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Edgy in the 'right' way: Meeting pent-up demand for youth-oriented local content on Saudi TV

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Abstract

Despite accounting for some 60% of the population, Saudi Arabia's under-30s spent a long time not seeing themselves on screen, except in comedy, satire and drama they made themselves and circulated on YouTube. Things have changed spectacularly under the transformational Vision 2030 project spearheaded by the kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, launched in 2016 and aimed first and foremost at youth. Drawing on insights from cultural proximity theory, this article explores how a state-sponsored emphasis on Saudi identity and national unity has shaped changes in television production structures and content aimed at engaging young audiences.

Keywords

Nationalism, cultural proximity, streaming, entertainment, social class, genre

Introduction

It is hard to overstate the changes encapsulated in the two buzzwords, 'transformation' and 'youth', most regularly applied to Saudi Arabia in the mid-2020s. 'Transformation' refers to the panoply of headline-grabbing programmes carried out under Vision 2030, the plan spearheaded in 2016 by Mohammed Bin Salman, now Crown Prince and the kingdom's de facto ruler, to turn the country from the harsh puritanism of popular imagination into what Vision 2030 documents describe as a 'vibrant society' that is economically, socially and culturally diversified away from dependence on oil. 'Youth'

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refers to a facet of Saudi Arabia's exceptional demographics, whereby 63% of the population is aged 34 or under, according to 2022 census data. For those aged 10 to 24 the proportion is 23% (General Authority for Statistics, 2023). Argentinian footballer Lionel Messi featured in a screen advertisement for the Saudi Arabian tourism authority in early 2024 that had the headline 'Go beyond what you think'. It showed Messi kicking footballs through a series of symbolic walls representing purported misconceptions about the country, to reveal a rich array of landscapes and entertainment activities. It culminated in a Saudi girl footballer demolishing the final wall called 'Girls can't', to open onto a panorama of young Saudi female pioneers in sport, music and space travel.

Just as Messi's campaign on Saudi Arabia's behalf is part of a lucrative contract he signed with officials there in 2021, Vision 2030 itself is part of an elaborate public relations narrative, directed at both internal and external recipients, that places the still relatively youthful Crown Prince, born in 1985, at the front and centre of what is presented as a massive effort of modernisation. Just as Messi's contract, seen by the *New York Times*, promised him the equivalent of some $25 million over 3 years plus all-expenses paid holiday trips to Saudi Arabia for up to 20 family members and friends, in return for positive posts on social media and no comments that would tarnish the country's image (Zidan and Panja, 2023), the government webpage outlining the deal with Saudi citizens under the 'vibrant society' pillar of Vision 2030 stresses 'national unity' and dedication to promoting 'our rich national identity'. That is to say, in the words of a foreign newspaper headline about the transformation in 2022, 'Dancing is in, dissent is out' (Bulos, 2022). Negative or simply unwelcome input online has resulted in long prison sentences documented by human rights groups, or state-sanctioned extra-judicial murder and dismemberment in the case of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 (United Nations, 2019: 3).

Various studies have shown how Vision 2030 puts Saudi youth 'at the heart' of Mohammad bin Salman's project to transform Saudi Arabia (Dazi-Héni, 2021: 14; Viden, 2024: 15), not least because the Crown Prince, having dismantled traditional power-sharing structures in the kingdom through a process of centralisation that sidelined the religious establishment and other branches of the ruling family, sought to establish his personal legitimacy as sole leader through his instigation of social changes intended to be popular with young people (Dazi-Héni, 2021: 15). The principal research question for this article is how a state-sponsored emphasis on Saudi identity and national unity has been applied through television to convince young audiences to engage with content aired on national platforms rather than Netflix or YouTube. Since theories of cultural proximity address television audiences' preference for what they perceive as national programming, these theories underpin the study.

The age cohorts considered here are those born since 1997 (Gen Z) and 2010 (Generation Alpha) and aged roughly between 14 and 28 years at the time of writing. The analysis begins by disentangling different strands of evolving cultural proximity theory to develop a framework that can illuminate aspects of recent television production for young Saudis.

