intimidation of journalists to enhance control over the content. Sakr indeed cites Saudi Arabian media institutions as being amongst the most tightly restricted in the home environment.

As for online censorship, Saudi Arabia installed a public body to supervise internet activity in the country during the 1990s. Eid (2003) claims that Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) was responsible for internet provision as well as providing several ISPs through which it extended its control by using certain techniques and filters to monitor and block websites. Eid argues that this method had enabled KACST to ban 200,000 websites by August 2001, and the number doubled over the following three years to 400,000 in 2004.

According to the Open Net Initiative Report (2009), the Arab countries had to regulate a set of internet rules to ensure their citizens did not use the internet inappropriately. Arab states continued to invest in media and IT projects and at same time were continuing to invest in monitoring approaches and surveillance techniques to enhance their censorship ability over their citizens (Open Net Initiative Report 2009). The report indicated that

the Saudi Arabia launched a new set of laws in 2008, including a penalty of ten years in prison and a fine for promoting or supporting terrorism activities, three years in prison and a fine for financial fraud and five years and a fine for those who promote and distribute pornography.

### *Online Activism and Society*

The rapid increase of scholarship in SNSs research in the Middle East can be attributed to the Arab uprisings that hit the region in 2011 in protest against dictatorships. From 2011 onwards, the research on Arab social media gained attention, quickly rising to the top of the agendas of several researchers and institutions who wanted to understand the relationships between the platforms, the participants and the political, historical and cultural changes in the context of violence; for example, Lim (2012). A number of empirical studies have investigated how social media platforms enable participants to utilize and produce content in the context of civil disobedience and violence; for instance, Alaimo, (2015); Ali and Fahmy, (2013); Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos, (2012); and Khondker, (2011).

These studies tend to examine the blogging sphere of young participants, outlining their role in reporting news that is unreported by the mainstream media. For instance, El-Nawawy and Khamis (2013) point out that the main functions of those online activists were to call for action by mobilizing and organizing demonstrations, providing information and engaging in interactivity by participating in brainstorming between the bloggers and the protestors. They also documented government violations of human rights, limitations on freedoms and corruption through citizen journalism dynamics. Other academics have examined the role of Arab blogging in facilitating discussion and serving as a digital public sphere, especially for those with no access to public platforms

in the authoritarian Arab regimes (Ottaway, 2009; Riegert and Ramsay; 2012; and Etling et al, 2010).

Howard et al (2011), for example, demonstrate the role of social media during the Arab revolutions as their study analysed more than three million Tweets based on keywords used. They focused mainly on Egypt and Tunisia by creating a unique database of information collected from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The research produced three main findings which confirmed empirically that social media played a critical role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring, as it was used to conduct political debate by a key demographic group in the revolution. Another significant finding confirmed that online revolutionary communication preceded mass protest on the ground and this toppled the Egyptian and Tunisian dictatorships. Finally, the use of social media by advocates of democracy has helped to spread democratic ideas across international borders and therefore inspire other such advocates worldwide.

Those studies indeed shed light upon the essential role of social media in affecting authoritarian rule as the current historical, political and cultural context of Arab discourse experiences a dramatic shift compared to the previous decade. In addition, another study by Tufekci and Wilson (2012) demonstrates that social media in general, and Facebook in particular, helped the citizens make decisions about participating in protests against the Egyptian Government, and half of those surveyed by the study disseminated visuals from the demonstrations.

However, as the vast majority of studies between 2011 and 2012 are based on a technological determinist approach to interpreting the Arab uprisings and social media, Fuchs (2012) contextualizes social media in the context of a moral panic model that was proposed by Cohen (2002). Fuchs argues that techno-optimism and techno-pessimism approaches are not sufficient to explore the phenomenon. Instead, he maintains that

critical research needs to be based on dialectical reasoning to allow casual relationships of media, technology and society to be seen and explored as multi-dimensional and complex phenomena.

This scepticism within the literature as to the extent to which social media caused the upheaval switched the mode of researching gradually from the view of digital determinism to a more multi-dimensional paradigm. The critique of Fuchs and others has seemingly triggered a new trend of research that overcomes the binary interpretation of either technological determinism or social determinism for the research problems.

For instance, Hammami (2016) examines the role of Facebook in Tunisia in the context of the public sphere, framing the cultural context of Tunisian society and linking Facebook to the historical process of the formation of the Tunisian public sphere. His research theorizes that the SNS has a public space in the cultural and political context of Tunisia and it took three different phases for Facebook to evolve in line with development of the offline activities. The outcome is the formulation of a new hybrid model of public sphere that combines that idea of discussion and representation of ideas, away from the Western-centric approach of the Habermasian view.

Another piece of research by Zayani (2015) presents an in-depth analysis of the Tunisian context by taking into consideration various factors such as the youth and the politics of everyday life in the country. This research moves from the traditional question of how the youth-led movements utilized the digital networks to bring the authoritarian regime, instead asking the question of how the Tunisian youth became politicized digitally, taking into consideration their lack of concern for politics prior to the event.

The significant work of Zayani (2015) stems from three considerations. First, his analysis breaks away from the centrality of politics or what he described as the cause and effect types of political analysis of media and communication in the Middle East, theorizing a new mode of research to understand the complex relationship between media participation and an undemocratic context. Second, the research considers the players in the playing field, namely, the youth factor. This was significant because the general trend of Arab media research excludes young people because the youth are marginalized by the political institutions. Finally, the research invites a new way of thinking about the political use of SNSs by asserting the need to study the changing nature of political engagement itself rather than whether the SNSs were eroding the control of the state over political life.

One academic work by Ramsay and Fatani (2016) addresses the issue of YouTube-based programmes in Saudi Arabia. The chapter is located in a volume entitled *Political Islam and Global Media* by Mellor and Rinnawi (2016), which contextualizes Islamic identity and online religious activism across different countries. This analysis is possibly the first attempt to discuss the issue of YouTube-based programming in order to explore the research problem in the Saudi context. The study takes a centric position between digital optimism and digital pessimism, arguing that the political impact of YouTube programmes is overstated and that the programmes are grounded solely in commercial motivation and not political motivations. They also argue that whenever the programmes engage in politics, their engagement tends to be in line with the Saudi policy and not in opposition to the state.

Their analysis represents a pioneering attempt to explore the unexplored issues, but a number of critiques can be made against the analysis offered by Ramsay and Fatani. First, the conceptualizing of the research problem is unclear in terms of differentiating between the top-down approach and bottom-up approach, and between UGC and PGC. Although the focus of the analysis is directed towards YouTube-based programmes,

better conceptualization was needed for the sake of clarity. For instance, they refer to YouTube-based programming as “Saudi new media”, which is an abstract term that needs further categorization and analysis.

Secondly, the study abstains generally from critically examining the role of the government in the context of YouTube-based programming, referring, for instance, to a visit from the member of the royal family as giving their blessing to the production house of YouTube. Thirdly, the analysis of Ramsay and Fatani maintains that the political role of YouTube-based programmes is overstated and that there is no political impact at all because they are only concerned with profits.

The internet has arguably introduced some form of threat to political systems around the world. Nevertheless, some academics have argued that the internet poses no serious threat towards authoritarian regimes, especially in the Middle East. For instance, Kalathil and Boas assert that “the impact of the internet on authoritarian regimes of the Middle East is an open question, one that must be subject to systemic empirical analysis on a case by case basis” (2003, p104). Their study analyses the role of open networks in closed regimes including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Egypt by considering several variables such as wealth, size, literacy, geopolitics and technology.

On the other hand, Khamis and Vaughn (2014) point out in their critical analysis how new modes of communication – namely online citizen journalism through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and blogging – have affected the Arab media landscape and therefore fuelled the democratic transformation and the political change that threatened autocratic regimes such as those of Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring in 2011. The study discusses “how online citizen journalism can provide effective tools for supporting the capabilities of the democratic activists by allowing forums for free speech and political networking opportunities ... to plan, organize and execute peaceful

protests” (p156). This resulted in real threats to the authoritarian rulers with the expulsion of both the Egyptian and the Tunisian presidents. Although the study documents the negative impacts of the internet, namely social media’s impact on the Arab dictators by, for instance, mobilizing the Arab public and accelerating the transition to democratization, it concludes that two essential points have to be considered. The first is to avoid a simplistic approach to the role of technology by being aware of its limitations in bringing political changes as those modes of communication are not capable of enacting change without offline activism in the real world. The second is that digitization is not an exceptional actor but rather it is a single element alongside other actors such as social, historical and cultural elements in the Arab context.

Ghannam (2011) explains in greater detail the role of social media in shaping the Arab political atmosphere. He argues that although social networking sites have brought change to the concept of freedom of expression among the Arab people, blogging and SNS alone cannot be expected to bring immediate political change. Indeed, it is long-term impacts that might take place over the next ten or even twenty years that can be called a real change. Ghannam also compares social networking to the Arab satellite channel, stating that “just as Arab satellite channels helped revolutionize broadcast news, social media is arguably changing the nature of news and community engagement, which continues to evolve with increased convergence of social media and satellite broadcasts, as seen in Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries of the region” (p.23).

Howard and Hussain (2013) agree that online movements alone cannot facilitate political change; they highlight the importance of civil society movements on the ground in facing oppressors. In fact, those civil society movements can take advantage of social media to flourish and expand their influences towards the public, especially among young and tech-savvy supporters.

To conclude this section, the aforementioned discussion has critically mapped out the complex relationship between media and states in the Arab world. What has emerged from this section is as follows. First, the model of government ownership, be it directly or by proxy, is very common in the Arab media scene. This concept resulted in, secondly, creating a media market structure that is characterised as a monopoly or oligopoly. Thirdly, censorship and self-censorship became prevailing concepts and practices. Fourthly, and in response to these conditions, the audience, including the young, moved on to search for alternative media platforms and sources to fulfil their social and cultural needs. Also, digital determinism is an emerging theme in the literature. However, the academic critiques of several scholars, for example Fuchs (2012), have seemingly triggered a new mode of research. Consequently, new but limited critical research has been conducted, such as that of Zayani (2015).

This circle of emerging concepts is significant because it lays out the historical and contemporary state of the field, and more importantly, it helps create a framework that suits this thesis. It can be noticed, however, that the nature of the above debate tends to be quite general, lacks a concise definition of field boarder, and avoids problematizing the research problem explicitly. I intend to build upon these general frameworks and take these concepts forward to produce specific and defined analysis corresponding to the research questions of this thesis and their findings.

## **The Business Model for YouTube**

One of the main research questions in this thesis concerns the business model of YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia. It aims to explore how the Saudi youth monetizes their online influence in the complex context of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it is essential to our understanding to integrate the academic debate regarding the business models for online platforms – specifically, YouTube – into the body of this chapter.

The previous discussions highlighted the political and cultural context of media in the Arab World including Saudi Arabia. This section now shifts the focus towards the business aspects of YouTube to construct a comprehensive framework for the research problem.

In order to set the stage for the economics of video sharing platforms, some essential critiques have been advanced by Farchy (2009). He emphasizes the significance of the classic notion of a two-sided market in online platforms, which brings together audience and advertisers by offering free services online. The audience, according to this concept, is attracted by the free content, then the monetization of the audience occurs on the part of advertisers. Video sharing platforms such as YouTube and Dailymotion have adopted this model to finance and profit from their activities. The classic model of a two-sided market is further enhanced by interactivity, which allows the tracking of the behaviour of users and more importantly the segmentation of the audience, including their geographical locations.

However, Wasko and Erickson (2009) argue that the huge audience and revenue of YouTube do not necessarily reflect a certain and sustainable business model for the video sharing platform. As a result, YouTube has turned to establishing new partnerships with content providers to form a new business model that is based on content so the revenue would be split between YouTube and its partner companies. YouTube moved to adopt a similar model with user generated content (UGC) but the audience ended up becoming fragmented. To solve this challenge for the purpose of sustaining revenues through advertising, YouTube categorized its videos, for example, in Most Viewed and Most Popular categories in order to draw attention to the fragmented content for advertising purposes. This segmentation enabled YouTube and advertising companies to commodify the user generated content that aligns with the advertiser's target audience, which raised worries amongst media critics and academics. For instance, Davidson and et al (2010) argue that the recommendation system of

YouTube accounts for 60% of video clicks from the home page, which is a biased model that grants the platform control over the content.

This segmentation can raise tensions in the economic relationships between advertising, content and copyright, a situation McDonald (2009) describes as digital discords in the online media economy. This stems from the fact that YouTube runs on advertising revenue. Keeping content attractive is necessary to draw the traffic in and in order to continue convincing advertisers to spend, but this model was used to confront the copyright industry in the USA during the early days of YouTube. According to Andrejevic (2009), YouTube represents a hybrid medium that combines original material with copyrighted material, but professionally generated content (PGC) and copyrighted material are the most popular content that draws the traffic and revenue for the platform. Andrejevic further maintains that “one of the concerns of content producers is that reliance on an intermediate like YouTube relinquishes control over interactively generated user data that is becoming an important resource for targeted advertising campaigns” (2009, p:408).

In critiquing the term user generated content in relation to YouTube, Andrejevic (2009) employs the terms free labour and exploitation to contextualize the relationship between the platform (YouTube) and individual content producers. Users are offered a limited degree of control over their creative outputs in exchange for building up an online community for the platform. This free participation is considered a form of productive labour captured by capital and “the offer to overcome estrangement produces a second-order form of separation between users and cyber commodities they generate about their social lives; their behaviour, their tastes, preferences, patterns of consumption and their response to advertising” (2009, p:420).

Although the offer of control over creative activity is regarded online as a form of exploitation, in the context of YouTube it can be seen as a different case because the final product is rendered in commodity form as the data are captured by marketers. However, while those who create user-generated content gain their own share of revenue and online influence in exchange for the provision of content, there is a difference between user-generated content and data-driven control, which are analytic-based forms of marketing.

Moving towards YouTube's characteristics, the literature presents the features that have made YouTube videos popular and demanded by audience and therefore have increased the traffic and advertising for the platform. For example, Cheng et al (2008) highlight that while YouTube shares some features with traditional video repositories, the platform has unique characteristics that can be attractive for audiences and advertisers. The small-world YouTube feature that helps to establish communities and connect them is one interesting aspect that increases the website's traffic. The networks of related videos that are based on user generated content "have both small world characteristics of a large clustering coefficient indicating the grouping of videos, and a short characteristics path length linking any two videos" (2008, p.216). YouTube expanded the scope of its business services by delivering video content to mobile users in 2006 in order to remain innovative and at the forefront of the video sharing platform industry. In addition, Hang (2008) examined the organizational structural of YouTube and found that the platform was the first to provide user-generated content via mobile telephones, thus expanding the recognition of its brand to mobile services.

In her critical account of the relationship between YouTube and television, Van Dijck (2013) argues that professional and amateur – PGC and UGC – are interlocking despite the initial narrative of YouTube as video sharing site that presents an alternative to television. YouTube can differentiate itself from television by certain characteristics such as streaming, uploading and social networking features, but both television and

YouTube gradually became attuned to each other's strategies, especially after 2008. This close relationship between the two parties can be found in their ownership, governance and business models.

According to Van Dijck (2013), the ownership aspect reflects early legal battles prior to 2008 between television and YouTube over copyright infringement and intellectual property (IP) violations. However, the search engine owned by Google and attractive PGC owned by American broadcasters bridged the gap in the common interest of both parties. YouTube developed itself to focus on professionally generated content and started to behave like a broadcaster, whereas the American broadcasters adopted the viewers' model inspired by YouTube to attempt to dominate viewer numbers and therefore advertisers.

Secondly, Van Dijck (2013) argues that governance of the content is another critical subject between both parties; YouTube behaved as a connector of users and UGC, and supporting the PGC model has gradually resulted in building professional content on YouTube that matches the broadcast industry's definition of content. Finally, the business model of YouTube (Google Inc.) is based on maximizing its ability to distribute personalized commercial messages to a mass audience by the integration of content, searching and advertising. In addition, it applies a partnership programme with content producers through the splitting of revenue, but this has raised critical and ethical questions regarding the commercialization of content on YouTube.

Although the relationship between YouTube and television is now interlocked, YouTube academics such as Kim (2012) have argued that it was not a threat to television because the two parties have different objectives. For example, the major broadcast networks have adopted online video services to make online video libraries an additional window of distribution for their content. The critique by Kim may have

represented a specific Western context in a specific timeframe (i.e. 2012) and indicates that various findings are attainable in different contexts and different timeframes regarding the relationship between YouTube and television.

However, Kim maintains that the potential for tension between user-generated content and professionally generated content on YouTube is bigger because of the interest conflicts between producers and advertisers, and more importantly because of the geographical availability of the clips. He concludes by arguing that online video platforms such as YouTube provide an alternative way to produce and disseminate cultural products, but television has struck back with institutional strategies including copyright protection and advertising. In addition, the vast majority of popular content on YouTube comes from traditional broadcasters, and YouTube producers borrow the format and content of television to produce their content for YouTube.

This section has focused on the academic debate that evolved around the business models of the video sharing platform, YouTube. The two-sided market, the sustainability of the business model and the challenging relationships between YouTube and television are all significant examples of emerging academic concepts in this domain. The literature concentrates on the American experience, highlighting the critical legal battles over the issue of copyrights between the platform and users. Applying these concepts into non-American contexts such as the Saudi applications of YouTube can be useful to explore and devise new analytical categories for the research problem.

## **The Study of Audience**

In this final section, the literature extends to cover the terrain of the audience, not only because it is a significant part of the two-sided market concept discussed in the previous section, but also because it corresponds to one of the thesis' research questions. Theorizing the audience is essential to setting up the stage for answering the research question because it enables the reader to position the analysis in its setting by understanding the main theories and concepts related to this field.

To begin with, the term 'audience' has historically evolved around different meanings and categories depending on its context within society. The term is rather complex and invites conceptual difficulties for researchers. For instance, McQuail (1997) traces the development of the concept, highlighting the difference between group, crowd and public before investigating the audience as a mass because of the wider consideration of the changing nature of social life in modern society. McQuail also states that technology was one of the social forces that resulted in pushing the concept of audience into our everyday usage and caused the fragmentation of the term into what we perceive nowadays as a media audience.

To build on this connotation, Webster (1998) attempts to categorize the literature of modern media audiences into three new models – the audience as a mass, as an outcome, and as an agent – in order to re-define their meanings and scope for the field of audience studies. First, audience as a mass is the most common model and it is defined as an entity by its exposure to the media. This model regards the audience as a large collection of people spread across time and space with no immediate knowledge of one another. It concentrates on the consumption of materials, how individuals make sense of the content and how media offerings capture the masses' attention.

The second model, according to Webster, is audience as an outcome, which has dominated the field of media studies. This model is concerned with the power of the media to produce a detrimental effect on citizens and on society as whole; therefore, it asks what effect the media has on people and society.

The third model is audience as an agent, which conceives the audience as an active force or free agent who chooses the media content they want to consume, applies their interpretive skills to the message and uses the media to suit themselves and their values.

However, Webster (1998) himself acknowledges the limitation of these models, maintaining that audience studies do not always fit neatly within models, but rather they can overlap the margins of these models. He argues that mixing these approaches can bring rich contributions to applied and theoretical constructs in audience research.

As a result, the fields of media audience and reception research have developed dramatically in Western academic circles in different contexts. For instance, Alasuutari (1999) recognizes the richness of traditional cultural media research, but he also noticed the fragmented loose schools throughout the years, so he attempts to conceptualize these developments into three different generations or phases of cultural media research. These phases are reception research, audience ethnography and constructionist view.

According to Alasuutari (1999), the emergence of the first generation is associated with Stuart Hall's *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973), which led to reception theory and subsequent research. As a result, it re-addressed themes that had already been raised – for instance, use and gratification theory – and more importantly, it laid the foundation for and stated the problems to be examined in the reception paradigm in the media studies field. The encoding/decoding model of Hall implied a

shift from a technical to a semiotic approach to the prevailing message. This message is encoded by content creators and decoded (interpreted and made sense of) by receivers. This suggests that messages can be interpreted variously from one receiver to another according to individual ability and the thought processes of receivers. This approach therefore adopts an interpretive framework that places weight on the interpretation of the media messages themselves.

The second generation of audience research is audience ethnography, which is qualitative audience reception studies that involve analyzing programmes and studying their reception amongst specific audience through in-depth interviews. This generation of researchers differed from the previous generation by moving from conventional politics to identifying politics by raising questions about gender, emphasising the functions of the medium, studying the everyday life of a group and relating the use of a medium to it. Thirdly, the constructionist view is the third emerging trend in audience research; it entails a broader frame that combines and conceives media and media use.

The goal of Alasuutari (1999) behind this critique and categorization was to pave the way for researchers to construct a new agenda and themes for the future of audience research discourse. Alasuutari postulates that a constructionist view can inspire new emerging trends which he suggested were increasing reflexivity, moving from audience psychology to sociology and addressing media culture as a whole instead of only as a component of mass communication research.

In order to discuss another theoretical perspective on audience, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) suggest that there are three types of audience: the simple audience, the mass audience and the diffused audience. The diffused audience echoes the social and cultural change in contemporary society where everyone becomes an audience. The diffused audience constitutes a number of characteristics. First, individuals spend a

considerable amount of time in the consumption of mass media at home and in public. Secondly, the media are constitutive of everyday life where television and the internet, for example, are integrated into the practice of everyday life. Thirdly, the audience is created through the performative society (Kershaw, 1994), in which human attitudes are structured through the use of performative modes and frames. Finally, the audience's characteristics reflects contemporary society and contemporary content rather than the enduring characteristics of humanity in general.

Speaking about the internet audience is complex because of the multiple meanings of the concepts of internet and audience. There is a need to allocate specific theoretical perspectives to examine specific research problems because generalizing can produce insufficient analysis across various contexts and countries.

Downes (2000) further suggests that one of the differences between the internet and earlier media are the audience characteristics; for example, the interactivity and the niche communities. He attempts to reconceptualise the internet audience as follows: the audience as a market; the audience as a public; and the audience as a relationship. The first type reflects the commercial relationship between the producer and the user or consumer and the changing revenue base for providers. The audience as a public implies that the free flow of information can promote participatory culture and a democratic public. The final categorization is associated with the active audience when producer and audience engage in a symbiotic relationship that governs the creation, production and distribution of content.

The interactive capability of the internet enabled the audience to gain a certain degree of power and to become more creative in engaging with media content. For instance, the notion of 'creative audience' was coined by Meikle and Young (2012) in their discussion of media convergence, in which they argue that the engagement of an

audience is a social behaviour. The creativity of the audience manifests itself in several dimensions such as organizing, writing, manipulating and sharing the content, which can result in improving the media literacy, activism and critical skills of an audience.

### ***Arab Audience Research***

In her attempt to highlight the significance of contextualizing the audience within their cultural and historical settings, Livingstone (2015) argues that the audience from a global perspective suffers from a number of challenges, including the hegemony of Western theories, and that there is a need to de-Westernize audience studies according to the particularity of every case. This de-Westernization can bring about new concepts and understandings in order to help understand the many forms of audience worldwide.

When speaking about the audience in the Arab world, it is essential to state the significance of political factors that have affected the outcomes of audience research in the region. For instance, the lack of research on audience responses to political content has increased the knowledge gap as a result of the perception of media-politics linkage amongst the viewers (Sakr 2007). This has caused, in certain cases, superficial analysis that has focused on promoting political objectives in line with the political agenda of the state (Amin 2008).

Historically speaking, several Western associations have commissioned audience research in Saudi Arabia – for example, during the 1960s and 1970s – to understand the audience habits in the kingdom. Boyd (1982) highlights that the BBC and the United States Information Agency sponsored a study in 1972 for this purpose. Another Cyprus-based marketing agency conducted research in 1977 and 1979, but the sponsor refused to grant permission to quote from studies.

Boyd elucidates that the restrictive policy of the Saudi government, with regard to allowing foreign entities to conduct a national survey and the cultural expectation of excluding women from any interviewing process, were complex political and cultural barriers for audience research. The Western audience research in the region, therefore, was not comprehensive and faced various logistical obstacles that prevented it from covering wider geographical locations, especially the rural areas of the Arab world (Mytton, 2011).

Mellor (2013) states that the research field is in the process of development, with several Arab and non-Arab researchers attempting to fill the gap by producing more analysis that covers various geographical locations in the Arab world. It was this slow growth, coupled with a number of challenges, including the heavy reliance on a positivism paradigm, which has made qualitative interpretive scholarship in the field rather scarce. (See also Souri, 2008). As the media industry grows, the audience becomes more fragmented and no sufficient methodologically-oriented studies have been able to cope with the growing trend. This has resulted in the absence of academic literature on Arab audiences or any ground-breaking audience research (Abdel Karim, 2012).

The reliance on Western theories has further complicated the process of audience research in this emerging area, and several critiques have attempted to address this scholarship hegemony. For example, Ayish (2005, quoted in Abdel Karim, 2012) and Livingstone (2013) assert that Western audience theories stemmed from Western settings by Western academics in response to Western circumstances, which made the Western audience theories culturally-biased.

There is, therefore, a need to encourage Arab scholarship that is culturally, empirically and theoretically based to investigate the marginalized Arab audience, to address the

patterns of change and to offer interpretative detailed exploration of this underdeveloped field.

In order to address the patterns of contemporary change, Kraidy (2008) offers historical reviews of how the Arab audience has been imagined by the states, media corporations and advertising agencies, and how the media and audience growth have resulted in commercial implications. He pointed out that there is an urgent need to conduct empirical and theoretically grounded audience research, breaking down the focus on television and moving towards building research frameworks that integrate other components such as the internet audience.

The commercial implications of media growth are acknowledged by Alterman (2005), who states that some market research conglomerates had conducted surveys on media consumptions and patterns in the Arab world for commercial and rating purposes. However, he argues that this research tended to deliver unreliable data for academics and policy makers because they focused on a limited number of prosperous countries and the research process is likely to have been driven by a commercial agenda.

Sabry (2010) agrees that this type of research can result in poor answers about who the Arab audiences are and how they interact with the media. He adds that the general poverty of Arab audience research has additionally contributed to the general lack of Arab cultural studies within the Middle East. The market research lacks meaningful relevance to the audience's perspective on their interpretation of the content, formats and also the issues rooted in the content (Ayish and Mellor, 2015).

The above critiques of Arab audience research literature highlight that the state of the academic field is underdeveloped, fragmented in nature and heavily focused on positivism. More importantly, the political oppression by Arab governments and their

sensitivity towards academic research further complicate the academic progress in the field. The fourth research question of this thesis is concerned with the Saudi audience, and specifically with investigating the reasons behind the popularity of YouTube-based programmes amongst the young Saudi audience by employing focus group interviews. It aims to respond to the gap in the academic literature by providing solid analysis that can contribute to Arab audience research in general and to Saudi research specifically, contextualizing the Saudi context and empirically examining the Saudi YouTube audience.

## **Conclusion**

The above studies have represented what Patton (2015) calls the intellectual heritage of the field of study. It has reviewed and contextualized some of the most influential academic works in the field of Arab and global media studies in order to map out the concepts, themes, methodologies and limitations so the thesis can neatly position itself in the exposed gap. The chapter has consisted of five sections, some of which might have overlapped with each other considerably because of the interdisciplinary nature of the literature.

In the first section, I weaved together broad discussions to produce specific and definite debates about the challenges of Arab media research in the Arab World. This was significant because it sets the tone for this thesis, highlighting the struggling state of the research and implying potential difficulties and consequences for critical and authentic research outputs in the region. This was connected closely to the next section, which investigated the development of Arab media research. It examined the Western role in constructing and advancing the field and, more importantly, it highlighted the

theoretical deficits in correspondence to the particularity of Arab media field. A number of themes and concepts have also emerged relating to the growing demand to de-Westernize media research and political motivation as a main driver for media development in the region.

In the third section, the discussion of relationship between media and states was inspired by the concept of political motivation, which emerged in section two. The discussion illustrated the complexity of the relationship between the two parties, discussing the central role of authoritarian governments in the industry. This has resulted in several concepts, for example, Arab ownership models, Arab models of censorship and self-censorship, monopoly and oligopoly issues in the media market and the move of audiences to alternative platforms and sources.

After that, the discussion shifted towards analysing the business model of YouTube to critically reflect upon its development and experience within the American context. No research has been conducted on the practices of the business model in the Arabic context, specifically in Saudi Arabia. The notion of a two-sided market emerged along with the concept of digital discords to reflect the struggle between the platform and other traditional media institutions. Finally, the last section shed light upon audience scholarship, outlining various types of audiences such as the diffused audience and creative audience to project the evolving nature of the concept in media applications and uses. The struggle of the Arab audience field is similar to the struggle of the Arab media field in terms of Western hegemony and the theoretical deficit.

The aim of this chapter was to explore what the literature tells us about the Arab and Saudi media field and their complexity so we can identify and locate themes and gaps that can be utilized by this research. Despite the wide scope of the literature and its diversity, common themes have emerged strongly throughout the critiques.

Firstly, there are issues regarding the application of Western theories to Arabic contexts as a response to the Arab theoretical deficits in the field. The Western circumstance in which the theories have been developed are in sharp contrast to the Arab settings and its applications; therefore there is a demand for detailed critical analysis derived from the Arabic experience. This chapter has shown that some studies have attempted to produce a specific analysis to overcome the Western hegemonic narrative in the field (Boyd, 1982; Kraidy, 2012; Sakr, 2007 and Zayani, 2015) by producing specific case studies that reflect the process and the experience of Arabic reality. However, many grounded empirical investigations are required to cover the ever increasing significance of the field by breaking away from pre-conceived Western assumptions and being open to new emerging theories and patterns that explain the specificity of the Arab experience.

Secondly, the vast majority of Arab studies, including audience studies, tend to adopt positivist ideology, abstaining from exploring new territories and meanings in media and cultural studies. As a result, critical qualitative research about SNSs in the context of non-violence is rather scarce and limited, as opposed to administrative research about SNSs during the Arab uprisings of 2010 onwards. In fact, very few academic works have attempted to study specific SNSs in stable Arab countries by contextualizing their use in the wider political, economic and cultural context, the exception being Ramsay and Fatani (2016), whose study as we have seen is subject to significant critiques.

Therefore, three main gaps have been identified in the literature: the Western theoretical influence over the Arab field; studying SNSs in isolation without taking into consideration their specific context; and the serious lack of specific analysis of YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia. No serious research based on empirical methods has been conducted on YouTube in Saudi Arabia, apart from Ramsay and Fatani (2016) and commercially driven marketing research.

There is an urgent need to better understand the experience of YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia and its implications, so this thesis will respond to the

gaps in the research by offering empirical analysis through the lens of a qualitative approach and contextualizing the research problem in its natural framework to fill the knowledge gap in the field of Arab media studies and non-Western media context.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the economic, political and cultural context of YouTube in Saudi Arabia. It therefore focuses on the actions and the processes of YouTube-based programming, its role in the Saudi cultural, commercial and political spheres and the interactions of young Saudi audiences with the content of YouTube based programming to which they are frequently exposed.