Cultural proximity, audience expectations, novel content and authenticity

Theories of cultural proximity, in circulation since Joseph Straubhaar's seminal work in 1991, have developed over the decades in line with changes in television technology and geopolitics. Straubhaar himself has noted some of these changes. Audiences who were once united by language or culture are nowadays 'increasingly fragmented' in their access to 'more kinds of television' , their familiarity with other cultures through travel and education and their fluency in foreign languages used by those in positions of power locally and globally (Straubhaar 2021: 30). This makes 'social class stratification' (: 30) an important factor in understanding what kinds of programming attract audiences.

Affluence and fluency in foreign languages are key factors in audiences' access to content streamed by suppliers of subscription video-on-demand such as Netflix or Disney+. Such access in turn affects audience expectations, not only in terms of production values but also as seen in calls for domestic providers to feature 'bolder' and 'more edgy' themes and storytelling, which viewers associate with Netflix (D'Arma et al., 2021: 692). Writers working with the Saudi streaming service Shahid told researchers about 'rais[ing] the bar' in order to 'bridge the gap' with the 'mainly Western' content of digital platforms their 'young Arab target audience' is used to, meaning more 'sensitive themes' and 'relationships that don't necessarily fit into the ideal social norm' (Haddad and Dhoest, 2021: 274).

Valuing 'edgy' content that departs from social norms raises questions about achieving the relatability that is also a necessary element of cultural proximity. Research on the appeal of Turkish drama serials among Arab audiences indicates that the quality of acting and projection of relatable emotions can 'significantly' impact viewers' 'perception of realism and authenticity', thereby reinforcing a sense of proximity also achieved through dubbing into local dialects and similarities of ethnicity, values and themes (Berg, 2023: 141–142). As Balázs Varga points out, cultural proximity is a complex phenomenon, whereby 'localization of the production' and 'cultural proximity do not always go hand in hand' (2021: 277). Instead, issues of '[f]amiliarity, identification, and recognition' are intricate and tangled up with aspects of 'political embeddedness, generic and textual specificities' (: 277). In the Arab world, relatability is additionally complicated by diversity in dialects and customs across the region. The rise of pan-Arab satellite channels in the 1990s and 2000s posed dilemmas over which version of Arabic to produce or dub in: a standardised literary one understood across the region or a dialect that, despite being specific to a particular country, would feel less formal or remote (Buccianti, 2010: 5). The choices made were combined with a lowest-common-denominator approach to what would be socially acceptable on screen, with the norms of affluent but socially conservative Gulf countries dictating limits, since Gulf companies were the biggest customers for drama series and Gulf audiences were the most prized by advertisers (Sakr, 2007: 134–135). This background gives some indication of the challenge involved in creating big-budget content that is specifically Saudi, is made relatable to young people who have become familiar with the bold and edgy content available on global streaming platforms and yet also achieves authenticity in terms of societal values, beliefs and politics.

Doubts about the authenticity of Netflix's original Arabic productions demonstrate the complexities. Netflix seeks to 'target and connect with distinctive transnational niche audiences in every market' by featuring universal themes that are perceived as 'authentic and inclusive' enough to cross 'all forms of boundaries' (Asmar et al., 2023: 36). In its Arabic originals, such themes have included bullying at school, violence against women and life after divorce, which Nuha Eltayeb, Netflix's director of acquisitions in MENA and Turkey, described in 2022 as able to 'create impact for the viewers, where they will find it authentic and representative, and at the same time relatable to their day-to-day storylines' (Vivarelli, 2022a). Yet, in appealing to a core transnational audience, there is a risk of sacrificing the authenticity that comes with what Joe Khalil calls an 'introspective examination of society' (2025: 503). Assessing the extent to which Netflix achieves its goal, Khalil points out that '[l]ocal producers and talent operate within a structure and respond to specific mandates, which often privileges a homogenizing of Arab culture', offering audiences a 'unidimensional perspective' that normalizes perceptions of the region as 'resistant to change—whether it be teenage love, post-divorce female empowerment, or homosexuality' (2025: 503). Thus, he writes, the discourses of authenticity, especially in relation to original Netflix series from Saudi Arabia, can be 'both restrictive and restricting' (2025: 503). Axelle Asmar and colleagues make a similar observation about the way 'certain identities are absorbed into commercial agendas under the guise of progressive politics to facilitate transnational expansion' (2024: 16). Whereas the 'globalization of difference often involves presenting "edgy" content that appears to disrupt the status quo', in practice it conforms to both global market imperatives and local political conditions (Asmar et al., 2024: 16).

In contrast to Netflix productions, homegrown Saudi-made television series have the potential to be both relatable and authentic through, to use Khalil's terms, a more 'introspective' and less 'restricting' approach (2024: 503). Through large-scale investment in expanding local screen industries under Vision 2030 there is also an opportunity to meet another element of cultural proximity identified by Straubhaar: namely that the extent to which audiences' preference for national programming can take effect in the first place depends on a country's ability to produce enough content in 'genres historically underrepresented in national production' (Straubhaar, 2021: 31).

Based on the above, current thinking on cultural proximity seems to offer four lines of enquiry applicable to the present study. One is the implications of social stratification for the handling of societal norms and values in television content. A second is the issue of relatability, experienced as familiarity and recognition. Third is the question of whether boldness in themes and storytelling is achieved in a unidimensional manner that simply globalises difference or whether, instead, it is a byproduct of an inward-looking examination of society that is liable to break taboos. Fourth is the national capacity for producing a sufficiently diverse range of genres. The analysis begins with this fourth strand in order to contextualise the rest of the study by outlining the institutional landscape for producing TV shows.

Overall, the investigation aspires to be a form of production policy study, not in the sense of probing middle management manoeuvres or creative decision-making behind the scenes but in the sense of seeking to track and scrutinise decisions on the part of state

institutions that relate to the origination of television content for young Saudis. Primary research data are drawn from various sources in the public domain addressing shifts in Saudi government policy since the launch of Vision 2030 in 2016. These include grey literature from think tanks and human rights advocates based outside Saudi Arabia as well as general press archives and the Hollywood trade press. All sources here are treated as documents requiring critical distance on the part of the researcher, in light of possibilities for inaccuracy or bias (Karppinen and Moe, 2012: 182) – possibilities that are amplified by Saudi government control over local media as well as Saudi investment in Penske Media Group which owns *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, and Saudi government efforts to deter open dissent whether voiced inside or outside the country (for instance, Al-Rasheed, 2021: 21–22).

Overhaul of national television production capacity

The fact that one dimension of Vision 2030 envisaged investing some USD64 billion over 10 years from 2018 to build a major TV and film industry inside Saudi Arabia (Sakr, 2023: 30; 37–38) speaks directly to perceived links between the scope and versatility of national screen content production capability and attracting a national audience. The investment programme was coupled with state intervention that decisively ended a split system for regulating television in place since the early 1990s. Under the old system transnational satellite television networks based outside the kingdom and owned privately by nominally relatively liberal Saudi government allies were received inside it, while domestic television, constrained by tight censorship and obvious state control, struggled to attract viewers (Sakr, 2023: 32). Motives for breaking with this past were both economic and political. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, wholesale centralisation of state control across the entertainment sector, including television, was combined with an unprecedented major state-directed expansion in youth-oriented entertainment. The General Entertainment Authority, established as a government department by Royal Decree in May 2016 to oversee the development of glitzy music and film festivals and other events, had a mission to stimulate job creation and investment and encourage young people who would previously have gone to Dubai for entertainment to divert their attention and spending back home.

Politically, the intention was to take control of the narrative surrounding the kingdom's dramatic cultural changes. Critics of the ground-breaking entertainment events were silenced, as happened when a professor of Islamic law was jailed in 2019 for issuing a video warning against the erasure of Saudi society's 'original identity'. According to Saudi human rights advocates in exile, he was still being held after his sentence expired in 2024. In television the decisive structural shift came in early November 2017, when Mohammed bin Salman ordered the Saudi owners of three prominent television networks – MBC, Rotana and ART – to be detained along with dozens of princes and entrepreneurs at the Royal Carlton hotel in Riyadh in the name of a drive against corruption, until they agreed to government demands. Walid al-Ibrahim, co-founder and owner of the leading pan-Arab multichannel satellite network MBC, and brother-in-law of a former king, was freed at the end of January 2018, having ceded a 60% stake in MBC to

state ownership and agreed to move MBC operations from Dubai to the more restrictive jurisdiction of Saudi Arabia (Sakr, 2023: 34–35).

Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, cousin of Mohammed bin Salman, also emerged from 83 days of incarceration having possibly handed over around USD6 billion to the government and – based on his public statement denouncing anyone not backing the crown prince as a traitor (Schatzker, 2018) – having promised to express unreserved public support for the crown prince's transformation drive. Alwaleed maintained to the press that his businesses remained intact. These include Rotana Media Group, the biggest producer of Arabic music, a prominent producer and distributor of film and a network of satellite television channels. Evidence of Rotana TV's political positioning could be seen in Mohammed bin Salman's choice of Rotana Khalijia (Gulf Rotana) channel for a rare interview with local media in 2021 marking the fifth anniversary of the launch of Vision 2030. The interviewer gave the prince ample openings to reel off a long list of positive achievements in housing, jobs, education, health and social reform. In 2024 Rotana Khalijia launched a weekly programme dedicated to showcasing Vision 2030 success stories and what it called the 'dynamic spirit of modern Saudi society' (Nagarajan, 2024).

The third television network owner held in 2017 was Saleh Kamel, billionaire owner of the regional conglomerate Dallah Albaraka, who was imprisoned along with his son, chairman of a leading Saudi daily, *Okaz*. Kamel's TV network, ART, was already in decline at the time of his arrest after selloffs to other players and was less of a prize than MBC or Rotana. Kamel himself died of a heart attack in 2020.

Of the three, MBC Group was the network the crown prince had long coveted. According to a *Financial Times* investigation, people close to the prince had been negotiating acquisition of a controlling share for 2 years but had failed to reach a compromise over the valuation. With MBC an 'obvious target' for ensuring that Vision 2030 would 'garner positive coverage', observers noted that Mohammed bin Salman's promotion to crown prince in 2017 meant he no longer needed to buy MBC as he could 'just take it' (Kerr, 2018). His takeover marked a turning point in the local media landscape, as evidenced by Netflix's arrival in the region coinciding with the Saudi authorities' new determination to create watchable screen entertainment under their control. It makes sense to trace the restructuring of MBC and prioritising of its Shahid streaming services in parallel with the phenomenon of Netflix making inroads on Saudi screens.

Netflix showed its first Saudi film in October 2017, before the kingdom's 40-year ban on cinemas was lifted in 2018. The film was *Barakah meets Barakah* (Barakah meets Barakah, 2016), a romantic comedy about a twenty-something Jeddah couple from different social strata trying to get to know each other in a conservative society opposed to *ikhtilat* (mixing of the sexes). It was made independently by young Saudis, with a lead actor well known for his role in videos uploaded to YouTube over several years (Sakr, 2023: 39–41). Apart from showings at film festivals, starting with the Berlin Film Festival in 2016, *Barakah meets Barakah* was available to view initially primarily on TV screens. The film's fortunes from then on clearly reflected the change in climate for creating entertainment in Saudi Arabia. Whereas the director, Mahmoud Sabbagh, had struggled to get permission to shoot it, the film was later selected as the official Saudi foreign-language

entry for the Oscars and was acquired by Rotana TV and the Saudi national airline for its inflight entertainment system.

Critical to the change in climate was the decision to make MBC a vehicle for expanding and diversifying screen production aimed at the home market and beyond, with the purpose of securing the national, regional and international reputation for Saudi Arabia in entertainment that its crown prince aspired to under Vision 2030. One element of this was upgrading MBC's production arm in 2018, to MBC Studios, run by international executives. Another was refining the business model, whereby MBC could benefit from increased subscription as well as advertising revenues. MBC's premium subscription service Shahid VIP was revamped to great fanfare in 2020 with a whole new slate of domestically produced shows in Arabic designed to make it worth the money. Provision of 'hundreds of millions of dollars' in government finance for this surge in production was confirmed in January 2024 in documents released for an initial public offering (IPO) of MBC shares that brought in USD222 million, and also by Sam Barnett, MBC's chief executive officer at the time (Vivarelli, 2024). Barnett acknowledged the need to compete with Netflix when he said Shahid VIP had 'pulled ahead of Netflix and the others' to become the market leader in streaming in the Middle East and North Africa (Vivarelli, 2022b).