As outlined previously in the literature review there is a narrow range of research in the field of Saudi media in general but there is a particular lack of research that attempts to offer a comprehensive perspective of Saudi youth production and consumption of YouTube in one of the most conservative and culturally sensitive countries, perhaps, in the world. In addition, according to Khalil (2010, p:79), “it is worth acknowledging that the complexity level of research tools is yet unable to match the level of theoretical sophistication on issues related to youth. Based on the methodological limitations of Saudi media studies that were demonstrated in the literature review this dissertation incorporates a qualitative research methodology to provide the reader with rich and inclusive accounts of the Saudi YouTube context by using a series of in-depth semi-structured online interviews and face-to-face focus groups.

This chapter begins with a brief background description of the qualitative method approach. After that, it moves on to explain the methodological considerations demanded by this study, describing the use of semi-structured online interviews with

content-makers and face-to-face focus group interviews with the audience. Finally, the procedure of data management and coding will be discussed.

## **Qualitative Methodology**

Initially several academics have highlighted the importance of adopting the research philosophy that determines the most suitable type of evidence and data-gathering methods for the research problem (Guba, 1990; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Blakie, 2010; Biddle and Schafft, 2014; Slife & Williams, 2013; and Creswell, 2014). Others have also demonstrated the central role of the research design in academic studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Jick, 1979; Olsen, 2004; and Hussein, 2009).

In terms of the qualitative inquiry, “the word qualitative implies an emphasis on process and meaning that are not rigorously examined or measured” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; p.4). It is important to state that there is no single accepted way of conducting qualitative research but rather it depends on several factors such as the aim of the research, the characteristic of research subjects, the funders and the audience for the research (Ritchie et al 2014). In fact, the justifiable use of qualitative inquiry for this study rests on several basics. Creswell (2013) outlines various reasons to conduct qualitative research; for instance, academics employ it to have a complex detailed understanding of the issue that can only be established when talking directly to people. In addition, it is employed to realize the context in which participants in a study address a problem. Hence, this inquiry is typically a theoretical framework for conducting research that involves collecting, analyzing and integrating data using qualitative strategies.

Methodologically speaking, a substantial number of Arab and Saudi media studies suffer from weak empirical grounds and they are also descriptive in nature. This study attempts to add value to this discipline by offering an empirical analysis of the research problem through the qualitative lens to explore the reality of the social worlds of Saudi YouTube context. Bryman and Burgess (1999) state that qualitative research is a strategy of social research that deploys several methods and displays a preference for the interpretation of social phenomena from the point of view of the meaning employed by the people being studied the deployment of natural rather than artificial settings for the collection of data and generating rather than testing theory. This in turn would help to produce more robust in-depth experiences from the research participants. According to Atkinson, Heath and Chenail (1991, p: 163), investigators “should be given the freedom to immerse themselves in unique experiences, follow their instincts and hunches, allow insights to arise and then to illustrate these insights vividly so their community can understand them”.

There are several advantages in incorporating a qualitative approach. For example, it appears to be an emerging consensus that many research issues cannot be adequately examined through questions that are posed by hypothetical deductive methods and addressed with quantifiable answers (Jensen and Jankowski, 1995). In addition, Strauss and Corbin (1998) point out that qualitative method can be incorporated to gain intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, emotions and thought processes which are difficult to extract through conventional research methods.

On the other hand, Atieno (2009) maintain that there are some limitations and challenges to employing qualitative research in academia. First, the ambiguities of the human language should be recognized. For instance, the word “red” could be used either to describe the colour or to reflect certain political categorizations. Second, the findings cannot be extended to wider populations with certainty because the findings of the research are not tested to discover whether they are statistically significant or due to

chance. Nevertheless, Mason (2002) emphasize that, while any piece of research may be criticized for its shortcomings, the idea that qualitative research has any inherent weakness is based on misunderstanding of the logic of qualitative inquiry.

## **The Data Collection Methods**

### *The Online Interviews*

Semi-structured academic online interviews with content makers of YouTube based programming were conducted to explore unseen themes and patterns in relation to two main specific categories; the context of Saudi YouTube based programming and the Saudi government's attitude towards this phenomenon.

In fact, the rationale for adapting online interviewing came as a reaction to not being able to obtain a visit visa from the Saudi authority. The intent of the research was to conduct face-to-face interviews in their natural settings at the studios, in Saudi Arabia in order to observe the work flow that could have offered the researcher with first-hand experience of the challenges and reality of production activities for YouTube. Therefore, this refusal by the Saudi authorities shaped the design of this study and its procedure. This logistical obstacle implies that re-applying again for the Saudi entry visa would cost extra time which is the resource that most needs a wise investment for this qualitative research. Furthermore, no positive outcomes could be guaranteed with another application. Therefore, fresh thinking was required and new decisions were taken to carry out in-depth interviews with Saudi content creators by employing a computer-mediated communication (CMC) mechanism.

Salmons (2015) note that online interviews are a viable alternative because researchers can choose from varied communication options and talk directly with participants anywhere at any time, which can bypass potential geographical and political obstacles. This requires basic IT skills for the participants of this research which was easily available to them as they are young with a great level of familiarity with technology. In addition, the nature of their creative work, which involves producing and disseminating cultural products for their audiences along with engaging with their fans and followers online, are other factors that made them already equipped with essential technical requirements for online interviews. Online interviewing is therefore considered to be inherently cost and time effective for the research. Yet, this new method brings its own challenges and difficulties which required attention and consideration for certain issues such as the authenticity of participants. The discussion below will highlight how the challenges have been dealt with throughout the fieldwork. Various softwares were used to conduct the interviews including video chat and voice call application (Skype), instant messaging and video chat communication platform (Google Hangouts) and voice-over internet protocol (TeamSpeak). The online interviews enabled flexible time scheduling for participants. For example, they made it easier to conduct an interview with one of the contributors who was studying in Los Angeles in the USA at the time of the interview.

Adler and Adler (2012) point out that the best answer to the question of how many interviews are needed is to gather data until empirical saturation is reached. Charmaz (2014) elucidates that the number of interviews depends on the analytical level to which the researcher aspires as well as the purpose of the research. Charmaz also points out that small samples can produce an in-depth interview study of lasting significance but this depends on the initial and emergent research questions, how the study was conducted and how the analysis was constructed. As a result, this study conducted ten in-depth semi-structured online interviews which were flexible and emergent in nature and which brought usefulness and quality for the study of YouTube in Saudi Arabia. The interviews with the Saudi content makers were drawn on an informative and

intensive interviewing strategy that aimed at generating accurate responses and descriptions of events with clarification about the process, meanings, places and people involved in the production of YouTube-based programming.

More importantly, the interviews were carried out until the researcher felt that no new concepts emerged. The saturation of concepts and their properties were an indicator of the number of interviews required for the thesis. However, reaching the level of saturation was not easily attained as it took extensive engagement with the data following each interview in order to search for concepts and logical leads from the data. Finally, Baker and Edward (2012) affirm that epistemological and methodological questions about the nature and purpose of the research contributed to the argument regarding the chosen number of interviews.

As for sampling, I established initial sampling criteria for potential participants as a point of departure for the interviews before moving to the process of theoretical sampling that focused on concepts and the theoretical development of the analysis.

The initial identified population was Saudi young people with practical experience in YouTube-based programming, whose programmes or YouTube channels have at least ten million views. The benchmark of ten million views was chosen randomly as an initial step because the number of views was relatively high amongst Saudi YouTube channels and this number was an estimated random average figure to help establish the initial sample. Secondly, it served as an initial filter mechanism to navigate through various Saudi YouTube channels.

Following the initial sampling and interviews, the focus gradually shifted from people to concepts where each interview was followed by analysis which led to more data

gathering and analysis. This resulted in interviewing some participants who did not meet the criteria of initial sampling; for example, some interviews were conducted with participants whose YouTube channels had fewer than ten million views.

This means the sample ended being as diverse as covering YouTube-based network of one billion views down to YouTube based programmes of 187,000 views. By being driven by concepts, this allowed the research to explore the emergent concepts in depth and to identify various properties and dimensions of the research problem. Theoretical sampling is important when studying new areas because it allows the opportunity to explore issues and problems from different angles (Corbin and Strauss, 2015) and it can be used as a strategy to narrow the focus on emerging categories, developing these categories and refining them (Charmaz, 2014).

Following the initial sampling, a suggested shortlist of potential fifteen interviewees was drawn up. This included creative workers at Saudi YouTube-based programming, and those involved in production, management and presentation. However, considerations of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation have shaped the procedure, and the researcher ended up interviewing ten content makers. This wide range of respondents was selected to incorporate a diverse range of voices and experiences into the research.

As the shift took place towards theoretical sampling, I contacted new interviewees who were identified and ranked according to the concepts which emerged. The interviewees were mainly approached by using an online news and social networking service, Twitter Inc., where all the participants are active on this platform. In some cases, some interviewees co-ordinated with me to approach certain people that I could not approach using Twitter Inc.

Table 1 outlines the participants and their positions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the interview materials to be clear who the interviewees were and on what basis they were contributing to the thesis.

| <b>Name</b>                | <b>Position</b>                              | <b>YouTube Channel</b>       | <b>YouTube views</b> | <b>Notes</b>                                      |
|----------------------------|--|------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| <b>Abdullah Mando</b>      | Co-founder and Ex-CEO of UTURN network       | UTURN Entertainment          | 1.5 Billion          | Left the network and established his own business |
| <b>Malik Nejer</b>         | Art director and co-founder of Myrkott       | Myrkott                      | 391 Million          | Animation   |
| <b>Abdulmajed Alkenani</b> | Co-founder and creative director of Sceen TV | Sceen TV                     | 148 Million          | Mixer of factual online shows                     |
| <b>Anonymous</b>           | Presenter                                    | Anonymous                    | 30 Million           | Saudi Female                                      |
| <b>Mohammad Makki</b>      | Director                                     | TakkiSeries                  | 49 Million           | Drama online and then appeared on TV              |
| <b>Aymen Khoja</b>         | Director                                     | SargoShow                    | 233K                 | New Saudi-American drama in Jan 2016              |
| <b>Mohammad Bazaid</b>     | Presenter                                    | Quarter to Eight (talk show) | 18 Million           | The first Saudi show on YouTube                   |
| <b>Safana Sejini</b>       | Presenter                                    | Tabatek (cultural show)      | -                    | Saudi female                                      |
| <b>Saeed Baeshen</b>       | Actor and film maker                         | 8arwasha                     | 40 Million           | Drama that reflects on migrants                   |
| <b>Ahmed Aref</b>          | Presenter                                    | DeSTRoYeR                    | 81 Million           | Games   |

*Table 1: The participants and their positions*

For those who agreed to participate, an introductory email, outlining the purpose of the research, was sent to them, which was followed by a short online video meeting of ten to fifteen minutes (with some of the interviewees) to demonstrate the procedure, explaining the ethical form and its applications, agreeing upon the date of the main interview and the anticipated length of the interview.

This step was time-consuming but it was essential to engage deeply with participants in order to build robust and personal relationships with them so that they became comfortable in sharing their experiences with the researcher. Importantly, this also served as a professional etiquette technique to verify the authenticity of the interviewees by comparing their identity to information obtained from internet search. For instance, their photos on Twitter, their performance on YouTube and the news available about them in the public domain. It must be noted here, however, that some subjects did not have the time for the initial online video meeting so they preferred to be informed by the e-mail and then they participated in the main interview without the introductory meeting.

There have been some cases when some interviewees asked to look at the questions in advance, and so the researcher provided them with the main themes of the interview, indicating to them that the interview was semi-structured and that it would be based on the emergence of information. (the guide interview can be found in Appendix A)

In terms of the time-frame, the process of recruiting was intricate as the Saudi YouTube market is not fully institutionalized but rather differs greatly throughout the market. For example, I experienced different mechanisms of contact that spanned from contacting personal assistants of certain YouTube figures to direct contact with some contributors without going through the gatekeepers. The overall process of interviews

(from sending the first initial invitation email to the last interview) was conducted between July 2015 and February 2016.

The actual duration of interviews themselves varied from forty to eighty-five minutes and they were recorded by two methods; computer-based recording software and digital recorder to secure two separate copies of each interview in order to avoid any technical challenges so the data can be obtained and transcribed. This strategy was helpful because, during one of the interviews, the software encountered technical errors of which I was only aware at the end of the event. However, the digital recorder served as a rescue vehicle for this issue. In addition, there were some poor video calls because two of the participants, for instance, were using their mobile phones, instead of their PCs, which resulted in unfavourable communication quality. This led to a reliance on only using voice calls instead of video conferencing which dismissed non-verbal interactions.

At the end of each interview, the respondents were asked to sign and return the consent form which had been approved by the Ethical Committee in the College of Arts at the University of Glasgow (see Appendix B). Only one of the participants did not return the consent form although her verbal consent was recorded at the interview. Her contribution has been used throughout the study.

Indeed, all of the participants, with the exception of one female participant, did not ask to be anonymous but rather preferred to be identified in the research. (See Appendix C) One of the participants requested to take the decision of the identity at the end of interview when the participant joked at the end by stating that I have not spoken against the King so the anonymity was not needed. The willingness of the participants to be identified could be because all of them already have a strong online presence where all their online activities are known and traceable. In addition, the public engagement of the

participants and the nature of the research itself might imply the reasons behind their wish to use their real names.

When it comes to quoting the participants, it is important to state here that the thesis chose to identify the participants by their positions, their names and the year of the interview to help the readers to link the contributor into the themes of discussions.

In general, each interview started with an open discussion about the interviewee's background and how they got involved in YouTube activities so that they could get gradually into the interview. After that, the interviewer moved to the themes of the discussion, framing the questions in a general but yet tailored manner to get deeper into the experience of the interviewees. This required incorporating personal, professional and cognitive skills that I brought from my personal experience in order to balance the content and the process of collecting data through interviews.

### ***Focus Groups***

In order to investigate the analytical categories related to the Saudi audience, focus group interviews were utilized to uncover the interpretation by the Saudi audience of the social world of YouTube based-programming and to explore the complex relationship between the content and youth culture.

This method of using focus groups offered a rich and productive way to gain access to well-rehearsed public knowledge and highlighted the way in which social exchange has reinforced hierarchies especially when it comes to researching young people's experience of their social world (Michell, 1999). Focus groups can be defined (Barbour

and Kitzinger 1999) as group discussions that involve some kind of collective activity; for instance, viewing videos or discussing a set of questions in order to explore a specific set of issues. Methodologically speaking, focus group interviews involve gathering together a group of people who share a similar social and cultural background to debate and discuss certain issues with the assistance of a moderator (Liamputtong, 2011). The goal of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way that would not be feasible using other methods and thus focus groups are not natural and spontaneous, but rather are organized events (Gibbs, 1997).

The purpose of employing focus groups for this thesis was to probe deeply into the young Saudi audience's perspectives and to draw upon their beliefs, thoughts and experiences which is not possible using a numeric strategy. This method encouraged Saudi youth to tell stories about YouTube content; how they perceived it, how they saw it and how they reacted to it. As was explained previously, the refusal of the Saudi authorities to grant the researcher a visit visa encouraged a new way of thinking in terms of data collection. Since it was difficult to conduct focus group interviews with young Saudis in Saudi Arabia itself, I decided to take advantage of Saudi students in the United Kingdom who were sponsored by their government to pursue their various levels of education.

So, the city of Glasgow in Scotland was chosen to be the location of focus group interviews for various reasons including the availability of Saudi students in the city, the cultural and the educational significance of the city and the convenient access for me to this geographical location. The focus group interviews took place in two different educational settings: Glasgow Caledonian University and Glasgow Mena Trust Centre.

In response to determining the number of focus groups interviews, several factors that have been drawn from Morgan (2013) shaped the decision. Firstly, the general homogeneity of groups meant fewer conflicts between Saudi participants and more consistency, which enabled the researcher to anticipate at later stages what would be said next in a group. Being Saudi participants meant making the groups less diverse, but it did not produce complete, coherent points of view because of the various factors such as age, gender, educational level, cultural orientation and the level of religious practice. Secondly, the degree of structure in all interviews was standardized as well as a medium level of moderator involvement which decreased the variability of responses from group to group.

Morgan, (2013) suggests that three to five focus groups were standard for projects because simply having more groups seldom provided more meaningful new insights. Based on the above arguments, along with reflecting on the research purpose, research plan and the consideration of time and cost, the research conducted seven semi-structured focus groups interviews of twenty-nine participants in total. With regard to the segmentation, five Saudi-male focus groups and two Saudi-female focus groups were used. The number of participants in each group varied but it was very challenging to recruit Saudi females for these focus groups. The average number of Saudi-male participants for each group was 4.6 whereas the average number of Saudi-female was 3. (See appendix D)

The recruitment method used was theoretical sampling. It was guided by key characteristics that were considered relevant to the research problems of the Saudi audiences. The recruitment strategy of individuals incorporated a set of requirements for eligibility to take part in the study, including being a Saudi participant based in Scotland with a minimum age of seventeen years. No maximum age was put forward. All respondents were required to be familiar with, at least, one example of YouTube based

programming but the level of engagement was left unspecified so they did not have to be fans of certain shows or certain individuals on YouTube.

The recruitment strategy was initiated by me because I have an extensive social network with the Arab community in Scotland because of my engagements with several NGO organizations and through his experience as a presenter in the radio community in Glasgow. However, the strategy was enhanced via an intermediary who helped me to recruit eligible members to take part in the research.

With regard to recruiting the Saudi female participants, the issue of gender is highly sensitive in Saudi Arabia therefore the Glasgow based focus groups for Saudi females offered a free-er platform to discuss and debate their points of view. However, it was difficult to organize the groups and to obtain the sufficient number of participants within the groups themselves. The attendance rate was less when compared to Saudi male participants and this could be because they were uncomfortable in being part of the process. Working with a male researcher might be one of the reasons that contributed to this outcome along with other cultural and societal Saudi dimensions. All in all, the participants in the focus group interviews were different in their ages, occupational levels, and the number of years spent in the UK. The last factor was interesting to observe because the longer the participant has stayed in the UK the more liberal view he/she holds as the analysis revealed.

With regard to the focus group questions, they were open-ended and leading to allow engagement and they were organized around key topics; the popularity of YouTube based programming and the pattern of consumption. In addition, the focus groups allowed for new themes to emerge throughout the discussion in order to enrich the data of the research. Visual prompts were used except in the first group because of some technical issues. This stimulated conversation and discussion amongst the members of

the groups. The prompts showed top ten Saudi presenters and YouTube-based programming. Snacks and beverages were provided.

Focus group protocol was developed prior to conducting the interviews in order to build a road map for the procedure. The interviews started by welcoming the participants and providing them with an overview of the research. After that, participants were asked to fill in the fact sheet (see Appendix E) and the consent form respectively (see Appendix F). All participant's names were anonymous and their ages have been used to introduce them whenever they are quoted throughout the research along with the year of the interview. The interviews were moderated by myself and the aim was to facilitate the discussion and ensure fair distribution of ideas between all members of the groups (Appendix G). The interviews were recorded by two separate digital recorders to avoid any potential technical errors. Depending on the number of participants in every group, the time of interviews varied between thirty-five minutes to ninety-five minutes. The focus group method was flexible in the sense that later groups were informed and enhanced by the experience of early groups.

## **Transcription and Translation**

All online interviews with the content creators of YouTube based-programming and focus group interviews in Glasgow with their audience were conducted in the Arabic language. This meant that the process of post-interview follow up was time-consuming and required further efforts to transfer the oral discourse into narrative mode. Transcriptions are regarded as the solid rock-bottom empirical data of interview projects (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) and, therefore, special attention should be paid to this process.

The interviews were transcribed into the Arabic text by the researcher and this in itself was an initial analytical process that enhanced initial thoughts while conducting the interviews. The transcriptions were made manually because there is no software that can transfer sound files to written format in the Arabic language so far.

Arabic transcriptions were made after each interview to allow me to reflect upon the material and to organize initial codes that could be used in the following interviews and to construct a general understanding of the research problem. Pauses, emotional expressions and repetitions were omitted during the transcription to keep the data focused and ready for analysis.

The interviews were conducted and transcribed by myself. It was very significant in developing the coding and categories while the research was in process, but also it was time-consuming process. Therefore, the translation of Arabic transcripts to English language was outsourced online. The translation of transcripts was done by a professional freelance translator via the Upwork platform which is a global freelancing platform that connects businesses online.

Importantly, the names of shows, figures, cities, the country of origin and any other piece of information that could reveal the identity and the nature of the participants, their association and their nationality were deleted before handing the transcripts to the freelancer translator. The translations were good in general but I had to revise the English version to rectify some minor errors and modify the meanings of some local expressions.

It is important to mention here that, although all interviews were conducted in the Arabic language, the questions for the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were

prepared and written in English but they were delivered to the participants in Arabic. To ensure the quality of translated questions, two measures were taken. First, I am a bilingual which helped me to ensure the quality of translated questions. Second, this was enhanced by a 'back translation' technique where the questions were sent to one of my friends who is a linguist and professional translator to double check the accuracy of the translation before conducting the interviews.

Finally, the process of transforming the Arabic oral discourse to written format carries linguistic, cultural and meaning bias. Being a bilingual researcher and by applying the back translation technique, this can serve to reduce bias in the language used in the research. In addition, the sense of sensitivity of the researcher has been developed throughout the stages of the research which helped in reducing the bias.

## **Data Management and Analysis**

In order to organize the overwhelming amount of texts and field notes, a coding procedure was developed in order to be able to make sense of data. The ultimate goal was to develop a theory which Auerbachian and Silverstein (2003) defined as a description of patterns that had been found in the data.

To extract the patterns relating to YouTube based-programming, the first step was to apply a filtering strategy to connect the relevant text to the research problem and research questions. This was done by reading all the material line by line in order to understand the content, compare transcripts and exclude irrelevant text and consequently established memo-writing. Charmaz (2014) describes this process as

initial coding where the researcher is open to all theoretical possibilities which could emerge from the data.

As the breaking down of the data took place, the next step was to look for repeating ideas within and across groups to construct the main themes of YouTube based programming in Saudi Arabia. I was going back and forth to restructure and merge various themes according to their similarities or differences. This stage was labeled by Charmaz (2014) as ‘focused coding’ as the analysis moved towards conceptualizing segments of data as a result of active involvement with the material.

After that, theoretical constructs were developed as a result of processing the themes of the study. Headings and sub-headings of the research were inspired by the emerging themes and theoretical constructs of the analysis. The research then moved to what Auerbachian and Silverstein (2003) describes as theoretical narrative where the researcher pulls together all refined data in a coherent written story that pointed out the voice and the social world meanings of participants. This was coupled with integrating the relevant literature into the theoretical narrative of the research. Using the quotes enhanced the interpretation of this research. The theoretical narrative transformed the context of YouTube based-programming (the research problem) to the definite interpretation of how the Saudi youth redefine their role in the society through their participation in YouTube-based programming.

As for quality considerations, the research followed several techniques to enhance the value and the effectiveness of the thesis. Firstly, during the process of writing, I used the language and the words of the participants to resonate their voices and their life experience throughout the discussion. This sensitivity of the theoretical narrative offered the reader various insights but it also shaped the narrative scientifically. Second, linkage between the raw data and the emerged theoretical constructs was reviewed

frequently to ensure that the outcomes explained the meanings of the respondents. Third, special attention was paid to the process of data collection methods, the sensitivity in dealing with ethical issues of the field-work, the position of the researcher and the reflexivity as the research was processing. This also helped to ensure the aligning of the research purpose to its design in order to produce a coherent, flexible and good quality thesis.

One of the quality criteria used by qualitative researchers is member checking. This refers to presenting a written draft, oral report or the analysis for the participants to comment on the trustworthiness or authenticity of what has been produced (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Nevertheless, the major challenge for applying this criterion was the linguistic obstacle. As has been discussed above, the online interviews with content creators and the focus group interviews with the audiences in Glasgow were conducted in the Arabic language. The processing of the data, coding, labelling, theoretical constructs and the theoretical narrative were crafted in English. From the respondents' standpoint, this is resulted in a language barrier that made it difficult for them to comment on the analysis and offer the researcher any feedback. The resources available for a PhD researcher are limited in nature and it was highly challenging to facilitate this technique. According to Thomas (2016), member checking is unlikely to be relevant to research focused on theory development and there is little evidence, in general, that it improves the research findings. Thomas also mentioned several problems associated such as the low response rate and no substantive change in research findings.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has laid out an overview of the methodological considerations demanded by this study. It has presented coherently the relationship between researcher design, research methodology, fieldwork implementation and the process of analysis.

It started by explaining briefly the qualitative methodology and highlighting its practices, advantages and limitations. After that, it outlined the process of online semi-structured interviews with Saudi content creators - arguing about the logic behind ten interviews and explaining the procedure involved in theoretical sampling, issues related to timeframes and conducting the interviews ethically.

Following this, the process of focus group interviews with Saudi audiences in Glasgow was discussed. It showcased the theoretical implementation of seven semi-structured focus groups of twenty-nine participants and the procedure of conducting face-to-face focus group interviews with Saudi students. The issue of gender is highly sensitive in the Saudi context and this was fully explained, suggesting the potential reasons behind the low rate of Saudi female participants.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic and were transformed manually by the researcher because of the current absence of software that transfers the Arabic voice into written formats, but this step served as an initial analytical process for the whole procedure. The translation of Arabic text was outsourced to a professional translator online and the researcher reviewed them to rectify some minor mistakes and specific matters related to local culture.

Finally, the process of data management and analysis was examined - highlighting the initial coding, focused coding and theoretical construct, before examining the debate which has evolved around the issue of quality.

## **Chapter Three: The Public Sphere of Online Video**

### **Introduction**

The previous two chapters have provided the essential theoretical and methodological groundwork to pave the way for the analysis of the thesis. This chapter now shifts the focus towards engaging with materials drawn from online interviews with content makers of YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia. This chapter specifically focuses on the cultural and political context of YouTube-based programming; it will explore the circumstances surrounding the formation of this phenomenon, the motivations and issues faced by content makers, and the struggle of female presenters in this context.

As the literature review chapter highlighted, the concepts of political authoritarianism and politically motivated media outlets (Boyd, 1982; Rinnawi, 2006; and Sakr, 2007) are influential because they have shaped the context of the media industry in Saudi Arabia. It should be clear from the previous chapters that these external political factors have also led to internal cultural behaviours within media organizations where, for instance, the concepts of censorship and self-censorship (Amin, 2002; Khazen, 1999; Al-Obaidi, 2007; Sakr, 2003; and Wojcieszak, 2007) became common, defining the relationship between media institutions, the state and the individuals within the organizations. The following analysis builds upon these concepts and the general overview previously provided to explore the cultural and the political context of YouTube, and how the youth negotiate their cultural and political aspirations in such a restrictive environment.

For the sake of clarity, the chapter begins by first briefly introducing all the YouTube-based programmes and channels employed in this study in order to make sense of them in later analysis. Second, it maps out the Saudi cultural landscape to help contextualize the YouTube programmes culturally. Third, the analysis explores the formation of YouTube-based programmes, highlighting their motivations and other emerging issues related to representations. Finally, it pays special attention to females' participation, one of the significant themes to emerge in the analysis.

## **Introducing YouTube-Based Programmes and Channels**

This section aims to introduce the YouTube-based programmes and channels mentioned throughout the analysis in order to help the reader engage with the materials and make sense of them. The prominent features of each programme or channel will be briefly introduced, and the URLs will be provided for ease of access.

### ***Monopoly* film**

*Monopoly* is one of the first and the most prominent Saudi short films that used YouTube as a platform of exhibition in 2011. The 22-minute film provided a public critical narrative, which was not the cultural norm in the country back then, regarding the housing crisis in Saudi Arabia. *Monopoly* is a satirical mockumentary highlighting the struggle of Saudi youth in purchasing their homes. It indirectly blames influential political figures and associated business moguls in Saudi Arabia who control massive amounts of real estate that they monopolize, causing housing prices to rise beyond the financial grasp of young people. The film gained massive global media attention and it has been featured by a number of Arabic and Western media outlets. The film was written by Abdulmajeed Alkenani, who is one of the respondents of this study. Alkenani later co-founded a popular YouTube channel called ScenTV and he presented one of the programmes in the channel. *Monopoly* can be accessed and watched with English subtitles through this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMvCURQEhpM>

## **ScenTV**

ScenTV was established in 2012 and aims to enrich Arab online content. It provides a number of entertaining, cultural, educational and cinematic programmes which have received more than 152 million views. The channel incorporates a wide range of voices and attempts to distinguish itself from other YouTube channels by providing both entertaining and factual content. ScenTV can be accessed through this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/ScenTV/featured>

## ***Quarter to Nine***

This was the first regular Saudi YouTube-based programme by Mohammad Bazaid, who is one of the interviewees for this study. *Quarter to Nine* published its first episode on YouTube at the beginning of 2010, and it consisted of three seasons with 18 million views. The programme focused on criticizing the content of Saudi newspapers, with the last part of each episode devoted to criticizing Saudi classified advertising. Being the first Saudi YouTube-based programme, *Quarter to Nine* became popular amongst the audience, and it was the only YouTube-based programme that transferred to a private television channel, Rotana, which is owned by Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal. *Quarter to Nine* can be accessed through the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/s7ch/about>

## **Uturn Entertainment**

Uturn is an online entertainment network based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; it provides local and professional Arabic video content for Saudi internet users. According to the official website, the network was founded in 2010 and has amassed two billion lifetime views, with one hundred million views per month. Uturn has evolved over the years, expanding its scope to neighbouring Arabic countries with an eye to creating and aggregating premium and professional videos to promote Arabic content globally. The

network has a wide range of shows including social, religious and educational YouTube-based programmes to serve its young audience, mainly within Saudi Arabia and the Arabic Gulf countries. Uturn has won a number of regional awards and has been featured by various regional and international media outlets. It can be accessed through the following link: <https://www.uturn.me/i/about.php>

Importantly, Abdullah Mando, who is one of the interviewees for this study, was the co-founder and the first CEO of Uturn Entertainment between July 2010 and December 2012. During his time, the network expanded its scope in terms of production, exhibition and online distribution. As Uturn Entertainment expanded and the market became more complex, he became the Executive Producer of the network, making him responsible for the main YouTube-based programmes of the network such as *TakkiSeries*. In 2014, Mando established Qubba Studio, which focuses on producing premium content for both online and traditional media outlets.

### ***TakkiSeries***

*Takki* is one of the YouTube-based programmes produced by Uturn Entertainment. It began in 2012 and amassed almost 49.5 million views. What differentiates *Takki* from the rest of the YouTube-based programmes is that it is drama-oriented rather than being a talk show. The first season of *TakkiSeries* was produced and exhibited exclusively on YouTube, whereas the second season was acquired by Orbit Showtime Network (OSN), a private television network that operates in the Middle East and North Africa. The first season of the YouTube drama consists of fourteen episodes that ranged from ten to twenty minutes each. *TakkiSeries* offered an insight into Saudi youth issues that no official television channels had covered at that time. These issues include the struggle of women in the workplace, the relationships between males and females in public, the pressure placed upon non-Saudi residents who were born and raised in the country, the role of religious police at the time, and the drinking parties that some Saudi youth hold privately. *TakkiSeries* was directed by Mohammad Makki, who is one of the

interviewees for this study. The URL of *TakkiSeries*:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/TakkiSeries/about>

### **Myrkott Production**

Myrkott is a production company that is based in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, with thirteen full-time employees. The company focuses on animation and original content creation and it has several animated YouTube-based programmes with almost four hundred million views. Myrkott also provides original animated content for private non-YouTube clients such as the state of Qatar, the Kingdom of Sweden and big local and international brands. One of the most popular animated YouTube-based programmes is *Masameer (Nails)*, which tackles specific Saudi social issues by employing a satirical approach. One season of *NAILS* has been broadcast on Saudi state television. The website: <http://myrkott.com/>

Malik Nejer, who is one of the interviewees for this study, is the co-founder and the art director of Myrkott studio, and the popular *Nails* programme was associated with him along with the writer Faisal AlAmer.