Competition with Netflix called for high production values and a diversification of the MBC offer to include a bigger range of genres. Whereas local production had previously focused predominantly on 30-episode dramas for evening viewing in Arab homes during the month of Ramadan, Barnett stressed that growing video-on-demand subscriptions meant originating a much bigger variety of output in Arabic. The proposition for Shahid, he said, is 'Whatever you want to watch, we've pretty much got it' (Vivarelli, 2022b). He noted that the 'edgy high-quality titles' that work on paid-for streaming 'don't tend to be 30 episodes' but 'six-to-ten episodes' (Vivarelli, 2022b). Genres that could be classed as 'new' in the sense of originating in Arabic and being set in Saudi Arabia ranged from a 250-episode soap opera to an eight-episode crime thriller and much else besides.

Diversity and disparity among young Saudis

Young Saudis and their parents have long been familiar with American films, sitcoms, reality shows and other content that MBC imported from Hollywood for several of its channels over decades on the understanding that MBC audiences 'could tolerate watching foreign behaviour in a foreign setting but would not accept the same behaviour at home' (Sakr, 2007: 118; 130). With the arrival of global streaming services and normalisation of the subscription model, differences between groups of Saudi viewers based on their interest in so-called 'foreign behaviour' and their ability or readiness to pay to watch it were accentuated. Because the regime of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman itself 'bet' on the kingdom's 'overwhelmingly Western-educated and Western-oriented young urban elite to neutralize conservative contestation' of his policies (Farouk, 2024: 293), there is a risk of analysts overlooking not only the groups outside that elite but also divergences within it. Scholars with close knowledge of the field stress the extent to which the 'myriad Saudi youth constituencies' across the kingdom's large territory are

socio-economically, culturally, geographically, ethnically and religiously diverse (Thompson and Quilliam, 2024: 8–9). The corollary of a concentration of Western-educated youth in urban locations favoured by Vision 2030 projects is a 'consolidation of social inequalities' across Saudi Arabia's 13 regions, where some 'modernization projects that disrupt lifestyles' in the rural peripheries have been poorly received or understood (Dazi-Héni, 2021: 19). As a field study of the country's nascent music industry noted, 'available surveys' contradict any claims about 'homogeneous reception' of new forms of entertainment, indicating instead that, 'far from cultivating consensus, they exacerbate class contradiction' (Abdelrahim, 2024: 23).

Looking first at disparities in education, many scores of thousands of Saudis, male and female, have attended universities in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, especially since the King Abdullah Scholarship Programme was launched in 2005. That programme coincided with a move to 'internationalize' education inside Saudi Arabia by 'copying curricula used in Western universities, hiring university teaching staff with 'Western' backgrounds and 'assimilating Western ways of knowing' (Hamdan, 2017: 2011). Both trends had implications for language use. Writing in 2017, Wafaa Fallatah noted a 'dynamic injection of the English language into the Saudi academic and social life' that had turned it into a 'popular language used by the elite and educated Saudis' (2017: 669).

Perceptions that Vision 2030 projects have benefited some to the exclusion of others are based on tangible evidence of a widening 'divide between the wealthy and less well-off' and an 'over-emphasis on elite interests' (Thompson, 2021: 807; 815; 817). But cultural events also highlight differences within so-called elites. The way ticketing and access is tiered at electronic dance music festivals suggests that 'steep social segmentation' has been 'built into the new spaces of entertainment', drawing attention to the 'drastic wealth disparity that is a characteristic of contemporary Saudi society' (Derbal, 2020). Resentment has been expressed in podcasts, for example, about privileges afforded to the wealthy in beach front developments. Disparities between social groups provide a reason for national television programming to be mobilised in support of a proud and unified national identity.