### ***Tabateek (Small details)***

*Tabateek* is a cultural programme on YouTube by Safana Sejini, a female Saudi presenter. The programme focuses on promoting specific cultural traditions of the Western province of Saudi Arabia which is historically known as Hejaz. At the time of writing this piece, I noticed that the episodes have been deleted from YouTube without any explanation.

### ***SargoShow***

This is a Saudi-American drama that was directed by a young Saudi filmmaker, Aymen Khoja, who is one of the respondents for this study. The drama series was published on

YouTube in 2016 and tackles the issue of stereotypes between Saudis and Americans. The intention of the producer was to secure a place on television to exhibit the drama, so edited and shortened episodes were published on YouTube as an advertising technique. *SargoShow* can be accessed and watched through this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtY1k1Aborw>

### ***8arwsha (Noise)***

This is a comedy-based drama that deals with the social lives and struggles of non-Saudis, Arab residents in Saudi Arabia. The series started in 2011 and ran for two seasons of thirty-four episodes that range between six and eighteen minutes, garnering forty-two million views. The focus of the series was on daily life activities, and it abstains from dealing with any political or economic issues in Saudi Arabia. The URL of *8arwsha*: <https://www.youtube.com/user/8arwsha/about>

### **DeSTRoYeR**

This YouTube channel focuses on gaming and technology and it produces, in general, three videos per week. The channel was established in 2011 and has almost ninety million views in total. The URL of DeSTRoYeR: <https://www.youtube.com/user/ArabGamingNetwork/about>

## **Understanding The Saudi Cultural Context**

Having introduced the YouTube-based programmes and channels that will be examined in this study, this section now moves on to discuss the Saudi cultural context to set the stage clearly for this chapter. This weaving is significant because it situates the analysis

in its natural settings and more importantly it avoids assuming that the reader is aware of the cultural complexity of Saudi Arabia.

According to Teitelbaum, Ochsenswald and Philby (2016), there are three significant factors that influence the cultural and political context in Saudi Arabia: tribalism, religion and oil. The cultural setting is Arab and Islam, with the population being described traditionally as conservative-religious and family-oriented segments consisting of nomads, villagers and townspeople. The Wahhabism doctrine is a cultural hegemonic factor that affects the cultural setting, society and many aspects of social life, ranging from the public dress code to the role of women in society to the ban of public cinema at the time of writing. Wahhabism formed a religious-political alliance with the royal family which enables them to have great influence over Saudi society (Buchele, 2008 and Redissi, 2008). The strict doctrine of Wahabbism is one of the reasons behind the slow development of the state and society.

For instance, the first Saudi girls' school was established in 1956, but wider access to education for women only became commonplace in the 1970s (Hamdan, 2005). Gender segregation is a general norm when it comes to public and social interactions, with restaurants and hotels having separate areas for women. Banks have women-only branches and buses are divided into two sections, with the front being for women and the back for men (AlMunajjed, 1997).

This monopoly over the Saudi public narrative is maintained in line with the political interests of the royal family and the religious institution of the state to construct a cultural identity that serves and sustains the cultural and political status quo of the regime. This attitude of the authoritarian government has produced Arab public opinions that tend to be unrepresentative of what ordinary citizens think or need because of the political constraints and the elitist views of those figures who participate in the

media with no effect on the political regimes (Saghiyeh (2004) in Lynch, 2006). Hamzah (2005) confirms that this misrepresentation implies the absence of authentic public opinion, and thus the absence of a transnational Arab public sphere itself.

This political-religious narrative has also shaped the cultural structure in the country. For instance, the Saudi cultural critic Professor Al-Ghathami (2005) points out the paradox of modernity in the context of Saudi society, theorising it as a static format of the conservative society that rejects any changes. He argues that the collective mind of society opposes modernity by distorting the characters of theorists and attacking the message of modernity itself. Al-Ghathami maintains that key intellectual Saudi figures, including himself, are subject to massive political, religious and societal pressures in the press and public platforms; they are attacked and accused of secularism and treason because of their thoughts regarding modernity, the critical theory and its applications in the context of Saudi Arabia during the 1970s and the 1980s. The withdrawal of PhD awards, the use of pseudonyms in the press and the closure of culture sections in some newspapers are illustrative examples of the cultural struggle between conservatives and liberals in Saudi society.

The repression of Saudi intellectuals is also driven politically in order to silence any voices that criticise or challenge the political status quo. For example, a Saudi novelist named Abdul Rahman Munif, whose work has also been published in English, was stripped of his citizenship and banned from the Kingdom because of his critical views and publications against the regime (Abukhalil, 2004).

The status of the youth population has also been shaped by the cultural and political dominance of the state. The issue of youth marginalization is one of the prominent themes that concerns the young, especially following the Arab uprisings in neighbouring countries in 2011 (Schlaffer and Kropiunigg, 2011). Increased access to

communication methods and the lack of public outdoor activities, along with economic challenges, present a dilemma for young people and a challenge for the government.

The advent of social media networks has posed a particular challenge to the manipulation abilities of authoritarian regimes, including Saudi Arabia's. This is because social media allows information to be accessed and exchanged, resulting in the emergence of new online narratives. Also, it has facilitated the participation of grassroots voices in public affairs which had not been widely available to them. This concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) has subsequently transformed into multi-complex layers which have created a specific object of study such as regional sub-public spheres related to culture, religion, ethnicity or certain segments of society such as women or youth (Ayish, 2008).

Finally, the liberal policies of the late King Abdullah (2005-2015), who established, for example, a scholarship programme and introduced women widely into the workforce, have slightly improved the position of women in the country (Murphy, 2013; and Welsh et al, 2014). Nevertheless, this reform has not translated into significant changes as of yet. For instance, the Global Gender Gap Report (2016) demonstrates that the status of Saudi women has not improved significantly in terms of employability compared to Saudi men. The report ranks Saudi Arabia at the bottom of the global list, with the rank of 141 out of 144.

To conclude this section, the above contextualisation has aimed to serve as a departure point for this chapter in order to help set the stage for the analysis in the next section. It should provide the readers with the required background to position the following discussions within these complex political and cultural terrains to provide a solid understanding of the research problem.

## **The Formation of YouTube-Based Programmes**

The concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) describes the new social order of bourgeois families as a sphere of private people coming together as a public to exchange and discuss issues related to political and social concerns. Habermas discusses the evolution of the concept from bourgeois families to the institutionalization of public spheres and their functions. Arguably, the concept can also be extended to the use of public platforms, from public saloons to cafés to media platforms, to hold discussions and engage in rational debates about matters of concern for the gathered people.

However, in a non-democratic context, these public platforms might be not accessible to citizens and activists due to the nature of governance. For example, Saudi Arabia has maintained tight restrictions on the freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly (Amnesty International, 2017), which negatively affect both the cultural structure and the public sphere activities. The complexity of the Saudi case was further intensified when the government implemented sophisticated IT infrastructure to develop information technology services (Kaba and Said, 2014), which opened up virtual and accessible platforms to the public. As a result, the youth's use of social media platforms in Saudi Arabia has grown dramatically (Ayed, 2013; and Ramsay and Fatani, 2016). The literature review chapter also discussed several influential concepts such as the political motivation for building media systems and the authoritarianism of the state in affecting political and cultural activities in Saudi Arabia (Boyd, 1982; Rinnawi, 2006; and Sakr, 2007).

Based on these concepts, the analysis in this chapter investigates the rise of YouTube-based programmes that create what I argue to be “the public sphere of online video” in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi youth seemingly find cyberspace to be the only place to voice their concerns due to the lack of platforms that bring the youth together to debate and

negotiate their issues publicly. One of the most prominent phenomena that has taken place is the unprecedented boom of the YouTube platform (Ramsay and Fatani, 2016), which started in 2010. The youth organize themselves to produce YouTube-based programmes that reflect their opinions, concerns and views on culture and identity, a movement that also results in building a lucrative business for some creatives, as Chapter Four will illustrate.

Empirical data show that the emergence of YouTube, as a prestigious mechanism to distribute content, was spontaneous; it was never planned for or predicted. In the beginning, for example, the platform was not highly appreciated by the youth, as the following quote demonstrates: “When YouTube started in the Arabic countries, it was not such a platform...It was known as a site for scandals and so its reputation was tarnished” (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter of SceenTV, 2016).

A potential explanation for this early perception of YouTube might be that blog services and online forums, as Al-Saggaf and Williamson, (2004) and Al Nashmi et al. (2010) analysed, were more prominent and visible in Saudi Arabia. The most common practice for users was to engage with their text services. The blog service was particularly interesting for those who had the intellectual ability to produce, engage and offer critiques using written formats, but it limited the scale of reach and involvement.

The arrival of the video platform, YouTube, was a dramatic transition, although its advantages and benefits were not immediately recognized by Saudis, who took some time to adopt it. By reading between the lines of the previous quote, I argue that there could be several reasons behind this slow adoption of YouTube. First, the lack of original and relevant content available to the public meant that it was filled with scandals and other materials that were unlikely to be taken seriously by Saudis. The second issue was the lack of an innovative approach by the youth, who initially

perceived the platform as a consumption window rather than a production opportunity for themselves. Finally, technological advancement was in its early stages and the means of productions for individuals were slightly expensive. For instance, one of the interviewees highlights that YouTube flourished at a later stage because of the availability of technological means. “Technology plays an important role in the prosperity of YouTube as the old production technology such as the cameras and lighting systems [have been recently replaced with better and cheaper] technology” (Aymen Khoja, film producer of *SargoShow*, 2016). The context implies that this was not the case during the early stages.

The advancements in technology and the internet were the most important drivers for Saudi youth (Ghannam, 2011) to establish their virtual place for expressing themselves and igniting discussions about issues that mattered to them. As advancement in digital equipment increased its functionality, barriers to producing content gradually disappeared and the youth engaged randomly with the new platform. It took some time until the production of high-standard prestigious content for YouTube began in 2011. This was the production of *Monopoly*, the short YouTube film that highlights the housing crisis’ impact on the younger generation in Saudi Arabia. According to Alkenani:

*The big blast happened in the Monopoly film, for which I wrote the script. This film showed us how powerful YouTube is as a platform because it reached multiple levels. [For instance,] important channels like Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, the BBC and American newspapers have spoken about it. In addition, it was discussed using a Twitter hashtag, and famous names in the community have participated in this hashtag. It was absolutely unbelievable. (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter on ScenTV, 2016)*

*Monopoly* was not simply an early production for YouTube by Saudi youth, but it proposed several trajectories to be critically scrutinized in terms of the creators, the

message and the platform. As for the creators, the youth who produced this critical societal and political content, are the most important factor to discuss in the context of the visually mediated public sphere. They have traditionally been excluded from engaging in any form of economic, societal or public policy discussions (Al-Rasheed, 2008; and Yamani, 2008). However, producing *Monopoly*, which indirectly mentions the role of some members of the royal family and Saudi moguls in causing housing shortages across the country due to their control of large proportions of real estate, was a political act in itself. This indicates that with this film, they pushed the boundaries and posed a challenge to the traditional status quo, which has ignored the Saudi youth for a long time.

The youth redefine themselves as a public by igniting discussions about issues related to their interests, such as housing shortages and the rising unemployment rate. An interesting point to observe here is that this bottom-up professionally generated content (Kim, 2012) is employed by the Saudi youth to initiate public awareness and to reach Saudi audiences through YouTube. They utilize the new platform to produce a new public narrative in Saudi Arabia.

Secondly, the message of *Monopoly* is rational and critical; it highlights a specific, tangible challenge in order to publicize the struggles of the youth. The film ignited a massive amount of comments and debates about the issue, as the respondent highlighted above, which was not previously possible for the public. It also reflects the high self-awareness of Saudi producers as they publicize stories that are not told by mainstream media in Saudi Arabia, which avoids directing blame towards senior government figures for the deficit in housing availability.

In fact, the blame suggested in *Monopoly* was bound to be controversial in the public sphere, as those in power are not normally held accountable in Saudi Arabia. According

to Al- Rasheed (2008), the Saudi king has absolute power in Saudi Arabia; this extends from appointing the cabinet to legislation to foreign policy, which practically makes him responsible for the country in the absence of an elected parliament. Nevertheless, the Saudi youth direct their blame at ministers and local councils while praising the king and the royal family. It is worth mentioning that non-democratic practices can produce such behaviours. The notion of democracy itself is not perceived positively in Saudi Arabia by the government or by conservative institutions such as the Council of Senior Scholars.

In terms of platforms, YouTube provides a new medium to publicize local issues, which in turn triggers huge discussions and debates in wider circles of the youth community. The culture of connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013) has made it easy for messages to be distributed and debated across different platforms such as Twitter, no matter what platform the content was originally produced for. As a result, the connectivity of social media has led several prestigious Arabic and Western media outlets to pay attention to this societal shift online (Black, 2013; Smith, 2011; and Owens, 2012). This has helped some Western outlets get indications about Saudi Arabia, as it is difficult for some of them to gain access to Saudi territories.

One of the respondents illustrates how YouTube is very helpful for Saudis in terms of offering access to mass youth in the country and offering distribution windows for young publishers. He said that “the platform itself is helpful for Saudis. I cannot create long films because we do not have cinemas in Saudi Arabia to present our works” (Mohammad Makki, director of *TakkiSeries* and award-winning filmmaker, 2016).

It seems that the initiative of *Monopoly* has motivated several content creators to produce professionally generated content for YouTube in order to reflect and comment on the challenges and struggles of Saudi youth. This has been particularly useful as

YouTube and other online platforms have been the only place available for them in the absence of physical public platforms such as cinemas at the time of writing. “YouTube for me is a cinema as it offers 24 frames per second, and it may be called a small cinema or a portable one” (Saeed Baeshen, actor in *8arwsha* comedy series, 2016). Consequently, the new culture of engaging with society expanded across online platforms like YouTube, as more programmes appeared to highlight and present different issues from the perspective of Youth.

### ***Motivations and Consequences***

The empirical data elucidated that the primary motivation for Saudi youth to produce such programmes is to participate in public matters rather than being driven solely by financial interests. This stands against the argument of Ramsay and Fatani (2016), who demonstrate that commercial interests are the primary reason behind the development of YouTube programmes in the country. One of my interviewees highlights the following:

*One of the main incentives is that we were doing something that mattered to us. The team was already working in [traditional] media [organization], and we were able to see certain opportunities. However, due to the complexity and the politics of [our] organization; we were unable to do anything. So the programme offered us an opportunity to create things that we believe in. (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016)*

The above quote manifests several thoughts to be analysed in terms of motivation and representation. While the respondent and his team were working for a prominent Saudi news TV channel prior to launching their YouTube programme, the culture of work in the traditional media seemingly did not offer them a great deal of freedom to deliver their missions to the Saudi public due to the sensitivity of the environment in which they were operating. In this context, the youth found themselves in an inconvenient

situation where neither their employers nor the structure of the social system offered them the freedom to express their concerns about affairs related to youth and their communities.

Another interviewee maintains that his reasons for participating are as follow: “As a painter, I wanted to create something that improves people's taste and makes them more sceptical, more critical about taboos in society. I want to expose it to a big number of people” (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016).

While this evidence supports the idea mentioned above, it additionally reveals a deep need for creative talents to expose and express their thoughts and ideas publicly, which is a human desire. Saudi youth are hungry for public engagement and participation and seek a greater role in society. They want to create positive changes and rectify inaccurate understandings of certain societal issues from their points of view. Dealing with taboos in Saudi society through their programmes can cause a conflict between traditional institutions and some liberal Saudi talents. Such conflicts are highly likely to arise when it comes to different interpretations of family values, personal freedoms and stances on the political regime, as Chapter Five will explore.

Again, the quotation implies a vital shortage of public environments for enabling the youth in particular to gather and discuss matters that concern them. The Saudi government has to take brave and positive steps to engage more with the youth by offering or allowing the private sector to set up platforms and incubators to assemble and discuss publicly so they can improve the public spirit of Saudi Arabia instead of keeping society under pressure. The youth push the boundaries and overcome governmental constraints by utilizing online platforms, which itself might not be sufficient to produce real change unless it is backed up with offline activities (Ayish, 2001).

Also, this should not contradict the fact that youth additionally look for any spheres to prove themselves (Khalil, 2010), unleash their intellectual energy and leave a legacy behind. As Nejer puts it, “As you know, everyone wants to achieve something to be remembered for, to prove and satisfy himself and to leave a legacy behind” (Malik Nejer, co-founder, and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016).

In fact, these marginalized voices were unheard until they utilized the platform of YouTube to critique government services, the performance of some ministries and some societal behaviour. For instance, by adopting and Saudisizing the American format of *The Daily Show*, the youth attract considerable attention and create influence over the public sphere narrative, which has traditionally been controlled by official and semi-official Saudi media organizations; the literature review chapter discussed the work of Lynch (2006) in this regard.

Losing an absolute monopoly over the local narrative in the country can be a serious concern for the government (Peterson, 2002), which faces genuine societal challenges in the wake of falling oil prices. For instance, the wealth of the Kingdom has been used for decades to silence the public (Yamani, 2008; and Al-Rasheed, 2008), but as the oil crisis of 2015 began to affect public welfare, user generated content producers started using online media to question the future of the country in the absence of democratic procedures. The reality of this newly coined narrative from youth is introducing new customs and culture to the nation. The empirical evidence in this research demonstrates that there is no major immediate challenge to the regime, which is similar to the views of Ayish (2001) and Kalathil and Boas (2003). However, no one can be certain about the future. It primarily depends on how far the youth can go, and on the behaviour of the government in the face of this phenomenon.

Interestingly, politics and current affairs were not the only topics that flourished on YouTube, but culture and the societal arena have also found their position in this discourse. For example, “the thing that motivated me to enter the world of YouTube is [that I wanted to] talk about our customs, traditions and our local popular phrases” (Safana Sejini, presenter and freelancer copywriter, 2016). This niche of contributions to culture exemplifies the birth of a new trend in the Saudi virtual public sphere where the producer attempts to add value to the public by offering new content, although it might be not so popular with the youth. She explains:

*We have grown and become accustomed to watching TV for the purpose of [only] watching news or soap operas. Few people look for useful things on TV or in newspapers. This is [one of the] reasons why we do not react well to the arts, cultural events and exhibitions.* (Safana Sejini, presenter and freelancer copywriter, 2016)

The lack of interest in cultural YouTube programmes might echo the taste of the Saudi youth, many of whom have a greater interest in politics and entertainment as a reaction, possibly, to the political deprivation in society. The quote also indicates that not enough effort has been put by Saudi educators and policy makers into including cultural discourse in the education system so as to promote it as one of the essential components of society. This analysis indeed matches the findings of Ayish (2012), who states that there is little visibility of a cultural studies perspective being integrated into the curriculum of twenty Arab universities that were surveyed.

The use of YouTube as a platform to disseminate content that promotes new narratives has helped to create a virtual space for the exchange of views amongst the Saudi youth online. This, in fact, poses a question about the nature of the targeted audience from content creator's point of view. The empirical data explain that some content creators

target their audience perfectly, whereas others are not able to predict the metric insights of YouTube. Bazaid states that:

*[O]ur target was both males and females but with more focus on males who are fresh graduates and fresh employees, 23 years old, and are concerned about matters of public interest, caring about local issues that affect them. (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016)*

As discussed earlier, there is a sharp shortage of civil society institutions that have the ability to accommodate youth discussions about public issues. The presenter in the above quote was well aware of this shortage and was therefore trying to occupy this niche by offering critical messages to catch the interest of his audience. The respondent continues, “The metric proved us right and this [segment] was actually our main viewers...The reason why we were targeting this specific segment is because we have the ability and the capacity to speak to them” (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016).

The phrase ‘speak to them’ used by the respondent in the above quote deserves deep examination. It indicates that the message was sincere, simple and straightforward for the right audience, which is comprised of viewers who have suffered from marginalization by official bodies in Saudi Arabia (Khalil, 2010). ‘Speak to them’ is significantly remarkable as it implies that there is no gap or distance between two parties; the presenter is considered part of the youth who understand his segment. The presenter speaks their colloquial language with their accent, and more importantly discusses common-interest issues related to them.

This could imply that governmental and privately owned media outlets do not have the ability or capacity (Lynch, 2006) to hook the young audience and speak to them sufficiently. If we link the history of the Saudi media to the contemporary context, then it should not surprise observers that television has traditionally positioned itself higher

in the hierarchy, where it reports to citizens the protocol news or what those in power want to deliver to the public, as Boyd (1982) explains. In contrast, YouTube offers an alternative space that positions both senders and receivers equally. The receiver has the right to disagree with the content, criticize it and respond either by inserting comments or by making a video, a phenomenon that Meikle and Young (2012) theorize as creative audience. This is a major change for the youth who were marginalized, and it opens the door to various implications for the social and economic future of youth. Another interviewee describes introducing a new dimension for their targeted audience:

*We wanted to make a show that is very close to the public and reflects the cultural variety that exists in Saudi Arabia, where there are many local and expatriates who live together in a funny way. (Saeed Baeshen, actor in 8arwsha comedy series, 2016)*

The above discussion inspires several considerations in terms of the credibility of these programmes' messages. The perception of being in an equal position to the content creators makes the message seem close to the hearts and minds of the receivers, who apparently look for people to talk to them directly. Also, trust can be established easily between two parties due to the simplicity and authenticity of the message. This authentic message might motivate debate further and enhance the flow of discussion amongst the youth. Another point here is that this should, in theory, provide the participants with the skills of negotiation and know-how for dealing with diverse opinions about a given public matter. Challenges, difficulties, building coherent arguments and misunderstandings are all expected to occur during the process of discussion, but they are the only way to sharpen the youth's skills in the absence of genuine offline platforms.

### *Empowerment of Youth*

The above discussion leads to another dimension to be considered in this context, which is the empowerment of youth. The youth spark discussion through YouTube-based programmes which lead to a sort of empowerment (Khamis and Vaughn, 2014; and Zayani, 2015). Empowerment here could take several shapes and forms. First, a certain degree of political influence within youth circles can be gained because pointing out societal challenges usually provides creators with an element of authority in the community. Secondly, YouTube-based programmes enhance the confidence of creators by enabling them to address more public matters that relate to them from their point of view. Third, it promotes a culture of ‘speaking up’ through the cameras and therefore encourages and empowers ordinary young people to participate in public discourse.

This empowerment carries elements of leadership, where taking the lead and breaking societal taboos are the most prominent features of Saudi youth initiative. This aptitude for spotting the needs of the youth community and then delivering on them publicly by producing related content on YouTube should be a clear message to policy-making circles that the youth are becoming an active factor. The lack of organizations that support the youth is a concerning sign because it offers no public platforms for Saudis to express their thoughts freely. This might engender the conditions for inappropriate and unwanted behaviours, such as extremism, to grow in the dark.

In essence, the Saudi youth have never been granted any platforms to share and exchange their thoughts with officials or even with other members of the public, but rather they took the risk and pushed for it wisely and gently. This might pose challenges for the regime, which has long enjoyed a monopoly on interpreting political, economic and even religious incidents that matter to society. Losing control over the dissemination of information is problematic for authoritarian regimes in general as it

gives rise to an alternative narrative that can challenge the stability and even the legitimacy of the government.

The self-empowerment of Saudi youth, gained through YouTube-based programmes, suggests that they have the ability to cross traditional lines carefully, without annoying the royal family. This section found that in closed political regimes such as Saudi Arabia, activists employ social media outlets only to criticize medium- and low-level state agencies. They usually avoid blaming the head of state or other senior political and military figures for shortcomings in the country.

I would argue there are several reasons for such behaviour. First, it is a safe opportunity for them to unleash and express their disappointment with the government's performance without being subjected to its rage. Those online activists may know that the absolute power of the head of state makes him responsible, in theory, for the performance of the government, yet they avoid criticizing him for the sake of their personal safety. Second, this provides youth with what this research describes as an imagined release, the chance to express their critiques without any fundamental changes in public policy. It is essential to mention here that criticizing any level of governmental agencies has not been acceptable in the past, but time and technology have changed these standards for the younger generation. The argument this research puts forward is that any potential future economic and political struggle might empower the youth further to raise their standards again.

The following section focuses on the empowerment of Saudi females that was made available to them through digital developments including YouTube-based programmes. The discussion of females' empowerment is an extension of the above debate, but I choose to place it in a section of its own because it is a prominent issue and its emotional resonance comes through in the tone of the respondents.

### *Female empowerment*

The struggle of women in different fields is a global issue that extends across cultures and societies. However, this issue should not be approached as if it were a single case; rather, the historical circumstances of every case has to be taken into consideration separately (Afshar, 1993). The specific case of Saudi women is rooted deeply in the cultural practices of the country, which has been discussed previously. Sex segregation is one of the most striking cultural features in the country, and it has forced Saudi women to develop their own private female spheres (Le Renard, 2008).

One of the themes that emerged in this analysis is the empowerment of Saudi female presenters who have participated publicly in YouTube-based programmes. It is a significant theme, especially if we take into considerations the complexity of Saudi culture and the poor participation of women in public spheres (Global Gender Gap Report, 2016). This section therefore explores the experiences of women presenters to understand how they transitioned from private-female spheres (Le Renard, 2008) to public-mixed spheres through the lens of YouTube in Saudi Arabia.

One of the factors that emerged in the previous sections was the lack of women's presence during the formation of YouTube-based programmes. When women involved in YouTube were interviewed, this point was made very clear by them and it reflects a massive gender gap in the everyday practices of cultural activities in the country. For example, one of the interviewees found the lack of women's input to be significant, which motivated her to respond to this gap by participating in YouTube-based programmes. The respondent chooses the term "no voice for women" (Anonymous female presenter, 2016) to describe her disappointment over the absence of women in the public domain or, more accurately, over the cultural obstacles that have prevented

their public participation. This presenter is amongst the very few who strives to break the male dominance in YouTube-based programmes by presenting her programme about Saudi social issues through the lens of women.

*I wanted to present the voice of woman on YouTube in a decent way...[My] programme critiques social issues from the perspective of women in a funny way. [In general], there is no place for women with a hijab on TV with ... I wanted to [present] in a stylish and smiley way that is not against our customs and traditions. (Anonymous female presenter, 2016)*

One of the key points in the above quote is her funny and sarcastic approach to tackling social issues. Being a comedienne can make her vulnerable to social and cultural pressures from sectors that disapprove of females' public engagement, let alone her funny approach. However, what this quote also suggests is that although the legal and cultural institutions of the state impose constraints on Saudi women's public lives, there is a margin of freedom that can be employed to challenge the public perception of women. The participant found a gap and decided to show leadership by breaking the cultural taboos around participating in a cultural activity. However, being a female in a male-dominated public sphere inevitably brought its pressures, as she stated that "some people may have problems with their thinking about women" (Anonymous female presenter, 2016).

It seems that Saudi women face a multi-layered challenge; this is demonstrated by the above quotation in light of the specificity of Saudi culture as it was examined at the beginning of this chapter. First, it highlights the seriousness of the absence of women's voices in public issues. Secondly, there is the respondent's emphasis on certain vocabulary such as "decent", "stylish", "customs" and "their thinking about women", all of which indicate the hidden cultural complexity around the appearance and the expected character of women on public screens. The public appearance of Saudi women is culturally problematic enough, but this is further exacerbated by the comedic style of

her critiques. A third point is the attempt of the participant to respond to what she refers to as "women with a hijab" on Saudi television. Kraidy (2013) discusses the policy Saudi television reform that led to the employment of some female presenters with hijabs. A possible interpretation of the quote could be that the participant meant that women who take a comedic approach are excluded from television and she wanted to offer a new perspective.

While this might offer an indication of the general state of Saudi women's participation in public events, it also demonstrates that the Saudi public domain is mainly dominated by males, while the role of females is greatly marginalized (Le Renard, 2008; and Global Gender Gap Report, 2016) and made less visible. This lack of visibility can be related to the influence of Saudi culture, which has its own narrative in terms of gender expectations. The policy of segregation in educational institutions (Murphy, 2013) and the ban on public social mixing between the genders (AlMunajjed, 1997) can result in barriers to communication between young men and women.

Apart from the cultural context of the country, several respondents argued that there were other factors that led to the absence of creative women in the production process of YouTube programmes, such as the lack of training. "If you are talking about talent, the only platform that presents talented and creative people is the theatre, and unfortunately the state of the theatre is terrible" (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter on ScenTV, 2016). This quote describes the lack of opportunities for both genders, but it points to the specific difficulty for women to learn and develop their production skills. The respondent associated the existence of talent to a strong presence of theatre, which can feed into other aspects of cultural activities. The lack of support for creative infrastructure has resulted in the shortage of Saudi talents. It can be argued that the lack of public support for theatres is responsible, but Saudi theatre itself is not to be blamed for this shortage. The poor state of theatre is just a consequence of the state of the cultural industry in Saudi Arabia.

The poor state of infrastructure and intellectual property regimes (Price, 2009) have created an uncertain environment that is full of obstacles and challenges for the Saudi youth. As one of the interviewees pointed out, “In terms of production, it is dominated by men...[but] it is difficult for men in Saudi Arabia to work in this industry, let alone for women” (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016). This demonstrates that the previously discussed cultural constraints are one reason for the absence of women, but this is coupled with the legal and institutional ambiguity (Price, 2009) and the uncertainty of the culture industry, including visual productions.

The gender gap caused by cultural, political and legal measures has resulted in a lack of understanding between men and women in terms of their consumption needs. For instance:

*[T]he percentage of female viewers over forty episodes was 13%, compared to 86% male viewers. It shows [that] the nature of our programme has caught the interest of more males than females in Saudi Arabia. (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016)*

Bearing in mind the male dominance of the culture industry, these viewership statistics suggest that the lack of female input in the production process may have resulted in another gap in the consumption of these programmes. It is difficult to be certain about the reason behind these figures, but it would be unfair to suggest that the political nature of the programme drove the female audience away, an explanation that reinforces inaccurate stereotypes about women, as in the following quotation:

*I think that the content of [YouTube] programmes is not for [Saudi] females. Our channel contains a variety of programmes but most of them are for men, not to mention that the interests of women are different and I think most of them are interested in watching [TV] series. (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter on ScenTV, 2016)*

This quote is problematic because it is based on the categorization of women as consumers of a certain type of dramatic, apolitical content. This can create more questions than answers about whether there could be changes if more women got involved in YouTube production and whether young Saudi women require certain types of content.

### ***Online Reactions***

As stated previously, the production aspects of YouTube-based programmes are dominated by young Saudi men, with limited visibility for Saudi young women since the establishment of this phenomenon in 2010. However, the few Saudi women who decided to engage in these public activities in 2012 by moving themselves from the private female sphere (Le Renard, 2008) to the public mixed sphere have experienced serious challenges and societal pressures from certain parts of the online community.

One of the reactions was the considerable number of male viewers for these programmes. For example, one of the interviewees stated that “the statistics of YouTube showed us that 49% of [my programme’s] viewers are men, and that was a little shocking for me” (Anonymous female presenter, 2016).

Although the presenter was surprised by the overwhelming number of men who watched her show, this result matches the analysis in the previous section that outlined the dominance of men in both the production and consumption of the programmes. Her surprise reflects unspoken gender expectations, but even in a conservative country, being a female presenter does not automatically mean that the vast majority of viewers will be females, especially considering the public nature of the programme. When asked about her interpretation of the high number of male viewers for her show, the

respondent said, “[I think] men may be curious to know how women think about some of the social issues” (Ibid).

This section argues that such programmes might serve as a catalyst to bridge the gap between genders and to bring them closer together under the umbrella of public discussion. This is one of the opportunities that online platforms introduce to the lives of the youth, and it has since become the online norm on other video platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. The gender paradox in Saudi Arabia has been further fuelled by these online platforms because the public offline mixing of genders is very limited and often prohibited, but the rules of segregation are bypassed on online platforms, where both genders can interact and collaborate with each other.

The second reaction was the strong responses of some parts of the online community towards the participation of Saudi women in YouTube in 2012. For example:

*There was and still a segment of society that rejects my appearance in the first place... and this why they attack me. I reply to them that if you have any comment about the content, I will be very glad to consider it. However, if your problem is only my appearance, then you are not the targeted segment, and it would be better for you to not watch my programme.* (Anonymous female participant, 2016)

The strong emotional tone of the presenter highlights the impact on her of this rejection, which is related to her gender. This case sheds light on the nature of certain segments of Saudi society that subscribe to a certain narrative in terms of women’s roles in the public sphere (Al-Ghathami 2005; Buchele, 2008; and Redissi, 2008). In addition, ordinary members of the public might comment negatively about the presenter without necessarily being motivated ideologically, but because they have been shaped by the culture. The same interviewee revealed that “the most painful comments were the ones that talked about my appearance like: Hey ugly, hey fat, hey bad, hey elephant” (Anonymous female presenter, 2016).

The anonymity of commentators fuels such behaviour (Boyd, 2012 and; Lang, 2007). While the motivation for such behaviour is uncertain, the context of the incident implies that it took place as a result of her public appearances. This segment of the audience paid attention to the appearance of the presenter rather than to the message itself, which reflects limited and extreme views toward Saudi women. Another female presenter experiences the same difficulty:

*The attack was very severe especially because my family is a well-known one...[and] this attack has caused a lot of disturbance to the family name. This happened because some of them used some filthy and inappropriate words. In addition, I received many text messages that insulted me. (Safana Sejini, presenter and freelancer copywriter, 2016)*

Online abuse (Sengupta and Chaudhuri, 2011) has taken the most sensitive form in those conservative societies that value the family name and the honour of the name in an attempt to mobilize the family and the relatives of the presenter to prevent her from participating in the programme. Publicising the private telephone number of the presenter to criticize her severely is not only a breach of her privacy, but also shows unethical resistance to what should be a right for young Saudi women. The impact of the comments was severe enough that both female presenters were about to withdraw from engaging in online public platforms to avoid online harassment.

*I was about to suspend the programme...since I thought the programme wasn't worth it. I am from a decent family and I have kids so why should I put myself into this situation. (Anonymous female participant, 2016)*

The climate of fear and threats presents the danger of a drain of talent, which is already scarce, from the newly formed public mixed sphere. Huge societal pressures could be faced by family, friends or wider circles of society due to a female's public participation.

The massive online harassment against the families is a powerful deterrent to participation, especially in a conservative country where the family and its reputation are so important.

The third reaction, surprisingly, is the general liberalism introduced to a certain segment of Saudi youth online. Vast societal and cultural changes have occurred in Saudi Arabia, particularly upon the young population, over the last decade (Murphy, 2013). These changes are partly a result of the enormous numbers of students studying abroad and massive non-state television channels owned by liberal members of the Saudi royal family and other associated business moguls, which broadcast liberal Arabic and American cultural products to the Saudi public (Sakr, Skovgaard-Petersen and Ratta, 2015). In addition, advances in technology, backed by a strong IT infrastructure (Kaba and Said, 2014), have fuelled the pace of societal change. These factors have all resulted in introducing a sense of liberalism to the youth population.

One aspect of the media-cultural paradox is that all liberal private television channels are based outside the country (Fandy, 2007; and Kraidy, 2013), meaning that they do not have to comply with Saudi legislation. Therefore, they produce cultural products that are incompatible with Saudi values as the conservative institutions perceive them. This explains why several Saudi women presenters can go 'live' without wearing hijabs, unlike their counterparts in state television (Kraidy, 2013), which is run from within Saudi territory. That means the Saudi women need to take a geographical aspect into consideration when they get involved in media activities.

However, the various online platforms reveal that some young and influential female figures online have actually shown liberal attitudes. For instance, Darin Al Bayed, who is the host of a YouTube programme, has also utilized other online platforms to create comedic content (Akerman, 2016) from within Saudi Arabia, which led to her having

4.2 million followers on Instagram as of January 2018. Some women film their daily activities without wearing the hijab, which is a compulsory tradition in the country. In addition, they show themselves publicly socializing with their male colleagues, which is also not a common Saudi practice. Saudi Arabia is changing gradually and it seems that this change is not visible yet to non-Saudi observers. This thesis suggests that this change takes two forms: direct and indirect.

In terms of direct change, there is some soft rebellious behaviour by some young women online who oppose the current structure of culture, not only in terms of dress code but also in their own political and societal views. They usually utilize their personal Instagram and Snapchat accounts to disseminate this unspoken rebellion culture. Recently, using YouTube as a form of professional production has become less common for those figures, as they have migrated to Snapchat and Instagram, which is an interesting phenomenon in itself. As for indirect change, a relative culture of acceptance is now emerging in Saudi Arabia. Whether the vast majority of the online public accept this behaviour or not, there is no option left but to live with this new reality that has penetrated an enormous number of smart phone users. Conservative figures also utilize online platforms (Matthiesen, 2015; and Mellor and Rinnawi, 2016) to disseminate their message and shape the Saudi online and offline spheres. Local culture and traditions are still dominant amongst the mainstream in the country.

Finally, the general deficit of female participation supports the academic analysis by Ftouni (2012), who states that Arab women are underrepresented in language and society. The author calls for new modes of thinking and knowing that take women's lived experiences as a foundation for knowledge in line with current Arab feminist scholarship. Discussing Arab feminism is beyond the scope of this study, but it is vital to signal that this line of thought is controversial and it is still in its very early stages in Arab countries.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter is to answer the first research question, which concerns the role of YouTube-based programmes in the cultural and political context of Saudi Arabia. The analysis borrows and utilizes some concepts from the literature review, such as the political authoritarianism of the regime and the political motivations of media outlets (Boyd, 1982; Rinnawi, 2006; and Sakr, 2007), to make sense of the complexity of the research problem. However, these concepts are used as departure points for the analysis, and not treated as core guidance, to avoid devising theories based on pre-assumptions rather than emerging themes. The reason for this is that the study employs grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2014; and Corbin and Strauss, 2015), which requires openness to what happens over the course of the research to allow the emergence of new patterns of knowledge to address the research problem.

The analysis has focused on those young people who took the initiative to voice their concerns and critiques publicly by producing YouTube-based programmes. I have labelled this theme as *the public sphere of online video* in Saudi Arabia. This concept demonstrates and explains the gradual change in the attitude of youth towards breaking the cultural and political manipulation of the traditional institutions, the state, and its associated media investors over the narrative of the Saudi public.

Based on the above analysis, Saudi youth, who seem aware of their political limitations, act as agents of change subtly and have the willingness to push the political boundary to where no one had gone before; a case in point is the film *Monopoly*, which subtly criticizes both business moguls and officials for creating the housing crises by monopolizing the Saudi real estate sector.

The rise of this new socio-political culture, which bypasses the governmental monopoly over the interpretation of information, is one of the main dimensions of the idea of *the public sphere of online video*. The authoritarian regime has lost its cultural hegemony over society, regardless of how heavily it invests in order to dominate the mediascape (Kraidy, 2013; and Sakr, Skovgaard-Petersen and Ratta, 2015). This seems to have pushed for a margin of freedom that shapes the public discourse, which can be translated into a new form of relationships between the authorities and young people.

However, this chapter has cautiously avoided exaggerating the impact of this change on the socio-political structure of the country; it is unlikely to lead to a radical political transformation in the political system of Saudi Arabia because of the political-religious framework of the governance. This is in line with Ayish (2001) of the relationship between online-offline activities and change. It also stands against the notion of digital determinism, which has been strongly criticized by a number of researchers such as Fuchs (2012) and Zayani (2015).

This technology and its applications, namely YouTube-based programmes, can bring a sense of political and cultural liberalism to the online community, but it does not necessarily produce constructive democratic practices for the society offline. This chapter has argued that this online liberalism has served as a window of release to those young people who have suffered from cultural and political exclusion by the state.

Another essential finding relating to the coined concept of *the public sphere of online video* is the impact of Saudi youth on participatory culture in its broader sense. Despite the poor cultural infrastructure – for instance the ban on cinemas and the lack of support for theatres, funds and training – young people have continued experimenting with their programmes until they reached the stage where they could offer premium content that attracts Saudi audiences online. The self-reliance of young people to produce public

goods highlights a massive deficit in the Saudi cultural policy, if there is any, in dealing with this massive cultural gap. The state and the private sector lag behind some of these ambitious and progressive young people and there is a need for a political decision to consider establishing the Saudi cultural industry in order to accommodate and capitalize on local talent. This also has a massive potential to create economic value because of the significance of the Saudi media market in the region. Such a suggestion can fit in with the controversial plan of Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the Saudi economy away from oil, but this might invite clashes and confrontations with different segments of society.

The discussion has also revealed that the ordinary young people who became YouTube-based programme makers have become what Turner (2010) describes as online celebrities. Some of the individuals who were involved in the production of YouTube-based programmes gained fame, influence and financial benefits, focusing on commercializing their outputs and allowing themselves to be driven by market forces, as I shall argue in the next chapter. Their function has changed over time in response to various factors. Consequently, this has motivated some of them to move from being online critics who represent critical voices to being less politically critical in order to pursue commercial gains. For instance, the online Women2Drive campaign of 2011 (Almahmoud, 2015) was not called for by new online celebrities, but by offline activists or ordinary internet users who felt less constrained by the financial calculations.

In terms of the participation of women, the analysis found that the activities of YouTube-based programmes are dominated by Saudi men with very limited presence of Saudi women. It also revealed that the online discrimination against women presenters in 2012 is clear, and it is solely based on the gender of the presenters. These findings echo the outcomes of the Global Gender Gap Report (2016), which raises concerns about the opportunities and access available to Saudi women in society. Saudi women face a number of pressures because of general political and cultural repressions but,

more importantly, because of the challenge of gender roles and expectations in their country.

However, this examination suggests that Saudi women do have the power to push for a cultural shift, for instance by challenging the cultural *status quo* and presenting on YouTube. Although the reaction was severe at the beginning, it has imposed a new reality on the online cultural landscape and consequently it has become less controversial over time.

The experience of YouTube-based programmes has indicated that Saudi Arabia's online world is changing dramatically with more young people participating in cyberspace. This has resulted in introducing new forms of culture, content and media flows. It has helped to develop an alternative platform for young people, but the impact on offline activities may need a longer time to be realized.

# **Chapter Four: Business Dynamics in the Saudi YouTube Market**

## **Introduction**

As discussed in Chapter Three, YouTube-based programmes in Saudi Arabia are primarily inspired by political and cultural aspirations as the youth employ the platform to voice their opinions over various local issues. The industry's growth, however, has triggered business-oriented thinking amongst a number of producers, and this is one of the themes that emerges profoundly throughout the analysis process.

This chapter addresses the second research question, which focuses on exploring the business models created and utilized by producers of professionally generated content in Saudi Arabia between 2010 and 2016. By focusing on the perspectives of young producers, this chapter eschews an investigation of the economics of YouTube itself and its monetization strategies, such as participating user-partners (Balnaves et al, 2009). Instead, it focuses on how Saudi producers monetize the platform to serve their interests without engaging directly with YouTube.

Chapter One discussed a number of influential concepts such as the two-sided market (Farchy, 2009); the unsustainability of YouTube's business model (Wasko and Erickson, 2009); digital discords (McDonald, 2009); and professionally generated content (Kim, 2012). Although these concepts, generally speaking, theorize the media economics of the platform itself, they can also provide useful departure points for the analysis in this chapter. I intend to engage with these concepts to theorize the specific business models created by individual Saudi producers.

The chapter begins by providing an overview of the political economy of media in the Saudi context in order to help realize its complexity. Second, it explores the development of YouTube market, conceptualizing it with three categories: *Abstract*, *Concrete* and *Innovative*. The categories are examined in the context of revenue, the attitude of YouTube Google Inc., human capital and market behaviour. Finally, it explores the relationships between advertising and YouTube-based programmes at the three conceptualized stages to provide an understanding of the behaviour of advertising, which is a crucial force in the economics of YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia.

## **Understanding the Political Economy of Saudi Media**

With its oil-based economy, Saudi Arabia is the world's largest exporter of petroleum; the sector accounts for almost 87 percent of the nation's revenue. In 2014, it became the nineteenth largest economy in the world with its nominal GDP of approximately \$750 billion (McKinney Global Institute, 2015). According to Askari (1990), the oil policy is determined at the highest level of government where the King, the Crown Prince and the Second Deputy are the ultimate decision makers. Saudi oil policy is motivated by broad political and economic considerations as opposed to technical factors.

The oil-based economy enables the state to act as the main financial source for public and private sectors, and enables the government to exert its hegemony on different areas of influence, including the national, regional and even international media industries. The political motivation for the Saudi state (Kraidy, 2013) to use the media as a public policy arm dates back to King Faisal (1964-1975), who invested in building new radio stations to counter Egyptian republican radio attacks against the Saudi royal family.

King Faisal employed oil-based revenue to create a global Islamic narrative that appealed to audiences both inside and outside the kingdom (Boyd, 1982) to counter the radical nationalist, Socialist and Communist movements that threatened the Saudi royal family at the time.

Political motivations were also behind the establishment of regional media influence to advance the Saudi narrative, especially in the aftermath of the Gulf War (1990-91), when Arab public opinion was generally in favour of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. For instance, Saddam Hussein used to utilize the Iraqi oil revenue to finance newspapers and magazines from Cairo to London to Paris to counter Saudi dominance over Arab media. Also, a number of journalists and media personnel were on Saddam's payroll (AbuKhalil, 2004; and Fandy, 2007).

In response to this situation, the first free-to-air Pan-Arab television station – Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) – was launched in London in 1991 by Walid al-Ibrahim (Sakr, 2001), the brother-in-law of Saudi Arabia's late King Fahd (1982-2005), with the objectives of promoting modernity and getting rid of what he strangely and hyperbolically described as a Taliban mentality (AlSaied, 2015). Other free-to-air Pan-Arab televisions and newspapers financed through proxy forces such as individual members of the royal family or associated businessmen continue to influence the media scenes in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East.

The opposition, however, came from Qatar. As Fandy (2007) explains, the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the consistent media attacks by Al Jazeera, which is based in Qatar, against the Saudi royal family caused the MBC network to launch an all-news Pan-Arab channel called Al-Arabiya TV in 2003, prior to the war against Iraq.

Yamani (2008) argues that one of the main priorities for the Saudi royal family is to maintain the dominant position of their historical narrative by incorporating and accommodating rival voices, thus utilizing the oil money. The media serve as an instrument to exert and expand the influence of the royal family nationally and regionally, excluding critical narratives such as the strategic dependence of the Kingdom on the USA, and the rift in the royal family.

This behaviour results in media ownership and concentration issues (Djankof et al, 2003) because the Saudi government monopolizes the national media and dominates the regional media scene indirectly through private Pan-Arab media outlets. This behaviour affects the narrative and the structure of Saudi media and results in several challenges, including a lack of authentic representation and the exclusion of input from the youth.

However, as this chapter highlights, Saudi Arabia's digital infrastructure and internet growth (Internet Live Stats, 2016) have enabled young Saudis to develop a new production system that bypasses the monopoly of traditional media establishments. This enables the youth to generate their own revenue by instituting new business models and forming new relationships with the country's advertising industry.

The previous section has briefly touched upon the political economy of Saudi media to highlight the role of the state in media, which has resulted in its having a complete monopoly over national media and great control over regional media industries including television, and relationship with the advertisement industry. With this in mind, the next section discusses how professionally generated content producers (Kim, 2012) negotiate their commercial interests in such a media environment.

## **Business in the YouTube Market**

The original motivation for the content creators in 2010 was to express themselves and voice their opinions. As Mohammad Bazaid explains, “[we] were doing the programme out of fashion and out of interest; and [we] were not driven by any financial motivations” (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016). However, the growth of the content and digital advancements facilitated new business opportunities that the young producers were unaware of at the time. According to Doyle (2002), the opportunities associated with internet growth always have a marked effect on the nature of media players and their products. Therefore, as this chapter argues, YouTube-based programmes developed to create a YouTube-based market, with new players and new cultural products emerging in the Saudi media scene. The audio-visual sectors, in general, have significant roles in creating employment and wealth, and it is widely recognized that they play an important cultural role (Doyle, 2012).

The increased popularity of certain programmes, with millions of viewers and subscribers (Ramsay and Fatani, 2016), has created a new set of economic conditions for creative young content creators in Saudi Arabia. This analysis shows that the process of building a YouTube-based market was complex and consisted of various stages. This chapter conceptualizes the development of the YouTube market in three main stages: *Abstract*, *Concrete* and *Innovative*. Each stage has unique characteristics and a different timeframe, and each contributed various economic dimensions to the emergent YouTube market.

### ***The Abstract Business Stage***

For many respondents, the first stage was based on simplicity and experimentation, and it took place between 2010 and 2011. The availability of YouTube as a distribution

mechanism for content creators to publish their original content stimulated a quick adaptation to gain certain societal advantages for their programmes. This stage was also marked by a lack of professional awareness of a business model concept and its applications for revenue generation. For Mohammad Bazaid, “[The business model] was not fully clear [for us at the beginning] and [we] were not aware of it in a professional way” (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016).

This demonstrates the struggle of the content creators to capitalize on their content and transform it into sustainable financial enterprises. There may be several reasons for this: First, familiarity with the concept of digital business culture was seemingly limited amongst the new players in 2010. Second, the legal framework and infrastructure (Price, 2009) that are supposed to help and guide new players in the YouTube market were undeveloped at that time. Third, those in power were slow or unwilling to invest in the emerging business culture, probably because the wide reach of YouTube-based programming is critical and was seen to work against the interests of the state.

Nevertheless, Saudi content creators were quick to respond to such challenges, establishing their own strategy to turn the unexpected mass audience into a commodity in order to reap financial advantages. According to Abdullah Mando, some YouTube-based programmes developed their basic business model naturally:

*It is a very simple model that is based on viewership. We create content that is extremely relevant to audiences, which can generate a lot of views, and then [we] embed the advertisements within the content only; because we do not have control over the platform. Basically, we sell based on 1.000 viewers.* (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)

This interest in transforming local cultural goods into business operations shows the attempts of content creators to create a model that capitalized on their content. It is noticeable that these digital practices were new to content creators and had not existed before.

This practice presented a policy dilemma that acted against the interests of YouTube (Google Inc.) itself in terms of advertising guidelines. Although Saudi content creators struggled to convince brands to advertise their products in YouTube-based programmes at that stage, when they succeeded, the use of advertising was not in line with YouTube's advertising policy, and this created some conflicts.

This leads to another pattern associated with the Abstract business stage, which is the absence of YouTube (Google Inc.) in the emerging Saudi YouTube market. For instance, “[YouTube did not] monetize the Middle East for the first two years” (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016) and “[YouTube] did not pay enough attention to the region [at the time] and it was underdeveloped” (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016).

As a result, this climate of uncertainty extended opportunities for content creators to prosper and to increase their locally relevant products in the market. The absence of YouTube policy at the Abstract stage ignited further developments in the newly emerging YouTube market, where limited revenue started moving into the programmes. There is a potential difficulty for global companies such as YouTube when they expand their services to unregulated markets in the Middle East; such moves might lead to controversial relationships with authoritarian governments, for instance, over the notion of freedom of expression (Schmidt and Cohen, 2013).

A third important characteristic of the abstract business stage is the significance of networking practices in the Saudi YouTube-based programme business. To illustrate:

*In 2010, I had a meeting with my friend, the director, and we literally said that we wanted to make a specific product for YouTube, and then began to create some simple products. We also produced films for YouTube that had a wonderful impact on people, and the surprise for us was that they became so popular so fast. (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter of SceenTV, 2016)*

Based on similar accounts in other interviews, it is evident that in the emerging Saudi YouTube market, the extensive use of like-minded friends as human capital for initial business operations was prevalent during the Abstract stage. The dependence on friends at this stage could be a result of existing trust within certain social segments; it is most logical to rely on a trusted companion because of the sensitive aspects of the cultural goods and the new nature of the content.

This type of relationship conveys several features in terms of team size and the chain of production. It brings together a small number of talents who are friends, volunteers and passionate about the new experience. These semi-mature teams go through a brief videomaking production process based on trial and error. The small-scale nature of this activity enables content creators to learn more about the process. In addition, the experience helps them to develop an instinct for the type of content to be produced in the Saudi context. The roles are blurred and there are no clear distinctions within the team, where each member might be responsible for several activities.

Another important feature of the Abstract business stage is the rise of the new stars' concept within the Saudi YouTube market. As one interviewee says, "the idea of stars in Saudi Arabia was exclusive to singers and to actors, but the idea of making stars of the presenters was very new because of that breakthrough in 2010" (Anonymous female presenter, 2016). This matches the interesting analysis done by Turner (2010), who conceptualizes the transformation of ordinary people into media figures or stars through media establishments or technology as the 'demotic turn'. Turner's concept is clearly

applicable to Saudi YouTube-based programmes because it shows the emergence of a new class as a result of interactions between ordinary people and YouTube.

This implies that YouTube-based programmes rely on the charisma of individual YouTube figures rather than on collective professional work. Successful presenters, for instance, build a fan base by capitalizing on the novelty of the programmes and the lack of competitors. This is because, as one interviewee explains, “at the beginning, any content was acceptable” (Anonymous female presenter, 2016). The abnormal conditions of the new market, where any content by any presenter can go viral, is an interesting aspect to be documented. The financial risk is limited because digital advances reduce the cost of production equipment (Doyle, 2002) and the producers employ a simple approach.

The previous section has conceptualized the Abstract stage (2010-2011) of the evolution of YouTube-based programmes in Saudi Arabia. This stage has four main characteristics. First, the notion of the business model was not robust at that time, and the monetization process was based on experimenting and a trial and error approach. Second, YouTube was absent and no set of regulations including advertising and monetization policy was imposed on Saudi content creators. Third, the production process was based on private networking between trusted friends, and the production roles were vague and unclear. Finally, this stage saw the emergence of online stars as a significant practise that could capitalize upon the newly established market. The next section explores the second stage of the Saudi YouTube market’s history and looks at how it differs from the Abstract stage.

### *The Concrete Business Stage*

The unprecedented growth of Saudi YouTube-based programming in terms of the number of programmes and views (Ramsay and Fatani, 2016) has made it a very significant phenomenon for observers. This growth took place in a very sensitive political climate in the region, as waves of revolutions affected several Arab regimes, which ignited a huge rise in the consumption of digital media across the Arab countries (Ghannam, 2011). During this period, Saudi Arabia remained stable, and the combination of that stability and the growth of YouTube prepared the market for the second phase, which I conceptualize as the Concrete Business stage.

The time frame for this second stage is 2012-2013, when the behaviour of both content creators and advertisers became more mature. Several insights appeared at this stage in terms of business model development. First, for Mohammad Bazaid, commercial sponsorship in this context is a significant key to the programmes' prosperity:

*The model of sponsorship is completely new [for YouTube programmes], not only for us, but even for companies in Saudi Arabia... [For example,] the overall revenue we received in [our three] seasons from sponsorships was about [100–110k GBP] and I assure you this is now attainable for just one season for a successful programme. (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016)*

This business model improved the cash flow, and the business became more valuable for young content creators than at the previous stage. Advertisers appreciated the appeal of local content to a targeted young audience, who had been difficult to approach through unattractive traditional TV channels (Lynch, 2006). The cash flow in turn contributed to developments in the market by increasing the number of programmes available to audiences and also by improving the quality of output. The sophistication of

the programmes attracted the attention of audiences, as Chapter Six will examine in detail, and created further appeal for the content.

As a result, new strategies such as product placement and branding content emerged, enhancing the practice of the business models. Abdulmajeed Alkenani states that:

*[Content creators] provide [brands] with product placement and branding content. Also, [they] provide ad samples in the introduction. These are the three forms we deal with on Sceen channel...We [developed significant] relationships with many [telecommunication] brands in the country. (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter of SceenTV, 2016)*

The business expanded, which led to the improvement of the infrastructure, such as the construction of new studios. This growth caused higher demand for human capital to fulfil the newly emerged roles: “We have six full-time employees and many assistants” (Alkenani). More importantly, the cognitive perception of business model progressed robustly at this stage. For instance, “we have managed to create our business model after a period of confusion” (Malik Nejer, co-founder, and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016).

This progress required content creators to develop their business skills and relationships with recognizable brands and advertising agencies, taking into account the accumulated experience they had built and their understanding of the needs of the young audience. This expansion in quality and quantity enabled some content creators to team up with international brands. For instance, “I have a partnership with the Machinima network” (Ahmed Aref, presenter of DeSTRoYeR, 2016). Brands found opportunities to reach niche youth segments through partnerships with content creators. Chapter One illustrated the concept of two-sided market as explained by Farchy (2009), and the

business development in the Concrete stage offers an interesting example of this concept within the Saudi context.

Second, as revenue grew rapidly, a very significant move took place when investors became involved in the YouTube market. The entry of professional production houses, also called ‘networks’ by Saudis, especially for YouTube, brought positivity to the market but also challenged some content creators who had started during the Abstract stage. This is summarised by one of the interviewees, who states that the “market switched to a supply and demand concept where some [advertisers]...pay more and others pay less” (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016).

The strategies of these new entrants relied on introducing new programmes to market, but more importantly acquiring certain programmes. For example, “several networks such as UTURN Entertainment and Telvaz 11 contacted me to join them” (Ahmed Aref, presenter of *DeSTRoYeR*, 2016) and “for the *SargoShow* series, I had some offers of acquisition” (Aymen Khoja, film producer of *SargoShow*, 2016).

This may reflect the intent of some investors to acquire emerging and established YouTube-based programmes in order to take advantage of their growing market status for potential economic returns. However, in such a non-democratic context it is also possible that some of the investors who were keen to consolidate influential programmes were driven by political motivations, wishing to gain control of the editorial policies of YouTube-based programmes and soften their critical tones. This interpretation is supported by the analysis of the Saudi traditional media context discussed in Chapter One (Al-Rasheed, 2008; Boyd, 1982; and Kraidy, 2013) in relation to the government's attempt to control media narrative through private proxies.

The strong financial hold of networks attracted various content creators to initiate creative ideas for YouTube. As a result, networks started to be perceived as incubators for some talents and as recognizable brands for online programmes. This can be seen in the account of Mohammad Makki, who points out that:

*We contacted some media production houses like UTURN Entertainment and Telvaz11, which are dedicated to producing content for YouTube, in order to look for opportunities to cooperate with them. If they like our pilot episode, then they might sign a contract with us. (Mohammad Makki, director of TakkiSeries and award-winning filmmaker, 2016)*

It seems that the strategy of the investors succeeded in consolidating some influential YouTube programmes and it initiated new directions for online content; for instance, producing programmes that speak to Saudi women – something that was unavailable before. This arguably created new business opportunities for women. As one female participant points out, “I became a part of UTURN network. My relationship with them is one of partnership” (Anonymous female participant, 2016). It can be argued that this behaviour between investors and content creators impacted the YouTube market positively, helping to institutionalize it more professionally by, for example, signing agreements between parties and setting standards for productions. This provides insight on the concept of professionally generated content (Kim, 2012) through the lens of Saudi YouTube.

Another aspect that emerged with the involvement of the networks was that they increased competition in the market. This competition stimulated a sense of diversity and pluralism in production and consumption activities. Abdullah Mando, who had been the first CEO of the influential UTURN Entertainment Network, perhaps best illustrates how the competition in the market developed from its inception:

*We do not have many key players in Saudi Arabia. In my opinion, the biggest company in terms of impact and leadership used to be UTURN Entertainment but today it is Telfaz11, which has been leading since 2013 or so... UTURN Entertainment was always leading the market in terms of originality and new content. So every month we had something new that shifted the market in terms of content online... Telfaz11 [was] slower than UTURN Entertainment, but in the long run they became capable of developing a unique identity for themselves, more controversial, more aggressive, and more liberal in some sense, and most importantly, constant improvement of quality. (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)*

This highlights the development of competition within the market. It indicates the need for consistent change in order to meet audience demands and tastes, which may represent unsustainable ground for producers (Wasko and Erickson, 2009). However, this competition was not always healthy:

*Sa7i [network's] behaviour is hostile as they want to compete aggressively with everyone in the market. They have created for the first time an unhealthy rivalry. Before their emergence, the market was friendly and more transparent. UTURN and Telfaz11 were cooperating together on projects. When Sa7i came on board, they had a bad impact. (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)*

The above quote provides an account of the commercial struggles which some investors caused between 2012 and 2013. Although competition can be credited with discovering and nurturing new talents for YouTube-based programmes, it also introduced a negative spirit regarding institutional co-operation between different networks. This hostile behaviour may well have been driven by the need to acquire talents from other competitors and it might raise a question about the impact of this strategy by Sa7i network upon the development of YouTube-based programmes.

In addition, however, these new entrants also had a negative impact on individual players in the market who were not associated with any network, because simple

programmes based on individuals were no longer able to compete with the new networks in terms of financial capital and the quality of output. For Abdulmajeed Alkenani, this unhealthy competition shook the market in two extreme ways:

*At the end of 2012, the YouTube market witnessed the powerful role of capital and that's been a distraction. A giant market revolution occurred. Some YouTube producers have raised their prices and suddenly there is less content and some people could not continue as the experience is still new. (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter of SceenTV, 2016)*

Consequently, this shakeup in market contributed to the disappearance of several small programme makers who did not have the financial power to sustain content production because the networks set high new standards. Arguably, this stage illustrates the gradual transfer of YouTube programmes from user-generated content to professionally-generated content (Kim, 2012) because of the hard intervention of networks in this emergent market. This has had a profound effect on the structure of the market because less content production creates a sense of concentration (Doyle, 2002) for content, and therefore the prices have gone up. A quasi-monopoly emerged because of the limited number of professional content providers for YouTube programmes in Saudi Arabi. The high barrier of entry has prevented individuals from competing with networks and a number of individuals have been unable to continue in the current market unless they join the new content providers – the networks. UGC has not disappeared but it began serving a different purpose. PGC became more appealing to audiences and the new logarithmic policy of YouTube that categorized content as Most Viewed (Wasko and Erickson, 2009; and Davidson and et al, 2010) has played a critical role in increasing the audience.

Third, the boom and the noticeable development of the Saudi market caused YouTube to start paying attention to it, perhaps to stay in control and to maximize the potential financial return. YouTube (Google Inc.) started to build relationships with Saudi content creators for the first time. A number of interviewees highlight that “Google contacted us

and strengthened their relationship with us and ... [all] Saudi YouTube programmes ... and explained to us how to generate revenue out of viewers” (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016) and “[YouTube] regulated the platform ... they were keen to sign partnership agreements [with us]” (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016).

The strategy of YouTube is to identify the players in the market in order to build relationships with them. Although this move attempts to serve the interests of both parties, it is more in favour of YouTube because the content creators outsource revenues by facilitating the platform rather than relying on YouTube monetization itself, which is less lucrative for producers. By doing this, YouTube monetized the Saudi market and began regulating this previously unregulated entity. It ensured that the platform was under its control by imposing its rules and agreements with Saudi producers. This resulted in the enforcement certain policies that made some producers feels uncomfortable. For instance:

*[YouTube] forces us to use [our ads] less...YouTube accepts [advertisements] as long as the [they] are indirect. If you use explicit advertisements such as “this show is sponsored by” or have a break in the middle for ads, then YouTube will take the video down.* (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)

YouTube serves its own interests, but this stimulated some producers to respond by developing a new strategy, which will be explained later in the third stage. This partnership made the process of generating revenue for Saudis very challenging and it became difficult to generate revenue in the same way (Mando).

In terms of human capital at this stage, and according to the interviewees, most of the content creators were not fully committed to YouTube programmes as some of them

were either full-time students or employees. It seems the disappearance of some programmes following the networks' intervention resulted in the re-aggregation of human capital within the market. It caused the downfall of some people and the rise of others, and increased the influence of some popular stars.

The shift from voluntary roles to paid professional positions started to intensify the dynamics of the business; one participant declares that “my [financial] percentage is 30% and 70% for the UTURN network” (Anonymous female participant, 2016), and this is found again in the accounts of several interviewees, such as Mohammad Makki, who explains the financial agreement between himself as a director and between one of the networks. He states that “UTURN Entertainment was paying me for every single episode in advance, and they would get their profits by securing sponsorships [themselves]” (Mohammad Makki, director of TakkiSeries and award-winning filmmaker, 2016).

Although the concept of personal networking to facilitate the production of content was still essential at this stage, the perception of total relying on friends declined; it was being replaced by higher professional standards.

The dilemma that Saudi YouTube producers face is the challenge of recruiting talented people with professional experience in media activities, as the discussion in Chapter Three maintained. This dilemma is felt in several conversations throughout the fieldwork. This is how one of the contributors sees it:

*The definition of talent should be reconsidered and it should have an education- and knowledge-related base. Unfortunately, we have no institutes that teach arts in Saudi Arabia. I think [talent] should have a knowledge base and it should not depend on their experience. (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter of ScenTV, 2016)*

As a result, the mode of production was transformed into professional phases such as the pre-production, production and post-production processes. This can be seen in the following contribution of one of the respondents, who describes her relationship with the network as mutual agreement wherein “I write and present, and the network is responsible for the business of photography, production, distribution and marketing” (Anonymous female participant, 2016). This reflects that the chain of production, at the Concrete stage, adopted a structured approach compared to the way things were handled during the Abstract stage. In addition, the production teams became much bigger with clearer roles, as the following quote illustrates:

*I am the creative manager of the channel. Also, I'm the person who prepares and introduces a programme called Luqaimat [Bites]. The main responsibilities of the creative manager are to present the ideas, develop them into new ideas, and put the idea into an entertaining technical form. In addition, I am responsible for the innovation part. (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter of ScenTV, 2016)*

This is how these roles developed; however, some of them are slightly loose and vague. The taste of both content creators and audiences set the bar higher and the market entered a cycle where only attractive and high-quality content would be widely consumed. As one of the interviewees indicates, the audience became very selective.

This section has investigated the second stage of the development of the YouTube market in Saudi Arabia, which I conceptualize as the Concrete stage. This stage covers the period from 2012 to 2013. The Concrete stage has a number of distinctive features. First, the concept and the application of the business model become robust as the producers developed a number of strategies to capitalize on their content, such as sponsorship, branding content and product placement. Second, YouTube intervened in the market, following the unprecedented growth and its previous absence, to impose its policies and rules upon the Saudi producers to safeguard the interests of the platform. Third, this stage was marked by the heavy intervention of investors, who established

houses of production known locally as networks. This had massive impact upon the market, and most of the individual producers were replaced by market rules. Finally, the concept of personal networking remained important, but more professional posts emerged in the market as the production process became professionalized and standardized.

### ***The Innovative Business Stage***

This third stage features significant developments in terms of market structure and business model applications. The time frame for this stage is between 2014 and 2016. The first feature of this stage is the shift for some producers from being YouTube-based content creators to being content developers for various platforms. The constraints of YouTube upon content creators inspired some of them to think bigger and to move beyond YouTube as an exclusive platform for distribution.

Malik Nejer summarizes it by explaining that “Myrkott is a developer. We develop ideas, content and intellectual property. We... have an in-house studio where we can create the content” (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016).

This section finds that the professional presence of the animation studio, Myrkott, creates a positive sphere by maintaining high production standards. Several interviewees cite Myrkott as an excellent standard for the Saudi market.

This shift indicates that some creative studios entered a new area of business where they could compete with other established content and advertising agencies. Malik explains

that “because we [run] at full capacity, we sometimes develop content and send it abroad to Singapore or Jordan to be produced” (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016).

This demonstrates how content creators can take advantage of global culture and turn it into valuable local cultural and business assets. The creative process is in a state of flux as Myrkott embarks on merchandising their cartoon characters, thus conveying both business and cultural values:

*We are now in process of merchandizing our cartoon characters ... it is not simple. We need to license our intellectual property to people who will manufacture and distribute it for us. We need to find a third party.* (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016)

This highlights the difficulties that spread across all aspects of the business when no official support is offered to the content creators, let alone any easing of the restrictive and bureaucratic environment in which they operate. It illustrates the logistic obstacles that the market inventors face without any serious guidance or support. It opens several potential scenarios such as co-operating with their counterparts in different countries or simply continuing the process of being risk-takers in such an unpredictable context.

The second feature of the Innovative Business stage is the shift towards becoming advertising solution companies as a response to the challenges listed above. This is summarized by the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, who indicates that this strategy was a response to the lack of revenue made from YouTube, following the restrictions YouTube placed upon Saudi content creators:

*What UTURN is doing now, along with others, is to become adverting solution companies. This means that instead of simply embedding the advertising into the content, they are actually creating the ad itself for the client using the same content production process. (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)*

This move by a number of networks offers additional business opportunities to young content creators and to the market as a whole. It poses a problematic cultural point in terms of the sustainability of producing meaningful content (Andrejevic, 2009) for the platform of YouTube. However, some content creators have decided to leave the market of YouTube-based programmes and focus on establishing original content-oriented business According to Abdullah Mando:

*So, the model changed from being content creators to advertising solution companies...I [moved to Qubba studios to] focus on [producing] premium content... to invest in storytelling; to produce content that we can export globally. UTURN Entertainment does produce freemium content that is available freely online. (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)*

The basis for this change is the desire to create more sustainable business opportunities for content creators, capitalizing on their online influence. For example, some Saudi YouTube presenters take their new social capital and attempt to create their own businesses, such as Mohammad Bazaid, who remarks:

*Most people in [our YouTube programme] established the Mad Tomato Company ... It specializes in producing content for online as well as social media marketing campaigns. We additionally work offline on any kind of creative content including content, copyright, development and conceptualizing. (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016)*

It can be seen then that one of the consequences of market complexity is the orientation of some individuals and networks to expand the scope of their work by creating premium content for various platforms instead of being limited to YouTube. It could be argued that the experience gained through the previous stages has helped those content creators to spot the niche for Saudi content, either online or on television, and take a lead in filling those neglected gaps.

Another strategy utilized by networks that produce YouTube-based programmes is to not only create original content, but also to act as distribution windows for other YouTube-based programmes that are produced independently. As Abdulmajeed Alkenani puts it:

*Our plan is to make Sceen TV a platform for various contents. Many of our programmes come to us via creators who present their ideas for a specific price ... and so we allow them to produce their own programmes and use our platform officially. (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter of SceenTV, 2016)*

This echoes the shift in the networks towards maximizing the benefits of their YouTube network by diversifying their revenue options. This reflects the powerful position of those networks as well as their popularity in the field, enabling them to attract original content for their network. For Aymen Khoja, this opens up more opportunities for Saudi content creators. “The distribution windows in Saudi, like Sa7i and Telfaz11, are very smart, as they are not [only] producers but distributors [too]” (Aymen Khoja, film producer of SargoShow, 2016).

The impact of networks has reached a critical point in aggregating and diffusing local content. They dominate the scene and quietly kill independently produced programmes. It could be argued that this step is imperative to advance the market and raise standards.

However, this might have occurred in a manner that is not positive for new local content creators as the networks acquire the most successful programmes and, interestingly, control most of the advertising revenue.

Another innovative vehicle to generate income is what this thesis conceptualizes as a *go to ads* strategy, which has two forms. As the concept indicates, this strategy relies on recognizing the key advertising players and approaching them to initiate a win-win business deal. This technique is used by one of the Saudi content creators, who argues that “we found the media buying unit which is responsible for buying slots on TVs for advertisers and we dealt with them” (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016).

This quote is very thought-provoking. First, this could not have happened without the confidence of the content creators in their cultural products. It reflects confidence in terms of the quality standard of the animation programmes and their ability to deliver messages to an audience. Second, it highlights the prominent rise of some YouTube-based programmes and their strong presence within the Saudi cultural landscape online. Third, this increase could have complicated the relationships between the ad agencies and traditional national and Pan-Arab TV stations on one hand and the young content creators on the other hand, which echoes the discussion of Van Dijck (2013). The monopolized Saudi advertising market, which is described by one of the interviewees, Abdulmajeed Alkenani, as exclusively open to certain corporations and people, could have behaved in a way that supported the traditional alliance between television networks and advertisement agencies, to the exclusion of the new digital players.

It is essential to keep in mind that the visibility of YouTube-based programming facilitates a direct contact between content creators and commercial brands without the need for an intermediary. Malik Nejer explains his strategy for overcoming the

intermediary so his company could attract big brands to advertise their products through his own cultural productions. In his account:

*The media buying units behave like a broker between TVs and advertisers and they usually get around 7.8% for the deal. We offer the unit, the broker, 30% if he can bring me the advertiser, the Ford Company, instead of bringing that to Pan-Arab TV. (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016)*

The economic logistics behind offering the media buying unit such a high rate is described as follows:

*We generate lots of revenue because as an operational company we are more efficient ... we do not have broadcast costs, [multiple] studios, or big number of employees like the TV. I am a small business. So I can offer this media buying unit [this percentage]. (Nejer)*

The second form of the *go to ads* strategy is explained below;

*Using the restaurant[s] where we go and filming inside, [the presenter eats the main dishes and rate them with his friend] to market the restaurants. (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter of ScenTV, 2016)*

Apart from the credibility of rating the menus at the fancy restaurants that they film at, this model reflects another example of Saudi producers' innovative approach in securing another stream of revenue. He continues, "we started with a free episode or two to make the programme more popular and to foster demand" (Ibid).

With regards to the human capital at the Innovative Business stage, the boom of the Saudi YouTube-based market expanded the business sphere, creating various job opportunities (Doyle, 2012) and a new culture in digital business. This reflects an ongoing process of negotiation between many different parties in order to expand and sustain the new business, as acknowledged by Bazaid:

*Mad Tomato started with four employees and it currently has twelve full-time employees. We work with big brands where we organize several events in terms of content. We also work with around thirty local clients (business to business), marketing their brands on social media. (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016)*

In comparison with previous stages, the market became more mature and stable for both creators and audience during the Innovation stage. This widened the options for audiences as quality becomes very competitive. According to one of the interviewees, “the audience have started to filter the content and they do not accept any content except excellent [content]” (Anonymous female participant, 2016). This suggests that the huge amount of content aimed at the Saudi market during the previous two stages, 2010-2011 and 2012-2013, had improved the artistic expectation of the audience over a relatively short timeframe.

This section has theorized the development of the YouTube market in Saudi Arabia between 2014 and 2016, conceptualizing it as the Innovative Business stage. A number of characteristics are associated with this stage. First, the concept of the business model fully developed when the content creators secured revenue through various strategies. Furthermore, some of the content creators proved capable of moving from being content creators for YouTube exclusively to being content creators for other platforms by creating new business opportunities. Finally, the human capital for the market became more professionalized and standardized, including, for example, the introduction of contracts between parties.

The first part of this chapter theorized the development of the YouTube market in Saudi Arabia by conceptualizing it into three stages with different characteristics associated with every stage. The Abstract Stage (2010-2011), the Concrete Stage (2012-2013) and the Innovative Business Stage (2014-2016) covered different timeframes with different distinctive features. In the literature review chapter, a number of studies were examined concerning the economics of YouTube itself (Farchy, 2009; Hang, 2008; and Wasko and Erickson, 2009), the complex relationship between YouTube, television and copyrights (McDonald, 2009; and Van Dijck, 2013) and the institutionalizing of YouTube (Kim, 2012). These concepts are very useful, but their angles of analysis focus on the actual platform and its relation to television, paying little attention to the users. When they do, they tend to focus on UGC users with very brief discussions dedicated to PGC users. The above analysis fills the gap in Arabic and global online media studies by building and utilizing on the concepts drawn from the literature, thereby offering fresh perspectives on professionally generated content on YouTube through the Saudi experience.

In the following part, I intend to build upon the above analysis of the Saudi YouTube market to explore the behaviour of advertisers towards YouTube-based programming. The next part explores the behaviour of advertising agencies towards YouTube-based programmes throughout the three stages.

## **The Behaviour of Advertising Agencies in the Saudi YouTube-based Market**

The previous section offered a comprehensive empirical analysis to help understand the evolution of the business dynamics in the Saudi YouTube-based market. Although the above debate embedded elements of commercial brands' attitudes towards YouTube-

based programmes, the central focus was on the business development of the programmes and the players' reactions to several emerging forces in the market.

The advertising agencies in the Saudi YouTube-based market act as a catalyst to advance the market financially and professionally. Based on the above conceptualizations of business stages (Abstract, Concrete, and Innovative) this section briefly follows the behaviour of advertising agencies throughout the evolution of the market.

#### *Advertising Patterns at the Abstract Business Stage*

At the Abstract stage (2010-2011), the market was in trial and error mode and so the presence of advertisers was limited. Bazaid highlights that “the advertisers were unfamiliar with this new platform and they were scared to invest money in this new window” (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016).

The reticence of brands to investigate in this new platform was marked at this stage. The lack of professionalism of the content creators at this stage could have impeded the brands from engaging actively with the newly emerged platforms in Saudi Arabia.

The market was comparatively young and the culture of online advertising was seemingly not attractive to some commercial brands in the country. Nevertheless, the huge boom in YouTube-based programmes and their significant influence stimulated a change in advertisers' attitudes, as the following analysis will demonstrate.

### *Advertising Patterns at the Concrete Business Stage*

By 2012, the growing recognition of YouTube-based programmes resulted in mass young audiences. This encouraged some commercial brands to recognize the platform as a potential window for business. This recognition grew gradually and investment in the content of YouTube was on the rise. In spite of improvements, there were still reservations about advertising; as Bazaid argues, “we sell influence and this one of the things that some brands do not realize” (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016).

The mention of ‘influence’ highlights a very explicit indication that audience behaviours change, switching to online consumption as viewers are influenced by YouTube celebrities (Turner, 2010). This change pushes advertising agencies and commercial brands to follow the audiences and interact with them online.

The slow adaptation, at this stage, could be due to the lack of logic in the pricing policy employed by content creators. For example, one of the respondents indicates that the price of advertising on social media platforms depends, in the first place, on the number of views, and then on the continuity of the show. This, however, contradicts another interviewee:

*The number of viewers is not the only measurement to be taken into consideration because it is better sometimes for a brand to look for online content whose audience would be interested in its product rather than go to a massive general audience. (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016)*

One main theme that this quote introduces is the fragmentation of the audience as a result of the development of YouTube-based programming. This fragmentation raises

some doubts about the practicality of reaching and accessing a mass audience. This can offer measurable and efficient opportunities for advertisers to approach their potential or actual targets by taking advantage of the engagement metrics of YouTube. The business of advertising on YouTube-based programming flourished in the third stage, when fragmentation was perceived as an opportunity to reach specific local targets, as the following section maintains.

### *Advertising Patterns at the Innovative Business Stage*

Between 2014 and 2016, a very notable shift occurred in the mode of advertising in favour of YouTube-based programming. Several content creators offer explanations for this change as they perceive it. One of the interviewees is critical:

*[Brands] realize that no one watches their ads even if they pay millions. The audience uses the [airtime slot of] ads on TV to go to the bathroom or [they] mute [the sound]. It becomes similar to traditional pop-up ads on the internet. Yet TV requires very high [expenditure], and the question here is: is it effective? (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016)*

While this quotation carries its own bias because of the personal interest of the content creator, it does suggest that audiences show less interest in watching advertising on television than online.

This suggests that online advertising had become, at this stage, an integral part of the content on YouTube. It reflects that the adverts on YouTube-based programmes are seen as a promising option for commercial brands to reach target audiences. The brands were slow to embrace digital advertising, but once they became comfortable and aware

of its significant influence, they altered their attitude towards online video because of its effective functionality and its high-end content. Malik Nejer continues advocating for online advertising over traditional advertising because:

*YouTube is more effective because, for instance, I can offer Ford a targeted ad for unmarried 22-year-old males who are interested in watching cars. I can be as specific as this. I can target certain middle-class neighbourhoods in Riyadh. There was some resistance at the beginning but then as the interesting and professional content appeared, the image changed. Some YouTube channels become prestigious. (Nejer)*

This development enables the brands to ensure that their products are associated with prestigious content so they can invest in professionally generated content (Kim, 2012). However, knowledge gaps emerge as a challenge for brands in terms of the message to be delivered to young audiences. This period from 2014-2016 brought multi-level challenges for brands. The first challenge related to the feasibility of online video advertisements in the Saudi market, which has been addressed above. The second challenge was about how to craft a message that would be received positively by the targeted audience, and what the content of such a message should be.

This investigation reveals that some brands are unqualified to deal with the second challenge and therefore approached the content creators to initiate cooperative projects. For instance, “I received a call from the Ford Company requesting us to create ads using the language of people on Twitter ... We are assisting brands” (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016).

First of all, this emphasises the previous discussion regarding the shift of some content creators to become advertising solution businesses. Second, it shows a clear gap in terms of knowledge-dealing, where some brands acknowledge implicitly that they lag behind in terms of how to approach the audience using digital methods. Third, this

could imply a serious shortage of local advertising personnel not only within the YouTube-based programmes market, but also in the media advertising industry as a whole.

For instance, Kraidy (2012) highlights that the historical and contemporary influence of Lebanese human resources in Saudi media institutions existed for several reasons, an important one being the lack of technical skills among Saudi media human resources. The rise of the new Saudi creators who are technically literate, media-oriented, understand the local culture and speak in the local accent have caused a new commercial calculation for the entire Saudi media scene, both digital and traditional.

A final point before concluding this section is to introduce a significant example that echoes the above debate and, more importantly, affirms the shift towards online video advertising. According to Malik Nejer:

*Nescafe launched a new product called Nescafe Arabiana Coffee. They wanted us to [promote it purely by using] YouTube. We produced an animated show specifically for the product and this is where we created the animated cups story [for them] ... We did two seasons for them; six episodes per season, and now we are preparing for the third season in Ramadan. (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016)*

The trust that the Nescafe brand showed, first in YouTube itself as the only vehicle to promote its product in Saudi Arabia, and second in hiring local Saudi content creators to produce and distribute the episodes, represents a phenomenal shift.

This behaviour brings the brands closer to audiences because they create entertaining animated show that attracts young consumers and build positive feelings towards their

product. In addition, the timing of the show is significant, as Ramadan is traditionally known for being the season to produce exclusive media content (Kraidy and Khalil, 2009). Brands benefit from this season across the Arab world, and at the heart of it is Saudi Arabia, which owns influential Pan-Arab TV stations (Kraidy, 2013; and Sakr, Skovgaard-Petersen and Ratta, 2015). Consequently, the shift in the attitude of the brand towards YouTube empowers local content creators and initiates a competitive culture amongst them which is beneficial for the general state of the YouTube market.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has offered empirical analysis of the YouTube-based programmes market in Saudi Arabia during the period from 2010-2016 by building upon several concepts derived from the literature review such as those examined by Farchy (2009), Wasko and Erickson (2009) and Kim (2012). These concepts are very useful, however, but their angles of analysis focus on the actual platform and its relation to television, paying little attention to the users. When they do, they tend to focus on UGC users with very brief discussions dedicated to PGC users. The above analysis fills that gap by building on the concepts drawn from the literature, offering fresh perspectives on professionally generated content on YouTube through the Saudi lens.

The first section conceptualized the three stages of the business evolution of the Saudi YouTube-based market in order to trace its development. The debate has been framed in the context of revenue, the attitude of YouTube (Google Inc.), human capital and market behaviour.

In the second section, the investigation shed light on advertising as one of the crucial forces that improves market conditions. It highlighted the relationships between YouTube-based programmes and advertising through the three different conceptualized stages of Abstract, Concrete and Innovative Business. The behaviour of advertisers varied throughout these stages, ranging from suspicion and lack of trust to accepting the new reality and finally to engaging actively with Saudi YouTube-based programmes as the content progressed rapidly.

It would be interesting to briefly borrow the analysis of Picard (2011), who suggests that each industry has its life cycle which consists of various stages, namely introductory, growth, maturation and decline.

The establishment of Saudi YouTube programmes was out of the ordinary, and they evolved around various complicated political, cultural, societal and economic conditions that are rarely found in other countries. The popularity of the programmes stems from the gap found in the content of Saudi television, which is subject to political constraints and therefore faces a challenge in attracting young audiences. A decline period for YouTube might occur if there is a change in the main driver for YouTube, which is the nature and the content of television. A serious policy change in Saudi television in terms of its coverage and its editorial policy might affect YouTube in Saudi Arabia and switch it from its current status into a normal digital platform. The YouTube market has shifted through the years and has been a stabilized market since 2016. The rise of original, local and relevant content will attract more viewers to YouTube as long as traditional TV stations fail to attract young Saudi audiences.

Predictions for the future might be difficult to propose for such a conservative country located in the Middle East, a region that is in such a state of flux. One potential point is that the YouTube market in Saudi Arabia might be disturbed by Instagram and Snap

Chat, which already attract a large number of brands for advertising, but these platforms might be subject to the same circumstances as YouTube.

Finally, the analysis has revealed that YouTube-based programmes have opened new doors for Saudi content creators in terms of income, but more importantly in terms of cultural change. Those programmes have all contributed to the liberalization of Saudi youth online.

# **Chapter Five: The Saudi Government's Reactions to YouTube-based Programming: The Content Makers' Perspective**

## **Introduction**

The analyses in Chapters Three and Four concerned the cultural and business dynamics introduced into Saudi Arabia's online sphere by YouTube-based programmes. This chapter now seeks to extend the discussion into another area of investigation, focusing on the attitude of the state towards some programmes that contain critical political and cultural content.

It answers the third research question, which concerns the relationship between the Saudi government and YouTube-based programming. Understanding the Saudi government's reactions is central to the debate and controversies surrounding the relationship between content creators and the state. This chapter aims to provide a solid understanding of the dynamic of YouTube-based programmes in a non-democratic context to examine whether social media, and specifically YouTube platforms, can affect the behaviour of the state and the regulatory structure.

The literature review illustrated the integrated relationship between the state and media, as discussed in Rinnawi (2006), Boyd (1982) and Kraidy (2012). A number of concepts emerged throughout the literature review, such as the political motivation behind utilizing media output in Saudi Arabia and the concertation of media ownership. Keeping this in mind, I intend to explore the complex relationship between Saudi

content creators and the government to see whether or not authoritarian rule also extends to online activities.

This chapter starts by discussing the Saudi power structure to set the stage for the chapter's analysis. Second, it explores the regulatory context of YouTube-based programmes to see whether the online programmes operate within a constructive regulatory framework and what the attitude of the content creators to this is. After that, it moves on to investigate the Saudi government's reactions to the content and the strategies that have been employed to deal with the programmes, as the content makers perceive them.

## **Understanding The Saudi Power Structure Landscape**

The basic law adopted in 1922 declares that Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by the sons and the grandsons of Ibn Saud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia. The country has no officially organized political parties, and the King appoints the Cabinet and the Consultative Council, which is the equivalent to the Parliament in other countries (Background note Saudi Arabia, 2011; and MarketLine, 2016). Accordingly, the King, maintains full control of the state without any separation of powers.

The founding Ibn Saud King had several sons and the succession was passed down with them on his death in 1953 (Kechichian, 2001). The current octogenarian King Salman, who is the son of Ibn Saud, assumed the throne in January 2015; he could be the last son to hold this position because of the recent appointment in June 2017 of his young son Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (born in 1985) as a Crown Prince. The appointment of Mohammad Bin Salman is the first political move to enable the grandsons of Ibn Saud to occupy such senior positions since the modern foundation of Saudi Arabia, which

reflects a shift in the power transition within the royal family whose various potential implications domestically, regionally and internationally have yet to be observed.

Al-Rasheed (2008) attempts to analyse the contemporary Saudi political transformation by arguing that the Saudi Kings were always keen to ensure that the country was under their rule and that they held this authority publicly. They also distributed some posts and privileges for political reasons, for example to silence brothers and to exile dissident princes. For example, King Faisal (1964-75) ensured his supremacy over the state by weakening all potential threats to his authority.

Al-Rasheed argues that this later established what she conceptualizes as states within the state, whereby various princes built up their economic and military might and came to serve as balance forces to the power. This was seen during the reign of King Fahad (1982-2005) as time and experience allowed for the influential emergence of certain princes who all had a vested interest in publicly maintaining the positive image and authority of the King.

This fragmentation and configuration of power introduced complexity into the decision-making process and produced some contradictory policies and actions from within the state itself – especially in the absence of transparent measures. The contradictory policies are derived from the personal interests of the various senior princes as well as their divided ideology over liberal and conservative approaches.

Peterson (2002) maintains that the royal family's control over the political sphere and its upper hand over the distribution of oil income enable some of its members to abuse national trust and to enjoy more privileges than the ordinary citizens. For example, the Al Saud family produces the most senior members of the government, including the

King, the Crown Prince, the Deputy Crown Prince and the Minister for Defence. Younger members of the royal family tend to be more liberal, but they are guaranteed a certain standard of life as well as some public posts even if they lack the skills, experience and discipline.

The increasing royal privileges and the ban on political participation makes some Saudis (Ibid) feel that the royal family is a burden on the state, but the vast funds and the religious use of Wahhabism enable the government to bypass the social unrest that manifests in various events. This authoritarian model of governance results in a stable state, but it slows development because of the bans on political parties, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

Finally, it is important to point out that the Saudi political structure has recently been in a state of flux. This was especially true when the current King enabled his son – the current Crown Prince to collect an endless number of public titles such as Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and leader of the Economic Council in the Kingdom. This new concentration of power in his hands has stripped power from the other young princes who inherited their posts from their fathers, and therefore we can see the gradual disappearance of the ‘states within the state’ concept described by Al-Rasheed (2008). The current Crown Prince, Mohammad Bin Salman, depends on the royal power of his father to concentrate this power in his hands. This affects the structure of the Saudi media industry in that some of its parts were sponsored by different princes.

### **The Regulatory State of YouTube-Based Programming**

The Saudi media system is based on governmental licensing, which regulates media outlets and the actions of journalists to create a press that supports the policies of the

state (Duffy, 2014). This results in a restrictive media environment (World Press Freedom Index, 2016) in which no media outlets, such as television, radio and newspapers, can be launched from within Saudi territory without the permission of the state. The concept of licensing prevails because it positions the state – the Ministry of Culture and Information – as an intermediary responsible for approving any media activities, including online media, in order to purify the culture before it is permitted to be circulated to the public (Green and Karolides, 2005).

However, the rapid and widespread growth of YouTube-based programmes as a means of electronic information transmission creates the possibility of free movement for information and the interpretation of news without being regulated by the Ministry of Culture and Information, which introduces a degree of complexity in analysing online programmes in the restrictive media environment of Saudi Arabia.

The YouTube-based programmes were launched spontaneously, as was explored in Chapter Four, but they were able to attract the attention of young audiences and to gain momentum (BBC Middle East, 2016) because of the bold and different nature of the content compared to that of traditional television programming. The programmes went through experimental stages and they developed quickly to become more fragmented; for example, there came to be talk show programmes that comment on the coverage of Saudi newspapers and TV broadcasts, and dramas that reflect the struggles of the Saudi youth.

The growth of the content and the programmes, which are produced by youth for youth, pose a regulatory conundrum: the youth are breaking away from the monopoly of traditional media that operates as a part of Saudi public policy (Hammond, 2007).

When the interviewees were asked about the regulatory state of their programmes, they articulated various contradictory and different views. For instance, the first indicates that “you produce YouTube [programmes] and you do not know who your reference point is and to which governmental department you belong” (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016). However, the second interviewee reveals a slightly different point of view:

*Of course [YouTube is regulated] but not actively There is general media regulation, but a law to organize internet content was about to be issued... I think it's difficult since the internet is like the sea and the process of its arrangement is difficult. (Abdulmajeed Alkenani, co-founder and presenter of ScenTV, 2016)*

The third interviewee offers yet another suggestion regarding the regulatory state of YouTube: “I do not think the Ministry of Information is interested in regulating [our YouTube programmes] because they perceive it as a healthy situation [for society]” (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016).

These views indicate the uncertainty and the ambiguity around the legality of these online programmes as the content creators are unable to offer coherent and comprehensive interpretations of the regulatory status of their work. This regulative flexibility of the Saudi government, given its record in dominating the media (Boyd, 1982; and Sakr, 2007), the Saudi government’s regulative flexibility is surprising, allowing as it does the dissemination of creative and critical ideas on the YouTube platform.

This thesis speculates that there are three potential explanations behind the flexibility of the state in relation to YouTube-based programmes. First, it might be the case that the Saudi state does not perceive the phenomenon as a serious challenge to the established

system of information – national radio, television and newspapers – all of which are controlled. Instead, it conceives them as a new extension of other platforms like blogs or social networks sites, which might have little effect offline. Second, while the public use of the internet might pose some potential challenges to the regime (Kalathil and Boas, 2003), the possibility of the production of critical political content against the royal family or other key figures is unlikely because the programmes are produced within the Saudi territories, where producers have to take this into consideration; in other words, the government may expect the content creators to practice self-censorship. Third, authoritarian governments including Saudi Arabia's control the physical components of the internet and ICT infrastructure, which means they have total control over the nation's network domain in case they need to react to any critical content (Schmidt and Cohen, 2013).

In moving towards youth perspectives, the main theme that emerges from the above quotes is the *centrality of the Saudi authority* in the thoughts of Saudi content creators; they are aware that they are bypassing the traditional regulatory gatekeeper that should, in theory, authorize their content. The vocabulary used by the interviewees, such as *reference point*, indicates the social power of the state over the culture of production; in a subtle way, the producers do not exclude the state factor from their calculations. This is embedded with meanings about the wider socio-political culture and the dynamics of interactions between authority and the youth. What is clear is that the notion of the state is still essential when it comes to investigating YouTube-based programmes in non-democratic practices in Saudi Arabia.

The quotes also reveal the content creators' political awareness regarding the difficulty that the government can face in governing and regulating global, decentralized platforms such as YouTube. Young people, therefore, understand the politics of their production and they allow themselves to fall under the general media regulations in the country, but by taking another approach that pushes the cultural, legal and political

constraints in attempts to express their values. The content creators also build on their day-to-day experience to speculate and read the political context of their programmes. For instance, one of the interviewees suggests that the Ministry of Culture and Information has deliberately left the field of YouTube and other social media platforms as a window for youth to express themselves. However, this also helps the state to learn about the needs of the youth segment. While this assumption represents the personal view of the interviewee, it signals his ability to read the developments of the phenomenon and, more importantly, to realize the margin of freedom that producers can have or probably create for themselves in this context.

Another point that emerges from these three quotes is the struggle of youth to embark on their online programmes without going through the bureaucratic process of obtaining permission to film in public, for which legal permission is required (KFTB, 2017.) Young people find themselves, apparently, in a middle ground where their programmes do not fit neatly within the category of traditional media outlets that need licenses.

The production of online programmes requires physical places and tools such as studios, lighting, cameras and editing laboratories to produce and circulate content within the public domain of Saudi Arabia. Filming in public is not authorized without permission, which makes such activities a logistical struggle. Saudi filmmakers, for instance, need to work around the rules to shoot films in Saudi Arabia (Aftab, 2016).

This thesis argues that this shift in the cultural behaviour of youth towards the media regulatory body is a significant and subtle move that might require a considerable change in the practice of Saudi media regulations, especially with the influential rise of digital penetration and convergence. YouTube-based programming and filmmaking should introduce subsequent relaxation and modernization to Saudi media regulations if

the regulatory body seeks to evolve in a way that is relative to the digital norms and cultures.

Although the legal uncertainty has some advantages related to establishing the online programmes as discussed above, the general political culture has overshadowed the practices of some content creators who seek to obtain permission for their programmes to avoid any risk associated with producing content. For example, “I had verbal approval from the Ministry of Culture and Information” (Safana Sejini, presenter and freelancer copywriter, 2016).

This quote affirms the above analysis in relation to the centrality of authority in the practices of the Saudi youth, where some of them attempt to gain permission in order to hopefully avoid any potential threats from the state. Such an attempt is indicative of a cautious culture when it comes to participating in public events.

The legal uncertainty and the centrality of authority have implications that shape the process and mechanisms of production for YouTube-based programmes. This thesis suggests two typologies to describe the outcomes which have emerged from this legal-authority paradox. The typologies are the *culture of connections* and the *culture of exploration*.

The culture of connections describes a situation in which some content creators seek permission for their YouTube-based programmes by relying on their personal networks in order to cover themselves in the absence of a clear regulatory framework. For instance, the quote above reflects this culture as the interviewee has sought verbal approval for her programme, which is a problematic and unofficial mechanism to rely on.

The culture of exploration applies to content creators who establish their YouTube-based programmes without any attempt to seek permission to produce and circulate the content. Instead, they are more explorative, spontaneous and keen to be part of the developing culture of YouTube-based programmes.

These typologies show that the uncertain behaviour of the Ministry of Culture and Information, in terms of the regulations, creates multiple views and practices among the Saudi content creators. However, the flexibility of the regulatory situation helps in disseminating and circulating online content that offers a new perspective which differs from that of traditional media outlets. These circumstances lead content creators to be cautious about their content, and subsequently they apply a form of self-regulation which is examined in the next section.

### *Self-Regulation as A Response to The Uncertainty*

The uncertain legal situation around YouTube-based programmes has prevailed for some time and content creators have interpreted the situation differently. The main theme that emerges here is self-regulation as a response to the uncertainty.

This uncertainty is received maturely by a wide range of content creators who are apparently sensible, reasonable and sensitive in addressing societal and cultural issues in the country. They are aware of the political climate and the complexity of religion and culture in the context of Saudi Arabia. Such an understanding is evident in the following quote from Mando: “we understand the culture [and] we understand the country” (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016).

As Mando suggests, this sense of having a localized model, whereby young people blend foreign platforms with indigenous and sensible Saudi content, informs the character of the programmes, opening a new window for the flow of information and providing new interpretations for Saudi youth online. The closed Saudi system of information (Duffy, 2014) becomes partly decentralised because of the bottom-up production approach of YouTube programmes.

The quote signals the significance for content creators of being insiders who understand the sensitivity around certain taboos which, therefore, should enable them to address such matters responsibly. This gives them the advantage of being able to push the boundaries insightfully as their programmes reflect the lives of young people and they can read the reactions of the audience promptly. It can be argued that their programmes can be more influential than those of other international outlets that target the Saudi and Arab audience (Mellor, 2013) but which lack cultural relativity. The idea that the content creators understand the culture and the country matches the analysis in Chapter Four, which illustrated the propensity of creators to be critical of the middle and low levels of official agencies but not certainly of the higher levels of authority such as the King.

This cultural sensitivity leads the content creators to apply the strategy of self-censorship (Amin, 2002; and Khazen, 1999) in order to avoid unexpected consequences with societal and religious institutions or with the state. Abdullah Mando explains the rationale as to how his policy was developed:

*[F]or Uturn Entertainment, we have our own internal policy that [determines] the type of content that we can create and [the] type of content that we cannot create; [and] how women appear in our content. (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)*

The strategy of self-censorship represents advanced, professional and restrained thinking on the part of the content creators, especially as there are no institutions to educate and equip the youth with the knowledge and skill-sets needed for media activities or to inform the editorial aspects of the programmes. The content creators overcome the logistical obstacles, showing creativity and leadership skills in their productions. However, it can be suggested that the culture of political fear (Amnesty International, 2017) encourages the content creators to naturally apply self-censorship and to be sensitive of the political and cultural complexity.

This thesis argues that this notion of self-regulation, also known by euphemisms such as “internal filters” (Schmidt and Cohen, 2013), helps the online programmes to survive and expands the scale and scope of the newly established market, which has enabled the programmes to become such a popular phenomenon with audiences. This safe strategy, along with the popularity of YouTube-based programmes, increases the interest in this field and motivates new entrants to engage with this phenomenon, thereby widening the scale and the scope of the industry.

The strategy of self-regulation means taking into consideration the cultural specificity of the Saudi setting in order to be able to sustain audience appeal. For example, as Mando puts it:

*[F]or our policy, we are very conservative in every sense, socially and religiously. So, although we believe we are pushing the boundaries somewhere, we always try to investigate how much we can do that. (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)*

This careful and conservative approach, especially at the beginning of the YouTube-based programme phenomenon, highlights the pragmatic strategy of limiting sensationalism to avoid upsetting certain powerful factions of Saudi society. Therefore, the self-censorship strategy enhances the development of YouTube-based programmes, including human resources and self-regulating skills, which results in a more solid presence for content creators. This thesis argues that by being aware of their culture and context, content creators are able to push the boundaries in certain directions, and this reflects a hidden political act intended to provoke societal and cultural changes. They acknowledge that there is a legal vacuum for YouTube in Saudi Arabia and, therefore, they see certain available opportunities which enable them to broadcast how they perceive their local society and culture.

This self-regulation suggests that the Saudi content creators, who take every necessary step to avoid serious political controversy, employ this strategy to shield their business interests and to maintain the work flow of their productions. Gaining influence in society may be part of the agenda, but arguably it is not as essential as the commercial element (Ramsay and Fatani, 2016).

Self-regulation can be interpreted differently by different content creators because they rely on their instinct and judgement, which are not always accurate. According to Bazaid, “I used my own common sense which, thank God, never let me down in the previous years” (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016). Another example can be found in Nejer’s account: “we have our own intuition and [the team] always discuss our ideas before implementing them” (Malik Nejer, co-founder and art director of Myrkott Animation Studio, 2016).

The common sense approach that several interviewees describe can help the content creators to continue producing acceptable critical content, but it is equally important to

observe that a misjudgement could trigger official censure because of the difference in the criteria of evaluation. The self-censorship strategy might serve the content creators sometimes, but questions could be raised about the sustainability of this strategy. In the absence of clear guidelines, Saudi content creators are risk-takers who do not know what potential consequences they might face.

However, this thesis finds a general consensus amongst content creators when it comes to the interpretation of *common sense* that they apply to their content on YouTube. The content creators express contradictory views about the regulatory state of YouTube in Saudi Arabia, but they have clear stances on their limitations because of their understanding of the country and the culture. One of the interviewees defines the *common sense* as follows:

*Things that are not good to talk about using your real name...Common sense means you cannot talk about the King in any way, whether on YouTube or Twitter. It also means that you need to be aware of the public climate. For instance, there is currently a military operation in Yemen and it is not wise to speak against it or criticize it. (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016)*

In general, this quote outlines the nexus between the public and the government in Saudi Arabia where the citizens, including YouTube content creators, are aware of their limitations and the areas that are off limits. This evidence enhances the analysis in Chapter Three, which suggested that the royal family has the power and, arguably, prestige in the eyes of the public, and that people do not direct their criticisms toward senior figures such as the King. Alternatively, they blame and criticise middle and low levels of authority for the shortcomings in the country. Whether it is driven by admiration for the King and the royal family or by fear of imprisonment, targeting senior officials is a taboo in Saudi Arabia. If it is possible to use YouTube-based programmes as a mirror to make sense of society, then those red lines are reflective of

the socio-political culture in the country that is common, not only amongst YouTube presenters but for the public as well.

The military operation in Yemen is another taboo cited in the above quote as something that must not be criticized in the media. According to the Saudi narrative, the purpose of the 2015 Saudi intervention in Yemen was to restore the legitimate president of Yemen following a coup by an Iranian-backed group known as the Houthi militia. What is striking here is that content creators are very aware of how sensitive the regime is regarding this matter. Nevertheless, going to war without the approval of the public (because of the lack of an elected Parliament) but not accepting any sort of criticism reflects quite an extreme ideology. This has also been echoed in previous chapters when it has been stated that YouTube-based programmes offer a sense of liberalism to young people, but that they are very limited and controlled when it comes to national security issues such as the war in Yemen.

Another interpretation of the meaning of self-regulation is introduced here:

*The red lines for us were not to attack any person online; you can critique but do not make it personal. We do not do anything that would harm the individual or the public. We have to be specifically respectful of the leaders of the country.* (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)

Another interpretation is offered by another interviewee, who highlights that “we have red lines that we cannot cross like religion, religious figures, famous political figures and sexual matters” (Anonymous female participant, 2016).

Apart from showing respect and giving prestige to the leaders of the country, some producers develop guidelines to position themselves as professional content creators of YouTube (Kim, 2012) who seek to add value to the public by producing reasonable content that promotes harmony in society. They are willing to critique various societal issues, but in a manner that does not ignite negative consequences for communities. This shows that some producers are keen on focusing on ideas rather than making things personal, which reflects maturity and advanced editorial skill sets.

Another developed editorial line for some YouTube-based programmes, as inspired by the American programme *The Daily Show*, is to critique, for instance, the council and similar public services based on news that has been reported by official newspapers in Saudi Arabia: “we make our content based on what is available in public. For example, in *3albayer* [programme], the content we produce is based on published official newspapers. So our sources are already regulated” (Abdullah Mando, co-founder, and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016).

This technique is also reported by another participant. When they process the news and make humorous criticisms of low- and middle-level government agencies, the content creators shield themselves by using news that is already published and available in regional and national newspapers. Relying on regulated materials for the content of their programmes is a creative regulatory approach for the online programmes.

The recycling of content, where the regulated written formats of newspapers have been transformed into visual and humorous content for YouTube, is another aspect of a self-censorship approach by content creators. This enables them to produce novel and critical messages by transforming the content into a new medium and using simple language in order to target new audiences. One of the interviewees establishes a link between this type of programme and the newspaper industry in the country: “[self-

censorship] applies for newspaper industry as well, where the editors use their own judgment as they craft the news” (Mohammad Bazaid, presenter and co-founder of MadTomato, 2016).

According to his view, both newspapers and YouTube-based programmes share a certain degree of independence that allows them to make bolder comments and analysis relating to local issues related to the communities. The issue of judgement and self-regulation continues to yield a variety of interpretations for content creators because it is not always possible to understand or predict the changeable mood of the authority. One of the aspects that is worth pointing out is that the editors-in-chief of Saudi newspapers usually enjoy good connections with the state because they are appointed and removed by the Ministry of Culture and Information (Sakr, 2006). Whilst it would be difficult to determine whether the CEOs of firms that produce YouTube-based programmes have any connections with the state or whether the government tries to influence or contain them, it still vital for them to realize the sensitivity of their context.

In the next section, the thesis explores the behaviour and the reactions of the Saudi government towards the content of YouTube-based programming through the lens and experiences of content makers themselves.

## **Saudi Government Reactions**

The above analysis discussed issues related to the legality of YouTube-based programmes and how the Saudi content creators have reacted to this uncertainty by employing the strategy of self-regulation. This section now moves to explore how the Saudi government reacts to certain controversial content from the perspective of content creators themselves.

One could ask whether the decentralized network of the internet is governable by any state in the first place (Schmidt and Cohen, 2013). This thesis acknowledges that the government's investment in digital and information technology infrastructure (Kaba and Said, 2014) has resulted in a great deal of connectivity and has also paved the path towards online growth and activism. The State owns the hardware components of the internet infrastructure and the Internet Service Provider of the country (ISP), which enables the authority, in theory, to control or halt the service, as happened in several neighbouring countries, such as Egypt, during the Revolution of 2011 (Arthur, 2011).

Having said that, it could be asked why the state has not issued clear legalisation on the local practices of online activities, especially since this growth took place during the time of the uprisings in the Middle East. It can be argued that tightening its hand over the online sphere would invite unwanted international criticism. The state might have felt that although those YouTube-based programmes deal critically with issues, they do not constitute a threat to the Saudi throne, and hence it allowed a margin of freedom for young people.

### ***Hard Measures Towards YouTube-Based Programmes***

The empirical analysis shows that the attitude of the Saudi government towards YouTube-based programming is unpredictable, varying in response to different types of content and different timeframes. For example, one YouTube presenter was imprisoned because of his programme's coverage of poverty in the country, which has a massive amount of oil reserves (The Observer, 2011), but I have been unable to recruit him for this research. The imprisonment of this presenter reflects an aggressive response from the government to the coverage of issues that highlight shortcomings or poor governance.

In contrast, some participants state that the attitude of the government is relaxed and that this climate has encouraged them to produce more cultural goods. For example, “we have not received any complaint or criticism from any official entity regarding the nature of [our] content” (Anonymous female presenter, 2016).

This is echoed by another interviewee who states that they were never subjected to any censorship from the government:

*We never received any official pressure or comments against us or the content, and we never removed any content because someone told us to do so. All we received was the advice of friends and family and their points of view. (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)*

Those quotes provoke several thoughts which need to be examined critically in terms of the relationship between the content creators and the government. This relatively relaxed attitude of the government represents an empirical insight which was not expected prior to this research. The image of Saudi Arabia in international media outlets, seemingly, is not associated with positive sentiments and its record on human rights is quite poor (Amnesty International, 2017).

Yet the above quotes, which reflect the views of the production companies, not individual producers, describe a positive attitude from officials towards the content. YouTube can be accessed and it has never been blocked, which implies a certain degree of trust and prospect for the evolving market (see Chapter Three).

This is what some content creators experience and it would be difficult to determine the core policy of the state if, indeed, it has any policy at all on this issue. One could ask

what makes some YouTube presenters subject to detention, especially at the beginning of the phenomenon, when covering poverty in the Kingdom, while other presenters are not subjected to the same treatment. It might be that the decision to imprison is subject to several factors such as the nature of the topic, the tone and the angle of coverage, the timeframe and its context, the novelty of the message and the method.

Another potential motivation for the state, arguably, to allow YouTube-based programmes was discussed in Chapter Three. The lack of external activities is one of the drivers that encouraged young people to go online. As a result, it can be suggested that blocking this new window would cause anger and disappointment amongst the online communities, which are dominated by the youth.

In addition, giving young people a chance to take the lead in creating a new online order and new business windows offers a micro-economic case study for online platforms in Saudi Arabia, which not only benefits the content creators but also contributes to limited job creation and attracts capital flow for young people. It is essential that this be considered given the rise in the unemployment rate in the country (Murphy, 2013). One of the advantages of letting the content creators do their work is that it plants the seeds for a national entertainment industry, which has a very humble infrastructure and lacks professional human resources, as discussed in Chapter Four.

However, having mentioned the relaxed attitude, other interviewees suggest different views. One of the directors explains that one of the episodes of an online soap opera that depicts the religious police was banned. The authority mistakenly assumed that the episode had attempted to attack the role of the religious police and hence they blocked the episode before subsequently unblocking it. Mohammad Makki explains the circumstances surrounding the incident:

*The authority blocked the episode without any notice and they did not contact the producer...nor the distributor, prior to the ban. We were frightened that the issue might escalate but thankfully no one approached us.* (Mohammad Makki, director of TakkiSeries and award-winning filmmaker, 2016)

This quote indicates that the state is aware of the content of YouTube-based programmes and that they observe the influential contributions without imposing any regulations. However, the state is willing to intervene heavily without any notification or communication with those who invest considerable time and resources to create the content. It seems that state intervention is a possibility for content that is thought to contradict Saudi standards and norms, which is another vague and undefined notion. The block was possibly facilitated by the state's monopoly, which enables it to control the internet and the entry point of data to the country through its ISP, and hence it does not require any communication with a third party to block local pages. This attitude delivers a clear message that the state is able to intervene whenever they think it is necessary to do so in order to protect the interest of the Saudi state and society from its point of view.

Makki's quote also reveals the deep anxiety and frustration felt by those who were involved in this episode; they feared that they could have been subjected to the state's revenge for depicting the religious police negatively, especially in the aftermath of the previously discussed arrest one of the YouTube presenters. Nevertheless, no action was taken against them and they were not even approached because of this content.

It has been explained previously that one YouTube presenter was arrested because he spoke about the poverty in the country, twisting the motto used by the late King Abdullah. However, in the incident described by Makki, the authorities were shown to have used another measure, which was to block the episode, and did not approach the cast or creators. It is not clear what criteria of evolution the state uses to determine its

reactions to controversial content. This behaviour reinforces the power of the state and highlights that the liberality brought in by social media platforms is not able to undermine the structure of governing (Ayish, 2001; and Kalathil and Boas, 2003), and that the state remains the most powerful actor in society.

In addition, the attitude of the state in relation to YouTube-based programmes is also subject to various diplomatic interactions with Arabic embassies. One of the participants notes that:

*[The] producer of [our] programme received a letter from the Office of the Minister of the Interior [stating] that one of our episodes had an offence [towards Egypt] ...due to its presenting an Egyptian character in a particular way. That happened after the Egyptian Consul made a complaint against us... We did not mean that, and we deleted the episode as we respect the laws and regulations. (Saeed Baeshen, actor in 8arwsha comedy series, 2016)*

This extract suggests the complex dynamics that the content creators of YouTube-based programmes have to adapt to and to deal with during their engagement with content creation: for example, the lack of legal and regulatory systems, the unpredictable behaviour of the state itself and the unpredicted complaint by a diplomatic party such as the Egyptian Consul.

Following this official warning, the content creators deleted the episode themselves; it was not deleted by the authorities. This warning and the content creators' reaction to it illustrates a third pressure faced by content creators. Deleting the episode is one of the tangible consequences of this pressure, but the non-tangible effects are arguably more severe for the creators. For instance, apart from the expected climate of fear and frustration they experience, this security might limit their creative approach and their

freedom to choose or produce challenging content. The more constraints and obstacles they face, the more time they need to advance their progress.

The section has explored how the Saudi government has responded differently to different content with no clear regulation strategy available to the public. The behaviour of the state is unpredictable and the content creators cannot be certain whether they have crossed lines or not. What emerges from the analysis is that the state imposed three different measures to respond to three different types of content. The measures are imprisonment, blocking the unwanted episode and sending letters from the Ministry of the Interior (equivalent to the Home Office) to notify the content creators that their material was inappropriate.

### *Soft Measures Towards YouTube-Based Programmes*

The aim of this section is to analyse another theme that emerges in relation to the Saudi government's reactions to YouTube-based programmes. While the previous section discussed hard measures imposed against certain types of content, this section explores the theme of soft measures applied by the state to contain the programmes.

The concept of 'states within the state' in Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed, 2008) indicates the powerful influence of some senior princes on public policy in the absence of a written constitution and the lack of clear regulations under the absolute monarchy system. Consequently, the concept of 'state' in this context does not connote a steadfast meaning for this analysis because the nature of the Saudi governing structure, while obviously granting the King absolute power, also distributes influence amongst different bodies such as the Royal Court, the Ministry of the Interior, the National Guard and the Ministry of Culture and Information, each of which represents various interests for

different members of the royal family. In addition, there is the closeness of certain princes to the King; for instance, his son is given a massive amount of influence over public life. Each of these government bodies has a circle of influence, and each can intervene in public life, which makes it difficult to be certain about which entity, for example, imprisoned the presenter or blocked the episode of *TakkiSeries*.

Within Saudi Arabia's complex power system, the Ministry of the Interior is traditionally responsible for dealing with internal affairs that affect security and the harmony of society (MOI, 2017). The previous section also mentioned the role of the Ministry of the Interior in facilitating the complaint and warning the content creators about the potential diplomatic tensions that could result from the discussed episode of *8arwsha*. This shows the centrality of the Ministry in getting involved and guarding society (from its point of view), especially taking into account that the Minister of the Interior, Muhammad bin Nayef (MBN), was the Crown Prince between 2015 and 2017, when he was replaced by Mohammad Bin Salman, the son of the current King.

This indeed suggests that the YouTube-based programmes are not solely simple cultural goods, but rather they have been perceived from a security perspective by those in power. Such security concerns are always an issue for non-democratic governments in the Middle East, shaping the growth and development of the country (Fandy, 2007).

The heavy intervention of the state, especially at the beginning of the YouTube phenomenon, reflects the huge influence of young content creators who utilize this platform to express their views, critiques, aspirations and hopes for their community and country. This is a development that has not necessarily threatened the state, but it has at least caught its attention and raised some concerns about any potential applications in the youth community.

The government's soft intervention takes different forms in order to indirectly influence content creators. For example, one of the influential princes of the royal family made a visit to the headquarters of UTURN Entertainment, one of the production houses making YouTube-based programmes in Saudi Arabia. According to Mando:

*Because UTURN Entertainment has a big impact, we were told that [Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah] was interested to see what the youth thinks and talks about, the concerns of the youth and the [their] needs, and also if he could support us in any way. (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)*

There are several critical findings to be highlighted here. First, the prince, seemingly, was very keen on visiting the content creators to get closer to them and to listen to their aspirations. This section argues that this visit was an attempt to contain the young programme makers, shaping their work and opening up channels with them. The visit could also be interpreted as a vehicle to contain the creative classes and shape them to restrain young people from engaging in any unwanted content by offering support and advice to them.

Secondly, the visit from the prince, who was the son of the late King Abdullah at the time of the visit in 2012, reinforces the previous analysis of the complexity of Saudi power structures. Common sense suggests that the visit, if needed, should have been conducted by a related state agency or ministry such as the Ministry of Culture and Information, not by the prince who happens to be in charge of the National Guard. Being the son of the King granted him an enormous amount of influence over society and therefore this is one of the potential explanations for his engagement with the firm.

This also shows a positive and good gesture from one member of the royal family towards young people and their contributions to the public sphere. The fact that he was

eager to get closer to them and to understand them is suggestive of a reformist step apparently based on personal preference and agenda rather than a structured and constitutionalized framework. When the producer involved was asked about the arrangement of the visit, he replied:

*The visit was requested by us. I and the co-founder of the company met the prince before privately [at a certain event] and our request was based on a recommendation by one of his advisors. When the prince visited us, we had a very nice chat and I was surprised how approachable and humble the prince was. (Abdullah Mando, co-founder and the first CEO of UTURN Entertainment Network, 2016)*

The quote provides further evidence that the visit was made to contain and shape the content of YouTube-based programmes. This visit was made in 2012, which is within the period of 2011-2013 when the content was highly critical and the political situation in surrounding Arab countries was dramatic. The stage from 2014-2016 was marked by less critical content and the growth of soft news in YouTube-based programmes, and consequently the state's intervention almost ceased.

It is unclear whether the critical level of the programmes was softened spontaneously or as a result of other factors, but this thesis suggests that the behaviour of the government towards the content and YouTube content creators might have contributed to this shift where the content has been framed by the State and it becomes less critical than before. In addition, another factor which could have contributed to this new shift was the recruitment of those presenters by commercial television to be part of their programmes, as analysed in Chapter Four. The system of television production also took in some content creators and pushed them to adhere to the editorial policy of television stations.

More evidence regarding soft measures was highlighted by one of the directors of the YouTube soap opera *TakkiSeries*:

*As filmmakers in Jeddah we have good relationships with the Ministry of Culture and Information and they are very cooperative... There is a monthly meeting with the representatives of the Ministry where they discuss with us issues related to our needs... This was not the case four years ago.* (Mohammad Makki, director of *TakkiSeries* and award-winning filmmaker, 2016)

The quote shows how the prominent influence of filmmaking and YouTube-based programmes has attracted the attention of the authorities and encouraged them to deal with the emerging new cultural phenomenon by organizing activities, offering technical and logistical support and maximizing the benefit of Saudi content creators, which consequently shapes Saudi business and culture.

This attitude differs from the previous one, which was apparently based on political and security considerations, whereas this currently focuses on technical and business aspects to promote and facilitate the creativity of Saudi filmmakers even though the cinema is not allowed in the country. Not all filmmakers engage with YouTube activities; most of them prefer to participate in international film festivals to showcase their work and gain global recognition (Simon, 2016).

Finally, this containing behaviour of the state highlights that the authorities are very keen to set up direct communication channels with influential content creators to shape their direction instead of relying completely on traditional censorship mechanisms discussed by Wojcieszak (2007) and Gehlbach and Sonin (2014). This behaviour arguably results in severe self-censorship of content. This analysis meets the view of Zayani (2015), who suggests that non-democratic governments tolerate the internet and

the free flow of information as long as it does not challenge the regime. By containing the content creators through various hard and soft measures, the state ensures that the content does not pose serious a challenge to its authority.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis has answered the research question that focuses on the relationship between the Saudi government and YouTube-based programmes, and the reactions of the government to critical content.

It began by exploring the regulatory framework of YouTube-based programmes, highlighting that the programmes operate in an uncertain regularity context, which could make them subject to the caprices of the government. This leads them to develop a self-regulation strategy that is sensitive to the political and cultural specificity of Saudi Arabia. It then discussed the attitude of the government towards the critical content. This chapter has conceptualized the mechanisms developed by the state to control the programmes as a containing strategy. This concept has resulted in two emergent themes: hard measures (imprisonment, blocking the discussed episode and sending notification letters) and soft measures (a prince's visit to a production house and periodic meetings between representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Information and filmmakers).

The chapter found that the legal vacuum in which the programmes operate has two implications. First, the uncertainty has left room for varying interpretations, and this has served as a catalyst to boost the quality and the quantity of programmes without the content creators seeking the media licensing required for content produced within Saudi Arabia. The government's apparently relaxed attitude is surprising for a state that is well known for its restrictive media environment (Amnesty International, 2017). On the

other hand, the ambiguity has left content creators vulnerable to the state's reactions and its interpretation of the critical content because they do not know whether they have crossed lines or not.

The content creators took advantage of the poor regulation system and the state as the Ministry of Culture and Information seemingly allowed the phenomenon to grow, which is a positive sign. Relaxing the rules and decentralizing the system might be promising signs for the future of content creators, but more observation is needed to monitor the development.

However, the positive behaviour of the state has its limitations. As might be expected, it shows little tolerance for critical content; for example, content that addresses poverty in the wealthy country. The main finding here is that the Saudi government does not allow any cultural or political interpretations that oppose the official narrative or incite public anger, such as investigations of poverty or criticism of the war on Yemen. This is highly problematic because it offers no clear system of evaluation for the content creators, while the state maintains absolute power over public life.

The reaction of the Saudi government has been subject to various factors, including the nature of content, the context and the timeframe of YouTube-based programmes. The hard measures taken, such as imprisonment and blocking content, can exacerbate the culture of fear amongst the content creators, causing them to avoid critical political content and apply self-censorship, as revealed in the analysis. This finding is consistent with the argument of Freedman (2008), who states that censorship is seen as one of the hallmarks of authoritarian regimes; where media content is subject to formal and informal pressures from governments, pressure groups and corporations which seek to minimize materials which might be perceived as damaging to the regime's agenda.

The chapter argues that the perception of YouTube-based programmes or social media platforms in general as alternative channels with which to promote democracy and freedom is quite misleading. For Saudi content creators, their work has had limited effective outcomes, and it has had little considerable effect on the public life of youth. Because the state is capable of intervening and blocking any unwanted material, the lack of clear regulations has not meant that Saudi content creators are able to work with total editorial freedom.

It seems that claims related to voicing alternative opinions or democratising youth might only apply to soft news and entertainment-related content, not to the critical political and cultural content that is produced by recognized groups such as the content creators of YouTube. The programmes have not critically affected the regulatory and political structure of the country. The internet might present alternative voices for individuals online, but this is different from the case of the recognized work of YouTube-based programmes.

Finally, the Saudi social media field suffers from the massive ambiguity that results in its having no clear and agreed interpretations of what is acceptable or unacceptable practice for individuals. The Saudi state is the most powerful actor in society and it seems there is no sign of any radical media changes, even in the wake of the introduction of the Saudi Vision 2030 plan, which was mentioned previously. The content creators need to take into account the sensitivity of the state regarding certain issues, or alternatively they can focus on humour and entertainment content to avoid the direct intervention of the government.

## **Chapter Six: The Audience Perspective on YouTube-Based Programming**

### **Introduction**

The thesis now shifts its focus towards the audience by drawing upon the findings of semi-structured focus group interviews in order to understand the young audience member's perspectives. This chapter seeks to address the fourth research question, which considers the reasons behind the popularity of YouTube-based programming amongst the Saudi audience.

The field of audience research has historically received little attention in Arab academia and it has mainly theorized the Arab audience as a passive group that is subject to Western media outlets (Mellor, 2013 and Livingstone, 2015). Chapter One discussed the conceptual developments of the audience; for instance, the contributions of Webster (1998), Alasuutari (1999), Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) and Meikle and Young (2012) help in theorizing the analysis of focus group interviews in terms of the interactive nature of the young audience. The literature review also demonstrated the state of Arab audience research (Boyd, 1982; Sakr, 2007; and Kraidy, 2008) to highlight the political and logistical difficulties associated with conducting this type of research.

The chapter explores two main themes which emerged from the focus group interviews with Saudi audience members; these themes will be conceptualized as *representative choices* and *the localism of YouTube-based programming*. Each theme contains two categories to be analysed and investigated.

The first section analyses the theme of representative choices provided by YouTube-based programming. Its two categories are *meaningful diversity* and the content's *temporal order*. The second section investigates the localism of YouTube-based programming as a significant force in drawing the audience's attention to the programmes. This theme also has two categories: *cultural relativity* and *technological novelty*.

The analysis draws on the audience's beliefs, thoughts and experiences, which cannot be meaningfully represented using a statistical approach. The focus group interview method encourages young people to tell stories about YouTube content, how they perceive it, how they see it and how they react to it. Chapter Two outlined in detail the process of conducting focus group interviews and carrying out transcription, translation and analysis. I conducted seven semi-structured focus group interviews with 29 participants in total. As for the segmentation, there were five Saudi male focus groups and two Saudi female focus groups.

The focus group respondents were required to be familiar with at least one Saudi YouTube-based programme in order to be able to draw upon their personal experience and engage in the debate about the research problem. As the empirical data shows, a large number of the participants were easily able to name several YouTube-based programmes and discuss them passionately and controversially. However, a very small minority of participants were able to name only one local YouTube programme, and this was particularly common among the female respondents.

Several sources from business literature (Al-Arabiya, 2012; Smith, 2013; and Kerr, 2014) highlight the large number of YouTube views from within Saudi Arabia, which makes the country the biggest per capita consumer of YouTube in the world. The academic literature – for example, (Zayani, 2012 and Mellor, 2013) – shows the lack of

in-depth qualitative research aimed at understanding the Arab audience and the dynamics of the Arab media landscape as that audience perceives it. This chapter seeks to respond to that gap in order to contribute to the development of the literature, using the Saudi YouTube audience as a case study.

### **The Representative Choices of YouTube-Based Programming**

Representative choice is one of the main themes that emerged out of the discussions with the focus group participants. It is an overarching theme dealing with the meaningful diversity of content and the audience's temporal control over that content, options which had not previously been available within the Saudi media context.

The analysis agrees with Lynch (2006) that the choices of television content do not meet the demands of the audience, particularly compared with YouTube-based programmes, which provide audiences with representative choices. For instance, YouTube programmes highlight social issues that relate to young people such as employment, housing, gender issues, technology and comedy (Ramsay and Fatani, 2016).

The first section explores the programmes' diversity, outlining the wide range of critical political, cultural, societal and entertainment programmes available to the youth audience. These programmes, especially during 2011-2012, were unique in their willingness to break the norms of local media productions by highlighting what had been traditionally known as taboos.

The second section presents the temporal order available to the Saudi audience because of the technological features of the platform. It shows the attitude of the audience that favours YouTube programmes over television. It explores a new trend relating to the relationship between the content and viewers' perceptions of time spent watching the content.

### ***The Meaningful Diversity of the Programmes as an Aspect of Representative Choices***

In this first section, the vast majority of the participants were familiar with a number of YouTube-based programmes, and the findings of these interviews show that some of them can be considered fans of the programmes and even of the presenters or actors. For instance, a number of respondents were able to offer accounts of their favourite YouTube programmes:

*I like Sa7i channel because it has a variety of programmes related to youth. For example, social programmes tackle issues that the citizens suffer from. This presents the problem in a funny way that may relieve people. (44-year-old male PhD student, 2016)*

*ScenTV is a special [YouTube Channel] for me because it produces scientific programmes and documentaries. It is my favourite because of its diversity and its purposeful content with light comedy. (31-year-old male university student, 2016)*

*I watch YouTube on a daily basis and the first Saudi YouTube channel that I look for is UpToDate by Faisal Alsaif. It is a technological channel that offers technological content where it reviews mobiles and the new technology in the world, especially the CES exhibition in Los Angeles. (26-year-old male teaching assistant in a Saudi university, 2016)*

These quotes are notable because they showcase the ability of the participants to offer a great deal of detail about the content and nature of the programmes. Some viewers can be regarded as fans, which reinforces the shift in young audience's tastes towards online representative programmes and away from traditional TV shows, especially in authoritarian contexts where the mainstream media is subject to tight censorship (Wojcieszak, 2007; and Al-Obaidi, 2007) which can affect the quality of the output (Lynch, 2006).

This shift is made evident by the participants' emphasis that they are always connected to YouTube, which implies the centrality of the platform for them. What is unique here is not only the association of YouTube with the youth segment, but their deep engagement with local programmes that address their concerns and aspirations. According to one participant, "the presenters are close to our age, and they face the same problems we face. Their way of thinking is similar to ours. They speak on our behalf" (18-year-old male university student, 2016).

In a country where the young citizens lack access to public cinema and theatres, YouTube-based programmes could be seen as a catalyst to establish some form of a domestic entertainment industry for the audience. Nevertheless, YouTube offers greater freedom in terms of what can be said and how it can be said (Strangelove, 2011), bypassing the state and privately owned media outlets. The high engagement of the respondents indicates that the appeal of YouTube programmes is prominent. It reflects the need of young audiences for locally relevant content that is produced by people who understand their culture, speak their language and are aware of their needs and struggles.

The participants reveal their closeness to specific YouTube figures by mentioning, for example, the name of YouTube presenter Faisal Alsaif. This established relationship between the sender and the receiver is a positive indicator that builds the fan bases of

certain shows. It enhances the analysis of Chapter Three, which highlighted the influence and privilege that YouTube presenters can have in their communities, which echoes Turner's (2010) analysis of the emergence of new online starts. This content by Saudi youth for Saudi youth represents a major shift in the media landscape, driving the interest of the audience unprecedentedly and widening their media consumption options.

The diversity of YouTube-based programming has important implications for the way Saudis consume media. Some of the participants indicate that:

*I feel that the TV channels have been replaced by YouTube as on the TV you have to wait for the programme whereas on YouTube you have many choices and you choose what you want to watch. (18-year-old male university student, 2016)*

Another respondent highlights that: "YouTube is better as I can control the time and the place of watching and these are the most important [features]" (19-year-old female university student, 2016). Another interviewee states that:

*I have abandoned TV... [YouTube] contains all the content I follow so it becomes my primary reference since all people present on YouTube and all the programmes can be easily uploaded to it. (33-year-old male PhD student, 2016)*

These were some of the respondents who expressed their preference for watching YouTube programmes rather than TV shows and therefore sought to engage more actively with online platforms. While this behaviour represents the new global trend among young audiences (Lange, 2007; and Burgess and Green, 2009), these comments suggest further insights when read within the context of Saudi Arabia.

The above quotes emphasise the notion of choice that YouTube delivers for the audience, but television is also capable of delivering various choices. What these comments demonstrate is that YouTube-based programmes produce *representative choices* which engage with young people and echo their concerns, aspirations and hopes, unlike the mainstream media outlets that are owned by the Saudi state or its associated investors (Kraidy, 2013; and Sakr, Skovgaard-Petersen and Ratta, 2015). What can be understood from these comments is that the choices offered by television were not valued highly by the youth audience.

Addressing issues that are related to young audiences in Saudi Arabia is a central notion that drives massive traffic for these programmes, but more importantly the competitive environment has increased the quantity of programmes and therefore delivered more genuine choice for viewers online. Here, the notion of choice means more diverse and relevant programmes for the youth; innovative and brave ideas that shed light upon some taboos in Saudi society; introducing new online figures and presenters (Turner, 2010); and new modes of production (Doyle, 2012). The nature of the content and its diversity has empowered the audience to choose their programmes, especially in the early days of YouTube in Saudi Arabia from 2010 to 2012, when the quantity of programming was expanding.

The notion of choice can reflect an unspoken desire for freedom and change amongst young Saudi audiences. The online choice of cultural products resonates with the youth audience, suggesting that they enjoy the sense of pluralism offered to them by YouTube-based programming. This has implications for Saudi policy makers regarding the needs and aspirations of their young citizens to create and participate in a culture of pluralism in the country, especially during the economic challenges that face the Saudi government in the wake of the oil price decline of 2015 onwards.

Another dimension relating to the concept of *representative choices* is the differentiation of the participants between YouTube-based networks and YouTube-based programmes. This acknowledgement by audiences suggests an advanced level of awareness and engagement because they are able to distinguish between individual YouTube programmes, which are produced on their own, and YouTube channels that consisted of several programmes that are produced by production corporations or teams in a similar way to television.

One of the respondents differentiates between a YouTube channel that produces a number of programmes and another independent programme that operates individually:

*I watch Sa7i channel continuously and another programme called 8arwasha [drama series] if you come across it. It is a comedy and satire that I am really into. (25-year-old male university student, 2016)*

Another participant names a number of programmes for one of the channels:

*Sa7i channel offers a wide range of programmes. For example, they have Free Kick and Broadcast Show ... There are also other individual programmes that offer specific content like learning English or Islamic preaching. I think people move between these programmes and channels. (26-year-old male university student, 2016)*

These statements tell us something about the respondents' closeness to YouTube content as they were able to explain their preferences by, for example, identifying certain channels and their various programmes. This shows a greater level of engagement because reveals an understanding of the difference between YouTube-based channels and YouTube-based programmes. YouTube-based channels have more developed and advanced modes of production, but more importantly they reflect the

sophisticated level of audiences who are well aware of this unspoken subtle development. This further enhances the centrality of YouTube's content amongst the Saudi online public.

Nevertheless, the focus group interviews reveal that the vast majority of those with limited interest in YouTube-based programmes are the female participants. They are aware of the general concepts and practices of YouTube's content, but it is difficult for them, for instance, to name several programmes or channels. In most cases, they are able to name one programme or the names of a few presenters, unlike their male counterparts, who tend to be more engaged with YouTube-based programmes in general.

Here are some quotes from across the focus groups that demonstrate the above issues:

*Our taste is different from the taste of the children, as the quality of some videos is not that elegant and their focus is only on comedy and laughing. They want to make people laugh by any means, which may be hackneyed so I don't watch them. (31-year-old female PhD student, 2016)*

*I rarely watch YouTube-based programmes. I [only] watch them if one of my friends has sent me a link and asked me to watch it. (20-year-old female university student, 2016)*

*It depends on the topic. I follow the programmes on YouTube if I have free time. (23-year-old female university student, 2016)*

The general impression from these comments is that the Saudi female participants are less drawn to the vibe of YouTube-based programming and that it is not their priority to invest their time extensively in watching and following the most recent episodes of YouTube-based programmes. This view is shared by several women from different ages and backgrounds and this deserves more examination.

The first quote above suggests that the participant perceives YouTube-based programmes as being suitable only for a younger segment (e.g. children), which differs from the perceptions of other participants. Her comment presents a personal judgement which professes lack of interest and a limited level of enthusiasm for the programmes by linking them to poor quality and the absence of value for her. She positions her stance as being representative of women by saying ‘our taste’ to differentiate the interests of Saudi women from those of Saudi men.

One potential explanation for Saudi women’s lack of interest is the absence of Saudi females in the production process of YouTube-based programming, which is dominated by men, as Chapter Three pointed out. This lack of female input may have contributed to female viewers’ disinterest because the taste and mode of men’s productions might not be capable of delivering content that interests female viewers; in short, the programmes’ content may be too male-oriented.

It seems that the struggle for young people in Saudi Arabia has two dimensions: first, the exclusion of the Saudi youth in general from the decision-making process, and secondly the particular struggle of young women in the country (Global Gender Gap Report, 2016). This has culturally affected the production and the consumption patterns of Saudi women when it comes to YouTube-based programmes. This section argues that the continued absence of women in the process of production has resulted in their limited interest as an audience. Chapter Three demonstrated the challenges that some Saudi female presenters faced socially and culturally, which can serve as a catalyst for limiting female participation either as producers or consumers.

So far, the above analysis has examined one aspect of the *representative choices* theme by exploring the diversity of YouTube-based programmes as an attractive feature for the youth audience. This representative choice is reflected in the programmes that relate

to the everyday lives and concerns of the Saudi youth. The section has also differentiated between individual-centric programmes and genre-centric programmes. It also highlighted the stance of women as an audience and their views regarding YouTube-based programming.

In the following section, the analysis will consider another aspect of representative choices, the temporal control of the young Saudi audience, before moving on to shed light upon the duration of online consumption for Saudis.

### ***Temporal Control as an Aspect of Representative Choices***

This thesis affirms that when engaging and interacting with YouTube-based programmes, the interconnectivity features of social media platforms play a significant role in spreading and sharing content. The audience does not exclusively watch the content via the platform of YouTube itself, but through the various connected platforms that allow the sharing and exchanging of the content online.

The following quotes from interviewees explain their behaviour in relation to the consumption of Saudi content on YouTube:

*I usually watch the content using my phone and sometimes when I log into my Instagram account, I may click the links I find. In addition, I receive the links via WhatsApp and this is easier than watching on the computer, especially when I'm on my way to my university. (18-year-old male university student, 2016)*

*I watch the new episodes via [YouTube] channels that I have subscribed to and I watch the videos suggested by YouTube...[using] my laptop...and my iPad. (33-year-old male university student, 2016)*

*In front of me, I have my laptop while I work on my ... project and at the same time the TV is behind my back. In addition, my iPad is next to me to be able to watch the videos on YouTube. (31-year-old male university student, 2016)*

These comments represent various devices and methods for watching the Saudi online content. In the last quote, the respondent describes the position of the television as being “behind my back”, which reflects that the priority of TV comes behind the platform of YouTube for some young Saudi consumers. This also represents the rhetorical position that television has not succeeded in getting the attention of Saudi young audiences (Lynch, 2006). This behaviour of leaving the television set in the background is not exclusive to Saudi audiences; it matches global studies that address the position of television in the everyday lives of audience members. For instance, while TV still plays important roles in people lives, some audiences reinforce the belief that watching television itself is less worthy of their time than other pursuits (Boyle and Kelly 2012).

In the Saudi case, however, television seems less important for the youth audience because of the lack of content to attract them, and not because the medium itself is inherently less worthy of their time. In fact, the findings in the following section highlight that Saudi audiences watch online content longer than what several studies suggest when it comes to youth consumption patterns, so the issue of time investment for the Saudi youth is not of major significance. As a result, the lack of attractive TV content (Lynch, 2006) for young audiences can enhance the notion of this thesis that the Saudi youth favour Saudi YouTube content over Saudi mainstream television content. Their preference for YouTube over television is not because of a lack of time, but rather because of the failure of television to keep up with the aspirations, needs and interests of young Saudi audiences.

While the above quotes highlight the different devices used to access content online (e.g. laptops, iPads), the first comment draws attention to the easy connectivity of content which was made available following the technological development of smartphones and applications (Leurs, 2015). The content is made to fit the standard YouTube platform but the quote highlights that the content or the link can be shared through various platforms and applications, such as Instagram and WhatsApp. This sharable feature is one of the main factors that has made the content of Saudi YouTube very popular and appealing, along with those factors that were analysed in Chapter Three about concerns of youth participation in the public sphere and representation issues.

One point that was often mentioned across all different focus groups is the considerable amount of time that the audience invests in watching local content on YouTube. While the different respondents were not in agreement upon certain dimensions that relate to the content itself, the findings show that there was a tendency among the vast majority of them to agree on the preferred length of the content of YouTube. The vast majority of respondents assert that ten minutes on average is an acceptable duration for an episode. For instance:

*Ten minutes and less is appropriate but I watched a Saudi YouTube-based programme whose episodes lasted between eighteen and twenty minutes and it was very nice. (17-year-old male university student, 2016)*

*For comedy and social programs, [I think] ten minutes' video is excellent. (18-year-old male university student, 2016)*

*[T]en minutes is good for me. More than this would be boring. (26-year-old male university student, 2016)*

These excerpts signify interesting findings as they show the willingness of young audiences to follow programmes and watch content on YouTube for considerably longer periods of time than several commercial and academic studies have suggested, for instance, Newman (2010). It also shows the correlation between the content and the perception of time online; the audience is willing to spend longer on YouTube for specific genres. The thesis argues that the Saudi case has unique characteristics and circumstances that make it different from what other studies have shown.

This tendency towards the pattern of longer periods of consumption on YouTube might have several explanations. First, the amount of time available to the young audience is a significant driver that acts as a catalyst for the growth of online consumption. Khalil (2010) points out that the issue of *Al-faragh* – an Arabic term which means free time or leisure time available to young citizens – is prominent amongst young Saudi citizens. The Saudi population is relatively young, with 65% of the population between 15 and 54 years old (World FactBook, 2016), and this further enhances the growth of online consumption.

Secondly, the lack of outdoor activities and social spaces available to young citizens in the country has pushed them towards online space to replace the lack of offline spaces. For example, the ban on cinema halls, at the time of writing, provides the content creators with tremendous opportunities to establish their presence in the online community. However, this factor seems to also be one of the main drivers for this huge consumption, as the audience engages with content that speaks to them, as analysed in Chapter Three.

A third potential explanation for this trend of comparatively long viewing times is the economic advancement of the country because of the previous high price of oil at the time when the YouTube boom took place (2011-2014). This enhanced the infrastructure

of the telecommunication sector and increased the public expenditure that reinforced the welfare system (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015) and therefore made access to technology, for instance, electronic devices, much easier, more convenient and readily available for the majority of the young audience.

This relatively long-watching trend is notable especially in the context of online media studies because it indicates the need for a new approach and a new way of thinking to deal with Saudi YouTube content. This thesis concerns the Saudi experience and it can be difficult to generalize its findings and apply them to other countries. Arguably, the political, societal and cultural climate of Saudi Arabia is behind the complexity of YouTube-based programmes' production and consumption in the country.

When discussing some of the meanings surrounding this relatively long viewing behaviour, the participants provide more clarification about the relationship between the duration and the nature of the content: "Fifteen to twenty minutes is enough for the content the interests me like [YouTube programmes that focus on] automobiles" (23-year-old male university student, 2016).

This comment demonstrates that viewers would be willing to watch long content as long as it addresses their interests and needs. Niche content is prominent in this context because it is aimed at those who are willing to invest their time to follow the content they desire. Examples that arose from the focus group discussions included automobiles, technological products and gaming videos that offer up-to-date information and content by utilizing YouTube and other platforms such as Twitter.

There is a new trend among viewers of leaning towards more specialized YouTube-based programmes such as those mentioned above. These programmes are generally,

but not always, less broadly appealing than the social experiment or talk show-based YouTube programmes, but this is a sign of the maturity of the YouTube market in Saudi Arabia.

Another dimension of the relationship between the duration and the nature of content is highlighted by one of the respondents:

*It differs according to the type of the programme. Ten minutes is good for sports or political programmes but for the [soap opera] series, you need twenty minutes at least.*  
(18-year-old male university student, 2016)

The quote can also come under the umbrella of niche content, but it implies that entertainment content, especially the online series, is perceived positively by a member of the audience and that the content of such series is considered interesting enough to merit a longer viewing duration.

According to the interviewees then, the above discussion represents a new trend among Saudi audiences of watching YouTube content for relatively long periods, with an average of ten minutes for each episode. Depending on the nature of the content, some respondents suggested that, in certain circumstances, they watch a longer format of fifteen to twenty minutes of Saudi YouTube-based programmes. This thesis argues that the Saudi audience is hungry to consume authentic content that gives voice to their hopes, aspirations and struggles.

Nevertheless, there were some minorities in the focus group interviews who expressed their preference that episodes not exceed ten minutes. Their main argument was that the long format can cause boredom: “Most programmes are in this range [ten minutes] but I

do not think they would attract the audience if they made it longer” (20-year-old male university student, 2016); “Ten minutes but the conversation should not fill the whole video. The video should be divided into parts like comedy, conversations and interviews” (17-year-old male university student, 2016).

What is remarkable here is that those participants were not disagreeing about the acceptability of the ten-minute format, but rather about the notion of exceeding this limit. In any case, this represents a strong appetite among the Saudi audience as they regard the ten-minute format as standard and acceptable.

These findings have highlighted the new cultural behaviour of consuming YouTube-based programmes which contain local and relevant content for young people in Saudi Arabia. This feeds into their needs and interests, which have evolved out of the complexity of Saudi society.

It would be interesting for future studies to determine whether this behaviour has been temporarily adopted by the Saudi audience because of the novelty of the YouTube-based programming phenomenon. In any case, the traditional and online media in Saudi Arabia are always unique and different from any other country’s because of the uniqueness of the political, religious and cultural system of Saudi Arabia.

This discussion has analysed two aspects of the representative choice theme of YouTube-based programmes: the meaningful diversity of the content and the temporal order. The next section explores another theme that emerged from the discussion with Saudi participants.

## **The Localism of YouTube-Based Programmes**

This part now seeks to explore another emerging theme that was prominent throughout the discussions with the study participants. This theme is conceptualized as the *localism of YouTube-based programmes*, which is a significant aspect that drives the interest of the audience in the programmes. The theme of localism consists of two categories: cultural relativity and technological novelty.

Cultural relativity can be explained, in this context, as the delivery of content to the targeted audience by employing the popular Saudi way of chatting. The use of simple, colloquial language conveys mutuality; the producers do not position themselves in a hierarchy above the viewers, but appear close and familiar to the audience. The language, the accent, the body language and the local jokes against officials are illustrative examples that bind the producers and the consumers together, especially if we take into consideration the representative choices of the programmes, as explored above. This has resulted in the existence of programmes that cover issues related to young people and deliver them through the mechanism of cultural relativity.

Technological novelty means the producers utilize high-end technology to design and operate the programmes with highly technical features. It includes the use of the art of direction, for instance, to produce locally based dramatic scenes that the audience is not familiar with in order to expose it at the local level of television.

### *Cultural Relativity and Technological Novelty*

The findings illustrate that what makes the content unique is its ability to reflect the life and experience of ordinary young citizens who feel they are being spoken to directly by the cultural products of YouTube:

*I have never missed any episodes of the Masameer [Nails] programme; he presents [social] incidents clearly whereas other ordinary series do not usually reflect the real state of society. This programme translates the details of society. For the tone, this might be the only programme that represents... exactly the Najd [region] and the central regions. (32-year-old male PhD student, 2016)*

This comment brings to mind several thoughts and ideas which shed light upon why such content is attractive and popular with the Saudi youth. To start, the authenticity of these programmes' messages and their willingness to provide an unfiltered examination of the needs and the reality of the Saudi youth is a main driver for their unprecedented success. It is essential to take into account the chronological context of the YouTube-based programming phenomenon from 2011 onwards, when the state-owned media and commercial media outlets alike were mainly focusing on protocol news and imported entertainment programmes (Ghareeb, 2000) which mainly ignored the local needs of Saudi youth. YouTube-based programmes were therefore able to fill this gap and offer the marginalized audience fresh and representative cultural products that presented an understanding of their struggle for the first time. This established a new cultural norm and novel structure for the hierarchy of content-making, where the content is produced by Saudi youth for Saudi youth (Khalil, 2010), undermining the traditional existence of a gatekeeper in traditional media corporations. This new culture of production took advantage of low entry to the market and the editorial freedom to craft messages in 2011, which, as the respondent describes, means being able to translate the details of society. In addition, the respondent is able to prioritize the programmes and distinguish between them according to his preferences.

The respondent also highlights the significance of the tone, which overcomes any cultural and social barriers and makes the content attractive and engaging. The content creators' engagement with and understanding of their audience is evident in their language and accent, and this provides the local content with additional advantages and more traffic. The audience in this context are attracted to content that reflects their accent, colloquialisms, jokes and local social gestures, and which is in line with what young people say online as well as offline. This thesis argues that the high degree of familiarity between the content and the audience builds connections and limits the level of estrangement and mistrust between the senders and the receivers, which has resulted in audiences seeing the programmes as being more credible than those on television. This high level of familiarity is illustrated by the ability of the respondent to demonstrate the nature of the accent of his favourite programme and connect it to a certain geographical area in Saudi Arabia.

This mirrors the findings of Chapter Four, which described the coordination between big commercial brands and the content creators of YouTube-based programmes; the brands invested in the content creators' expertise and knowledge in order to reach specific demographics for advertising purposes, a significant move that bypassed the traditional advertising agencies that had been mostly run by non-Saudis (Kraidy, 2012) who lacked that specific cultural understanding that appeals to both advertisers and audiences.

In discussing the tone of the programmes, some respondents pointed to the significant role of satire in driving the programmes' strong appeal. This introduces new norms in relation to content creation.

*I focus on the programmes that criticize in a funny way and sometimes even in a ridiculous way. I especially prefer the social criticism, but it is occasionally silly despite its humour. (32-year-old male PhD student, 2016)*

Several respondents highlighted repeatedly throughout the focus groups that Saudi entertainment is one of the essential components they are interested in watching on YouTube. The satirical nature of the programmes fulfils this need for the audience and it offers them a novel and creative approach in its criticism of the political and societal status quo. In addition, this comment reveals the critical skills of the respondent, who was able to distinguish between humour and what he describes as “silly” content. This demonstrates that the viewer is active and critically engaged when perceiving the content. When one respondent was asked about his interpretation of social criticism, this was his response:

*Saudi society is very conservative from my point of view. [Broadcasting] what is unusual... is wrong and not good, such as the issue of women driving cars. There is a programme which intentionally talks about the [controversial] issues of society... In addition, there is social criticism of bad behaviour, corruption of certain corporations and corruption of some of the government agencies [which is positive]. (32-year-old male PhD student, 2016)*

The respondent draws a line between criticism that focuses on the personal behaviour of young people and criticism that is directed towards the official behaviour of certain government agencies. While there is a tendency towards accepting the criticism of government services, this comment shows conservative views when it comes to one of the most controversial cultural issues of Saudi society at the time of writing: women being able to drive vehicles. There were other respondents who had more liberal views on this issue, but this in general highlights the critical skills of the audience in accepting or refusing the messages of YouTube-based programmes. The viewers frequently engage and discuss the YouTube content within their social circles, as will be examined later.

So satire and entertainment in a broader sense are important features that attract the young Saudi audience. This can be further illustrated by the following views of the respondents:

*I think some of those programmes mirror the social reality of Saudi Arabia in a funny way. Additionally, they link us to other funny people in Instagram and social media. (21-year-old male university student, 2016)*

*I have enough lectures and philosophy all day [at university] so I do not want someone to give me lectures but rather I want to watch funny things. (21-year-old male university student, 2016)*

Chapter Three showed the lack of entertainment activities such as cinemas in Saudi Arabia and how this was one of the main drivers for the growth of entertainment-oriented YouTube-based programmes. The above quotes confirm the hunger of the young Saudi audience for local and relevant entertainment content to watch instead of consuming non-Saudi content either on television or YouTube.

While another respondent reinforced the importance of familiarity and the tone, he also suggested a further reason for the popularity of YouTube-based programming:

*[I always watch them because of] the way they transfer the information to the viewer, the way they speak and their professional photography, which plays an important role [for me]. Also, the high quality of the videos... Khambalah uses 4K technology for their videos. The quality of this technology attracts me. (18-year-old male university student, 2016)*

The high-end output of some programmes is a fourth factor that catches the attention of the audience and this has become an increasingly significant factor, especially for the

young, tech-savvy audience. For the audience, visual attraction is as important as the content itself and this raises the standards of production and consumption for YouTube programmes. This means the taste of the audience would be difficult to satisfy if a production embraced lower standards than, for instance, 4K resolution. This also adds a layer of complexity for content creators who cannot afford this sophisticated mode of production. This finding reflects the analysis in Chapter Four, which explored that YouTube production recently shifted from individual-based programmes to corporation-based programmes for several reasons, including the high investment of corporations in the content and technology to such an extent that it became difficult for individuals to cope with the pace of change in the emerging market between 2010 and 2013.

The respondents were keen to expand on the essential role of high-end production values on YouTube by discussing the impact of technical aspects such as filming and direction:

*[T]he art of direction is important but also the cameras themselves because they started using very high-end cameras for shooting in order to produce sophisticated content. (26-year-old male university student, 2016)*

The technological and cinematic mode of YouTube-based programming plays an essential role in keeping the audience interested and alert for the episodes. This shows the high level of technology expected by the respondents to satisfy them and make the content attractive and appealing to them. What is significant to observe here is how the market of YouTube-based programming has evolved and developed in such a non-supportive environment in Saudi Arabia; both the creators and the audiences have shown, to a great degree, their ability to progress greatly over a short period of time and overcome logistical and societal barriers.

This quick development can be attributed to the exposure of the audience to various national and foreign media outlets via traditional television, which improved their critical skills and knowledge as an audience. This reinforces the notion of the viewers' high awareness of the production values of YouTube-based programmes. The producers of YouTube-based programmes were able to read these developments and increase the standards of production over a short period of time.

This high-end production of YouTube-based programmes has stimulated creativity and provided some audience members with practical learning opportunities. One of the participants articulated this:

*I am about to launch a scientific programme on YouTube and I want to have a strong background regarding the nature of direction and photography in order to be sure that the technical level of my programme is not below the level of the present programmes.*  
(26-year-old male university student, 2016)

This can be seen as one of the indirect consequences for a certain segment of the audience that shows interest in this phenomenon. It shows the complex relationship between the creators and the audience, wherein the latter can sometimes easily move to play the role of the former. The slogan of YouTube – *Broadcast yourself* – bridges the gap between the makers and the viewers, which in the Saudi context helps young people to participate and contribute to the public discussion and democratise the community to a certain degree. Another indirect result is the abundance of programmes which have been stimulated in the first place by the pioneers who started this new trend.

The abundance of programmes is very significant because it helps develop the market of YouTube in Saudi Arabia. From the outset, as has been discussed earlier, the phenomenon of YouTube-based programmes has addressed a niche and certain needs of

the youth. However, within this niche there are several sub-niche themes that remain unaddressed as the vast majority of programmes focus on comedy, talk shows and pranks. This is an opportunity for some audiences to fill in these sub-niche themes, such as scientific programmes, in order to contribute to the development of this market. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate how common these new programmes are that have been stimulated by the existing programmes, it certainly feeds into the creativity of both the producers and consumers of YouTube-based programming by stimulating new thoughts and practices for young Saudi citizens. This phenomenon is described by Miekle and Young (2012) as the “creative audience” to mark the shift of some audiences from being a passive force to being creative or arguably, as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) describe it, a “diffused audience”.

The focus group respondents noted that the engagement of content creators with the Saudi audience is another key factor behind the popularity of the programmes. For instance:

*[T]hey [Telvaz11 network] recruit the Saudi youth. If anyone has the talent, they would call him and bring him in to participate in their YouTube programmes. They are really doing a great job. Anyone who became famous because of Snapchat or another platform, they would bring him or her into their programme to work with them. (26-year-old male university student, 2016)*

The outsourcing strategy of some YouTube-based corporations seems to be of interest to those who want to use the platform of YouTube to earn some fame (Turner, 2010). The audience, particularly the young, would be delighted to be called upon to participate in online programmes, especially when this invitation comes from a well-known Saudi YouTube-based corporation such as *Telvaz11*. This simplicity and flexibility can reinforce the familiarity, which has been discussed above, between the creators and the audience. It offers those young talents a new opportunity to showcase their creativity publically and consequently increase the traffic for *Telvaz11*.

Nevertheless, this outsourcing strategy can lead to a lack of human resources for the business of YouTube and the urgent need for creative personnel to contribute to their growing activities. This can be linked to the analysis in Chapter Four, in which several content creators mentioned the challenge they face in finding and recruiting talent for the business of content-making because of the lack of infrastructure and the lack of official support in the country. It is important to be careful when dealing with certain concepts mentioned in the above quote such as talent and famous figures. The respondent's understanding of those terms can vary from other interpretations as they do not provide a solid framework to investigate their meaning. As noted in Chapter Four, the shortage in human resources was more serious in the early stage of the YouTube-based programmes between 2011 and 2013, but the market was later able to adapt to the circumstances and develop their own mechanisms to keep production flowing with some difficulties in terms of scheduling and regularity.

What is interesting to notice in considering the above quote is the connectivity between various social media platforms in searching for talent. This notion is problematic because each platform has different characteristics and features that determine and shape the way they present content; what works well for one platform might not be suitable for another. Another factor that contributes to the popularity of YouTube-based programmes is the integration between the online programmes and official figures, particularly in the context of sport:

*Free kick is an interesting programme and I have been watching it since the beginning because they have very good access to senior people in Saudi football clubs. (21-year-old male university student, 2016)*

This seems to be a powerful strategy that adds value to YouTube productions. It provides the audience with the impression that some of the YouTube-based programmes are not immature, but rather a reliable media window that can feature and interview

high profile figures. This integration between YouTube programmes and officials in Saudi football clubs is phenomenal for several reasons. First, it indicates the growing influence of YouTube programmes, which allows them access to popular figures in the Saudi sports industry. Second, it implies that these senior figures recognize YouTube-based programmes as a channel to reach their audience or fans. Third, it offers authority and prestige, as well as editorial freedom for the programme and its presenter to cover certain issues related to Saudi sport, which means it can deliver unique content to the audience. Finally, this cultural product can be highly valuable for the audience because of the distinctiveness of its content and more importantly because of the catch-up advantage of the YouTube platform. This could pose serious competition for sport programmes on television.

The transformation of the sport programme *Free Kick* highlights the rapid development of some programmes over a short span of time and how their creativity and insight can drive and enhance competition, not only with other YouTube-based programmes, but even with some traditional television programmes which broadcast in the same genre. This is possibly one of the reasons that mainstream media outlets are keen on recruiting and holding onto some YouTube presenters even though their television expertise is very limited. Consequently, this can raise the issue of what the audience thinks of YouTube presenters who moved to television.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the perspective of the audience in relation to YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia. It was devised to answer the research question that is concerned with the popularity of the programmes from the

audience's point of view. Two main themes emerged from the discussion: the representative choices and the localism of YouTube-based programming. Every theme consists of concepts that emerged from the input of the participants.

The theme of representative choices was constructed of two categories: meaningful diversity and temporal control. The discussion revealed that YouTube-based programmes identified a gap in the Saudi media landscape where the mainstream outlets were ignoring the aspirations and the needs of young audiences (Lynch, 2006). YouTube-based programmes responded to this gap by offering the audience representative choices as opposed to the unrepresentative choices of Saudi television stations owned by the state or associated with royal family members.

The findings showed that Saudi audiences wanted tailored content that responded to their everyday lives and issues such as housing, employment and political critiques in the form of entertainment, which YouTube-based programmes were able to provide. This indicates that the youth audience is creative and active (Meikle and Young, 2012) in seeking to interpret, search, refine, redefine and recreate new critical interpretations for the content.

The findings also confirmed the adjustment of viewing habits among the young Saudi audience, which seems to be in line with the global trend (Boyle and Kelly, 2012); however, the argument here is that the Saudi context has a different motivation. It argues that the migration of the youth audience towards online and especially YouTube-based programmes was not solely driven by technological advances, but rather by the political and cultural constraints on the narrative of Saudi television. The audience in the authoritarian context looks for another authentic representative narrative to ascribe themselves to.

Another interesting finding was the influence of gender on the consumption of YouTube-based programmes. The female participants in this study showed little interest in following and consuming these programmes. This could raise issues related to the nature of the content preferred by them and whether the increased participation of Saudi women in the production process could result in different consequences. Saudi women represent approximately half of the Saudi population; however, according to the Global Gender Gap Report (2016), the unemployment rate and lack of access to public opportunities amongst educated women are high. These findings certainly confirm the state of women in Saudi society, and they also indicate that not enough attention is paid to the aspirations of Saudi women.

The chapter argued that while YouTube-based programmes offer marginalized Saudi producers a sense of liberty to voice their demands, the voices of Saudi women are still marginalized and excluded from the mainstream of both the production and consumption aspects of the programmes. The absence of regulation, the cultural expectations for women, the conservative nature of Saudi society and the traditional dominance of men are serious concerns that add complexity to the issue of women in this context. A possible solution is to not wait for any form of societal or political intervention, but rather continue the push for changes for Saudi women by Saudi women. This can happen by engaging in the online phenomenon and bringing new ideas and concepts that start to bridge the gap, at least, online.

As for the second theme, the localism of programmes, cultural relativity and technological novelty are the two main concepts that have been constructed in the above analysis. There are important lessons to be learned through the exploration of this theme. The authenticity of the message and its reflection of real daily Saudi interactions and discussions is highly valued by the participants of the study, and it has been a main driver for the growth of the audience.

If the theme of representative choices explains the scale of the object of the analysis, then the theme of localism illustrates the scope and the depth of our understanding of this phenomenon. The audience finds YouTube-based programmes attractive, amongst other factors, because of the closeness of the programmes to them. The spoken dialect, the spontaneity of presenters, the facial expressions and the nature of jokes have all built familiarity and bonds between the participants and the programmes. It can be proposed that the young audience wants to be talked *with* instead of talked *to*. The traditional hierarchy needs to be adjusted when getting involved with issues related to youth in order to accommodate them and make them react positively to concerns.

By analysing the young audience of YouTube-based programmes, who expressed their trust and admiration for the online programmes rather than television, this chapter has implied that official Saudi television faces issues related to credibility and authenticity. Producing engaging and representative content that speaks to the Saudi youth – both men and women – is required to attract this large segment of society. The Saudi television channels have to be reformed, to break away from the old mindset that perceives the audience as a passive force, and adopt more resilient methods if it wants to stop losing the new generation of the Saudi audience.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis was to explore the economic, political and cultural context of YouTube-based programming in Saudi Arabia between 2010 and 2016. It has focused on the bottom up, professionally generated content (PGC) which was produced by Saudi youth exclusively for the platform of YouTube. The thesis has examined the perspective of the content creators by utilizing semi-structured online interviews, and the view of the Saudi audience by employing semi-structured offline focus group interviews conducted in Glasgow.

The importance of this thesis stems from its goal to respond to the existing gap in Arab and Saudi social media studies, where a number of studies have positioned themselves in line with the technological determinist approach; for instance, to investigate the impact of social media during the Arab uprisings (Ali and Fahmy, 2013; Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos, 2012; Howard et al., 2011). Others perceive Saudi social media through the lens of political economy and international politics (Sakr, 2007; Al-Rasheed, 2008; and Sakr, Ratta, and Skovgaard-Peterson, 2015), which shape their outcomes, whereas other studies abstain from raising critical questions around the context of power and the structure of domination for various reasons including the political sensitivity of such investigations (Eid, 2003; and Kaba and Said, 2014).

Very few studies have investigated YouTube, as a generic object of analysis, in the Arab or Saudi settings (Ramsay and Fatani, 2016), and it seems that no extensive studies were conducted about YouTube-based programmes in Saudi Arabia by the time the thesis concluded. The thesis has investigated specific aspects of YouTube, namely the professional production of YouTube-based programming in the specific context of

Saudi Arabia. The cultural and political specificity of Saudi Arabia make this analysis of YouTube-based programmes particularly significant because of the restrictive political and media environment they operate within.

The thesis has advanced four research questions, three of them related to the perspective of the content creators and one exploring the audience's views. Chapter Three addressed the first research question, which aimed to explore the role of YouTube-based programming in the political and cultural online context of Saudi Arabia. Chapter Four focused on the second research question, which uncovered the business element of YouTube-based programming in the Saudi media context, and Chapter Five looked at the Saudi government's reactions to the programmes. Chapter Six shifted the focus towards the audience by answering the fourth research question, which examined the reasons behind the popularity of YouTube-based programmes from the participants' points of view.

The structure of this final chapter has been influenced by Silverman (2010); it consists of three sections. The first section seeks to synthesise the empirical findings in relation to the research questions. The second section discusses the implications of the findings for practice and policy. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting the limitations of the study and suggesting directions for further research.

## Findings

### Limited Political and Cultural Empowerment Offline

**Chapter Three** answered the first research question, which was concerned with the cultural and political role of YouTube-based programmes in the context of Saudi Arabia. The evidence has maintained that the Saudi youth's launching of the programmes was primarily motivated by their desire to reflect upon their personal views in relation to public, political and cultural matters. The absence of offline political and cultural platforms and the unrepresentative nature of Saudi television content, both nationally and regionally (Boyd, 1982; Rinnawi, 2006; and Kraidy, 2012), have played significant roles in driving the youth online to seek a way of voicing their concerns, aspirations and opinions on issues related to the youth and to the public – away from the media gatekeepers.

The chapter found that online participation has brought a sense of liberalism and a new critical culture to the Saudi online spheres, but this has not translated into effective offline political and cultural empowerment as yet. This online liberalism can be categorized as *online political and cultural empowerment*, which enabled the young people to speak publicly about what were deemed to be cultural and social taboos in Saudi society. *Gender empowerment* is another consequence; it has enabled Saudi women to present on YouTube, especially between 2011 and 2012, breaking away from the socio-cultural constraints on them.

Moreover, the influence of Saudi culture and its practices have shaped the online activities and influenced their structure. For instance, while YouTube-based programmes offered Saudi women a sense of liberalism and the chance to participate in

public issues online, the offline Saudi cultural sensitivity towards women had moved online with massive online attacks against the female presenters, especially between 2011 and 2012, because of their gender. This form of discrimination against women has become less prevalent recently online as the online community has adopted the change in the role of women. In addition, the offline Saudi male domination has moved online where few Saudi women participate in the production and the presentation aspects of these programmes, leaving the major contributions to the Saudi men, which echoes the sensitivity of gender in the Saudi culture.

Through their attempts to provide a new perspective, the YouTube-based programmes have re-defined the position of the Saudi youth in the society, and they have shown that marginalized voices can act as political and cultural forces to generate economic value if they are integrated into a wider cultural policy framework with a relative degree of freedom.

The programmes, as is evident in Chapter Three, have introduced new political narratives to the Saudi discourse as young people started critiquing a number of middle-level officials and even ministers, which was not the cultural norm before. However, avoiding criticizing influential members of the royal family, including the King and the Crown Prince, is still a political norm that cannot be violated either online or offline.

The influence of Saudi politics and culture upon the programmes cannot be underestimated, however, as these programmes have a role in introducing a new tone and new topics when it comes to covering public issues. More importantly, no YouTube-based programme (PGC) has participated in public activism activities such as the online campaign for Saudi women to drive, but rather this form of online activism has been left to individual online activists (UGC). The political and cultural voices of YouTube-based programmes were critical between 2010 and 2012, arguably in line

with the Arab uprisings, but then the tone gradually started to become less critical, focusing mostly on the commercialization of the programmes between 2013 and 2016.

This has made the programmes' creators and presenters behave as online celebrities (Turner, 2010) who manufacture cultural products that are largely apolitical. They became very keen on pursuing their own commercial interests, protecting themselves by not becoming too deeply involved in politics in order to sustain advertising and other streams of revenue.

### **Strong Financial Empowerment Offline**

In contrast to the limitations of offline political and cultural empowerment, the thesis found in **Chapter Four** that the offline commercialization activities of YouTube-based programmes were prominent, empowering and profitable for the content creators. The activities ranged from being able to develop various business models, to the flow of capital for the market, and to their engagement with the advertising market in Saudi Arabia, especially in the major cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah. The commercialization of YouTube-based programmes has created new opportunities in terms of employability for the Saudi youth and new patterns of advertising behaviour between commercial brands and online content, especially YouTube-based programming.

The chapter found that the commercialization of YouTube-based programmes has been developed through various stages that are associated with different characteristics in relation to revenue, including the attitude of YouTube (Google Inc.), human capital and market behaviour. The chapter conceptualized this development into three stages – *Abstract* 2010-2011, *Concrete* 2012-2013 and *Innovation* 2014-2016 – to describe the

development of the business models and the YouTube-based market. The analysis has shown that the advertising market reacted differently towards YouTube-based programming throughout the different stages, ranging from underestimating their influence to adopting online advertising within the content of the programmes to finally getting the content creators to tailor online advertising to the advertisers' targeted audiences.

This advanced commercialization has two significant implications. First, it has affected the competitive relationship between YouTube-based programming and traditional television. Second, the commercialization has manipulated the tone and the critical level of these programmes. More importantly, this commercialization created a new online class in Saudi Arabia – the online celebrity (Turner, 2010) – and the financial incentives have intentionally or unintentionally moved programmes away from highly critical content to secure the engagement of brands and therefore ensure the flow of cash by focusing on soft news and light social issues. This became especially prominent between 2014 and 2016 when the YouTube-based market became stable and fragmented. In addition, this implication can be linked to the findings of Chapter Three: Because cultural and political empowerment is limited in offline Saudi society, content creators are motivated to conform to those offline norms in their online work in order to secure real world benefits (i.e. advertising revenue), and thus they are disinclined to produce content that is critical of the government.

### **The State Remains the Most Powerful Actor in The Context of the Media**

Another reason that could explain the unwillingness of young people to produce highly critical content is revealed in the analysis of **Chapter Five**, which addressed the third

research question by investigating the reactions of the Saudi government to YouTube-based programming.

The chapter illustrated that the restrictive Saudi media environment rests on a number of pillars, but licensing is the prevailing concept in this media context in which no audio-visual productions can take place in the Saudi territories without the permission of the government (Duffy, 2014), namely the Ministry of Culture and Information. The absence of policy in relation to online content served as a catalyst to stimulate the production of the programmes, with content creators taking advantage of the ambiguity of the situation. The Saudi government allowed this phenomenon to emerge, but the content creators responded to this behaviour by adopting a self-regulatory approach that takes into consideration the cultural and political specificity of Saudi Arabia.

The chapter conceptualized the reactions of the government to the critical content, especially during 2010 and 2013, as a *containing strategy*. This strategy consisted of hard measures and soft measures. Hard measures included imprisonment, blocking content and dispatching notification letters from the Ministry of the Interior. Soft measures included a visit from a senior member of the Royal family to one of the production houses for YouTube-based programmes and periodical meetings between the filmmakers and representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Information.

The thesis argues that this attitude of the Saudi government towards the critical content of YouTube-based programmes, along with commercial factors, have all affected the output of YouTube-based programmes in terms of the nature of the content and the tone of their messages. YouTube-based programmes have acted between 2010 and 2012 as a limited democratizing channel for online public spheres. However, the above factors, which grounded this thesis, have shifted this limited democratization of the programmes only towards soft news and entertainment from 2012 onwards, preventing them from

engaging in any highly critical content. As a result, YouTube became a democratization tool primarily for soft news and light content.

### **The Relevance of the Content as A Main Driver for Its Popularity Amongst the Audience**

In **Chapter Six**, the fourth research question, which was concerned with the popularity of YouTube-based programmes from the perspective of the audience, was analysed. The focus group interviews revealed that the Saudi audience preferred watching Saudi YouTube-based programming to Saudi television because the mainstream media outlets, apparently, failed to address issues that reflected the young people's concerns (Lynch, 2006). Two main themes emerged to reflect the audience's responses: *the representative choices* and *the localism* of YouTube-based programmes. These findings showcased the reactions of the young audience in the authoritarian context where the state-owned media and state-associated media were unable to attract the young audience and to address their needs.

Nevertheless, the issue of gender also arose in this chapter when the female participants indicated little interest in watching the content of Saudi YouTube-based programmes; this can be linked to the findings of Chapter Three, which discussed the lack of Saudi female input in the production of these programmes. This could be one of the reasons for the lack of interest of the Saudi female audience along with other potential reasons such as the nature of the content.

What is significant is that locally relevant content that is produced in the Saudi accent is highly appealing to the young audience and that they are not drawn to the content of Pan-Arab television, which is owned by Saudi princes and associated businessmen and

tends to serve certain economic and political agendas for the shareholders rather than serving the needs of the Saudi youth audience.

## **Implications for Policy and Practices**

Based on the above analysis, this section argues that the spontaneous practices of YouTube-based programmes in Saudi Arabia have resulted in unexpected outcomes for both the content creators and the policy makers in the country. The legal vacuum, which was discussed in Chapter Five, reflected the gap between government policy and the practices of social media including YouTube in Saudi Arabia and even the internet in a wider sense. Although the spontaneous emergence of YouTube-based programmes has brought some advantages such as creating new business opportunities and introducing a sense of liberalism to the online Saudi public discourse, the online growth and its practices can be utilized in a better way to produce significant benefits for the public and the private spheres of the content creators.

### ***Implications for policy***

Addressing the matter of policy, the thesis argues that there is an urgent need for a political decision to initiate a nationwide initiative in order to transform the Saudi digital growth and other related activities into meaningful enterprises that yield cultural and economic value for young people and for the public in general. This initiative should not concentrate on the YouTube phenomenon in isolation, but rather it should treat YouTube-based programmes as one part of a bigger picture to establish a creative industry in Saudi Arabia. YouTube-based programmes can be developed independently,

as shown in Chapter Four, building their talents and business models and generating revenues that overcome the obstacles of policy and infrastructure. The potential to set up a Saudi creative industry that is tailored and relevant to the Saudi specificity is very appealing, if we consider YouTube-based programmes as an indicator.

The current political climate in Saudi Arabia has been marked by the rise of a number of young princes who tend to be relatively liberal and educated. This and, more importantly, the blueprint of Saudi Vision 2030 can all stimulate subtle and gradual changes around certain issues such as establishing a creative industry in the country.

The development of such an industry would require political support because of the massive challenges that stand in the way of the development of a national entertainment industry; for instance, the opposition of the conservative establishment and the absence of an infrastructure such as cinema halls, training and funds. Another reason is that the concentration of power is in the few hands of members of the royal family, which gives them an enormous amount of power over the public sphere and equips them alone to make such a decision. This thesis predicts, based on the above analysis, that the socio-cultural constraints on a number of issues such as women driving and cinema halls will only require time before being authorized in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, this would bring better opportunities for the potential Saudi-based entertainment industry and help to incorporate local talent in a meaningful way.

Such a policy is needed to develop the practices that are already grounded in the activities of Saudi young people such as YouTube-based programmes, and other practices that are beyond of the scope of this thesis, for instance, filmmaking and comedy clubs. This means that the issue of women driving and the current ban on cinema are not hindering the bottom-up development of local entertainment in the

country by the young people and that the policy can advance this progress and can allow time for cultural change to occur.

The concept and the practices of cultural policy in Saudi Arabia are relatively poor and humble, and the thesis suggests that there is an urgent need to develop and formulate a national framework to establish a creative Saudi industry for the huge youth population in the country. This policy can incorporate both online and offline creativity and advance better economic outcomes for the public.

However, the thesis has two main concerns for such a potential cultural policy in Saudi Arabia, the first being the political repression against any critical cultural products or activities. The thesis has shown that the government allows for a margin of freedom regarding soft news, light material and even for critiquing ministers and middle-level public agencies, but content that is highly critical of public policy is subject to repression by the government.

Chapter Four discussed the attempt of the Saudi regime to dominate the media scenes nationally and regionally across the Arab world for ideological and political reasons. The potential Saudi creative industry might act as a cultural and economic window for influential members of the royal family and associated business moguls who would aim to dominate the industry for their personal interests. This could result in ownership concentration, which would affect the outcomes of such a potential national project and eliminate unwanted voices, focusing on generating revenue and light entertainment products.

The second concern is related to the identity of the industry. For example, MBC TV, the Pan-Arab network owned by the half-brother of the late King Fahd (1982-2005),

concentrates heavily on importing American programmes for the Arab and the Saudi audience for economic and ideological reasons. This might reflect a trend within a certain faction of the royal family and its associates, and this trend may extend to the proposed Saudi creative industry. All Pan-Arab television tends to be extremely liberal in general, adopting Western values and ideologies that might not sit easily with the Arab identity.

One of the reasons behind the popularity of YouTube-based programmes is that they are grounded in local aspects of Saudi society and the audience wants cultural products that reflect their own experiences. The thesis suggests that the policy makers have to pay attention to the issue of identity and the specificity of the Arab and Saudi context in order to protect local culture and to develop a professional local industry by adopting certain measures. Liberal views and practices are needed for the creative industry in line with wider Arab liberalism, which is different from the Western understanding of liberalism and its applications.

### ***Implications for practices***

The thesis has argued that one of the advantages of YouTube-based programmes in Saudi Arabia is that they promote and develop local professional content that enriches the online Saudi culture, and establishes the base for the development of local talent through practice. What the thesis has shown is that the rapid development of the content has evolved around the theme of comedy and satire. The lack of entertainment platforms and activities in Saudi Arabia might be the main driver for this trend.

As YouTube-based programmes have become professionalized and industrialized, it is worth considering the diversity of the content, offering more specialized and perhaps

educational programmes that can attract new audiences. However, one challenge that specialized programmes face is the economic return for production because the process of production has been operationalized and commercialized from 2013 onwards. In the absence of any policy then one can only rely on the goodwill of production houses to diverse and educational yet entertaining content for Saudi and Arabic consumers.

One of the most significant issues that needs to be considered is the wider involvement of Saudi women in the process of YouTube-based programming, including writing and presenting the content. This has two implications. First, it contributes to the diversity of the content and its perspectives and therefore may attract a new audience, for instance, the Saudi women who were less interested than the men in watching the programmes, as the analysis revealed in Chapter Six. Second, it serves as a method to bridge the gender gap and empowers women to participate in public issues online.

The content of these programmes has widened the consumption options for Saudi audiences and they have become selective in their viewing choices. This results in the stimulation of competitive behaviour amongst the production houses and contributes to the pluralism of the content.

However, there are serious concerns regarding the future of PGC content on YouTube in Saudi Arabia. The first issue is the intervention of television in acquiring online presenters and moving them towards television programmes. A second issue is the lack of originality in their coverage, especially following the commercialization of the programmes from 2013 onwards. Finally, YouTube-based programmes are threatened by the emergence of other video platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat that tend to deliver short features and have built new communities and new stars for business and entertainment content. In addition, the competition of Facebook video can be a detracting actor for YouTube use in Saudi Arabia. YouTube-based programming could

lose its brightest names and practices and become an ordinary medium for Saudis if it continues to be subject to the threats mentioned above without any reaction from both YouTube itself and the Saudi content creators.

### **Limitations and Future Scope of Research**

Although the scope of the thesis has covered certain aspects of YouTube-based programming and its findings have revealed important insights into the media practices of young Saudi people in the authoritarian context, there is still much work to be done.

The main limitations of the thesis are related to the sample and translation factors. First, a number of observations can be pointed out about the size of the sample and its representation. For instance, the interviewees who participated in the focus group interviews were students based in Scotland. This conveys clear bias as it only reflects the views of Saudi interviewees who are educated in Western universities, and therefore it would be problematic to generalize their opinions for all Saudi audiences including those who are based in Saudi Arabia and are educated in Saudi universities or not university educated at all.

In addition, the number of interviewees, in particular Saudi women, was small and the sample cannot be treated as representative of all Saudi women either at home or abroad. The findings may be limited to the specific interviewees' experiences; for instance, the lack of interest of Saudi women in YouTube-based programming. The thesis has aimed to offer an in-depth analysis of the research problem rather than claiming any generalization related to the Saudi experience.

The second limitation is related to the translation process of the thesis. All interviews were conducted in Arabic and transcribed as Arabic texts before being translated into English. A bias can arise from, for example, choosing certain vocabulary to translate the opinions of the interviewees. In addition, being a native Arab speaker (insider) can influence the process of transcription and translation. Finally, the design of the questions and the structure of the interviews reflect the subjective cognitive experience of the researcher, but being aware of the limitations and applying critical reflection throughout the process has balanced the subjective process of qualitative research.

In terms of future research, this thesis has stimulated a number of other avenues for research related to YouTube-based programming, social media and even the political economy of traditional media in Saudi Arabia. Future research can investigate the relationship between traditional Saudi television and YouTube figures in Saudi Arabia to better understand the development between the two parties by building on the analysis of this thesis.

Other research can be conducted to examine whether there is any correlation between the content of YouTube and Snapchat amongst the young audience in Saudi Arabia because the growth of social media in the country is an eye-opener. The use of Twitter in Saudi Arabia is promising and critical investigation is needed to examine how Saudis react and respond to the domestic and foreign policies of the government. In addition, the use of Twitter by religious figures in Saudi Arabia is another area that can lead to a better understanding of the use of social media by conservatives to promote their messages. Another possible area of research is to focus on Saudi women online and how they use social media platforms from 2017 onwards to compare the experience of Saudi women with the analysis of this thesis, which covered the period between 2010 and 2016.

## **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

### **1- Background information: (Establish relationships).**

Welcome.

Aim of the research.

Explain procedure: [ethical matters, themes of the interview and anticipated time].

Record the interview.

### **2- Opening questions: (Build rapport).**

Interviewee's information.

Description of role and responsibility.

Explain your typical day at work.

### **3- Introductory questions:**

Running YouTube activities in Saudi Arabia.

Describing the current state of YouTube in Saudi Arabia.

### **4- The economic dimension:**

Business model.

Process of production and distribution.

The standards of production

The environment of YouTube market.

The targeted audience.

### **5- The cultural dimension:**

Aims of your YouTube-based programme.

Defining the content.

Format.

Influence and representation.

## **6- The policy dimension:**

The legal framework of your YouTube business.

Censorship and intervention.

The relationship with the government.

## **7- Winding up**

## Appendix B: The Consent Form

### CONSENT TO THE USE OF DATA

University of Glasgow, College of Arts Research Ethics Committee

I understand that **Omar Daoudi** is collecting data in the form of **recorded Skype interview** for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

The issue that this study addresses is the economic, political and cultural context of local YouTube programs in Saudi Arabia, which is the biggest per capita global consumer of Google Inc. This project would incorporate a qualitative research approach to critically investigate the correlation between the Saudi youth and the Saudi local YouTube broadcast practices through a unique analytical fieldwork. In response to research methods, this project incorporates qualitative research methods, in-depth online interviews and focus groups to in an attempt to obtain valuable and reliable data in order to gain an insight and knowledge about this phenomenon.

**I give my consent to the use of data for this purpose on the understanding that:**

- My participation in this project is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw or discontinue my participation at any time.
- I may be quoted directly in publications and my name used.
- The full recording and transcript will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The full recording and transcript will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

Signed by the contributor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

**Researcher's name and email contact:** Omar Daoudi - o.daoudi.1@research.gla.ac.uk

**Supervisor's names and email contact:**

Prof. Raymond Boyle - Raymond.Boyle@glasgow.ac.uk

Dr. Melanie Selfe- Melanie.Selfe@glasgow.ac.uk

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## **Appendix C: The Consent Form for the anonymous interviewee**

### **CONSENT TO THE USE OF DATA**

University of Glasgow, College of Arts Research Ethics Committee

I understand that **Omar Daoudi** is collecting data in the form of **recorded Skype interview** for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

The issue that this study addresses is the economic, political and cultural context of local YouTube programs in Saudi Arabia, which is the biggest per capita global consumer of Google Inc. This project would incorporate a qualitative research approach to critically investigate the correlation between the Saudi youth and the Saudi local YouTube broadcast practices through a unique analytical fieldwork. In response to research methods, this project incorporates qualitative research methods, in-depth online interviews and focus groups to in an attempt to obtain valuable and reliable data in order to gain an insight and knowledge about this phenomenon.

**I give my consent to the use of data for this purpose on the understanding that:**

- My participation in this project is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw or discontinue my participation at any time.
- I understand that my name will be held anonymously.
- The full recording and transcript will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The full recording and transcript will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

Signed by the contributor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

**Researcher's name and email contact:** Omar Daoudi - o.daoudi.1@research.gla.ac.uk

**Supervisor's names and email contact:**

Prof. Raymond Boyle - Raymond.Boyle@glasgow.ac.uk

Dr. Melanie Selfe- Melanie.Selfe@glasgow.ac.uk

**Department address:** University of Glasgow - 13 The Square - Glasgow, G12 8QQ

## Appendix D: The Focus Group Interviews

| Items         | # of attendees  | Age group | Location                      | Duration    |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| FG1           | 3               | 32-40     | Mena Centre                   | 70 minutes  |
| FG2           | 6               | 18-26     | Mena Centre                   | 95 minutes  |
| FG3           | 5               | 17-25     | Glasgow Caledonian University | 85 minutes  |
| FG4           | 6               | 19-23     | Glasgow Caledonian University | 65 minutes  |
| FG5 (females) | 4               | 17-23     | Glasgow Caledonian University | 65 minutes  |
| FG6 (females) | 2               | 25-31     | Glasgow Caledonian University | 35 minutes  |
| FG7           | 3               | 28-44     | Mena Centre                   | 60 minutes  |
| Total         | 29 participants | -         | -                             | 475 minutes |

## **Appendix E: The Fact Sheet for the participants of focus groups**

Focus Group Interview Number:

Date:

Time:

Place:

Demographic information:

| Name | Age | Level of study and area | Previous job (If applicable) |
|------|-----|-------------------------|------------------------------|
|      |     |                         |                              |
|      |     |                         |                              |
|      |     |                         |                              |
|      |     |                         |                              |
|      |     |                         |                              |

Special condition or circumstances related to the interview:

## Appendix F: The Consent Form for Focus Group Interviews

### CONSENT TO THE USE OF DATA

University of Glasgow, College of Arts Research Ethics Committee

I understand that **Omar Daoudi** is collecting data in the form of **focus group by using the digital voice recorder** for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

The issue that this study addresses is the economic and cultural context of local YouTube programs in Saudi Arabia, which is the biggest per capita global consumer of Google Inc. This project would incorporate a multi methods research approach to critically investigate the correlation between the Saudi youth and the Saudi local YouTube broadcast practices through a unique analytical fieldwork. In response to research methods, this project incorporates mixed research methods, including questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus groups to investigate the Saudi youth and the political, economic and cultural context of YouTube in Saudi Arabia in an attempt to obtain valuable and reliable data in order to gain an insight and knowledge about this phenomenon.

#### **I give my consent to the use of data for this purpose on the understanding that:**

- My participation in this project is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw or discontinue my participation at any time  
All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

Signed by the contributor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

**Researcher's name and email contact:** Omar Daoudi - o.daoudi.1@research.gla.ac.uk

**Supervisor's name and email contact:** Prof. Raymond Boyle - Raymond.Boyle@glasgow.ac.uk

**Department address:** University of Glasgow - 13 The Square - Glasgow, G12 8QQ

## **Appendix G: The questions of Focus Group**

### **Part one: Warm up question:**

How do you interact with the Saudi content on YouTube?

Level of engagements. (Share-like-comment)

Methods of viewing the content.

Watching habits.

### **Part two: The popularity of online programs:**

What are the reasons that make Saudi online content highly viewed?

What are the elements that make certain YouTube programs very popular for you?

What do you think of proliferation of Saudi YouTube programs?

Do you think YouTube stars use their online profile for other purposes?

How would evaluate the move of some YouTube programmes into Saudi TV screen?

### **Part three: The cultural aspects of YouTube programs**

What do you think of Saudi female appearance on YouTube programmes?

Have these programs /YouTube stars shaped your opinion on certain matters?

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