Seeing yourself on screen: Relatability and national identity

'We spent a long time not seeing ourselves on screen' was how an executive producer and scriptwriter of a YouTube comedy series put it to a sympathetic interviewer in 2023, when a film sequel to the series was released on Netflix (Bedirian, 2023). The series in question was *Alkhallat* (The Mixer), launched on YouTube in 2019, featuring idiosyncrasies of Saudi society and made by people whose YouTube content had been dealing with social issues through humour and satire for a Saudi audience for more than a decade. *Alkhallat*'s 22 episodes gained a total of 1.5 billion views (Bedirian, 2023). The paradoxical comment about 'not seeing ourselves' – despite the long background and high level of viewership – underscored a key phenomenon of Saudi Arabian cultural production whereby young creatives, denied outlets in mainstream Saudi television, had been depicting Saudi society in independent video years before Mohammed bin Salman's rise to power. Indeed, Vision

2030's social reform programme was 'in many ways a top-down response to bottom-up pressures' (Thompson, 2021: 807), since young nationals, especially in the main urban centres, frustrated by a lack of outlets for self-expression, had established their own informal creative groupings.

Makers of independent film and video have publicly marvelled at the contrast in opportunities for self-expression on Saudi screens before and after the launch of Vision 2030. Mohammed Sabbagh, aged 33 when *Barakah meets Barakah* was released, said in 2016 that he came from a 'generation where we are almost voiceless'; he said he had wanted to make 'a film about this generation's challenges and do something that is very genuine, very honest' (Saito, 2016). Two production houses to benefit from the change were founded by people still in their twenties. One was Telfaz11, the company behind *Alkhallat* and many other hits starting with *La Yekthar* ('Zip It' or 'Put a Lid on It', in Saudi dialect) in 2010. The other was UTURN, whose 2012 drama series *Takki* (Jeddah slang for 'relax/chill') was created by a 23-year-old and featured young Saudi adults negotiating gender relations, family dynamics, friendship, poverty, racial tensions and drug use. It gained more than a million hits in its first 3 months (Abou-Alsamh, 2012) and was picked up by Netflix in 2020. Recalling UTURN's early days, its founder, Kaswara Alkhatib, said: 'It is mind-blowing how we struggled back then, and now suddenly we have all the support we could hope for' (Lakhpatwala, 2020).

Fascination with their country's culture was a defining trait of the production teams behind companies like Telfaz11, UTURN and others, who drew comedy material from aspects of ultra-conservatism. Two of the biggest names in the early YouTube 'serious comedy' phenomenon, Hisham Fageeh and Fahad Albutairi, both studied at US universities where they gained experience in the art of stand-up comedy but learned to perform for a Saudi audience (Solomon, 2017). A linguistic study of bilingual shows by Albutairi and four other Saudi stand-up comedians found that they switched freely between Arabic and English, using linguistic devices in both languages to 'express their Saudi identity and cultural conceptualizations' through evoking Saudi cultural schemas, categories and metaphors (Fallatah, 2017: 673–675; 681). Under Vision 2030, Telfaz11 and UTURN signed production deals not only with Netflix but also with Saudi state enterprises, including MBC, the revamped state television corporation SBC and the media hub at the crown price's futuristic city project NEOM, seizing an opportunity to create relatable screen content for and about Saudi Arabia in genres that were previously unheard of on Saudi state TV.

Meanwhile Saudi residents' interest in seeing more home-produced content emerged from a survey in 2021 that found high levels of willingness among those aged 18–34 to pay for quality local content on video-on-demand (Arab News, 2022a). Their preference for Saudi-related stories was seen in local acclaim for the film *Sattar* on its release in early 2023. A family comedy about an aspiring wrestling champion, with Saudi folk music in its soundtrack and replete with what the local press found to be social intricacies and cultural nuances specific to Saudi Arabia, *Sattar* was produced by a production arm of Telfaz11. Its resounding local box office success in the kingdom (not matched in neighbouring UAE) surpassed that of the Hollywood blockbuster, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, showing in Saudi cinemas at the same time. Ibrahim Alkhairallah,

Telfaz11 creative director who also starred in *Sattar*, said of the film's success: 'Audiences are extremely hungry for content they can relate to and laugh about. Jokes and phrases they understand' (Variety Partner Content, 2023).

On the face of it, there could be consonance between the hunger of young Saudis for relatable content, Saudi creatives' eagerness to produce it and state institutions' online messaging about Saudi values that came to be repeated ritualistically in the top-down nationalist mobilisation that followed Mohammed bin Salman's appointment as crown prince (Alhussein, 2018, 2019: 5–6). An analysis of Instagram posts during the MDL Beast music festival in Riyadh in 2019 found 'nationalistic pride' to be a prominent theme, with change and opening up to the world celebrated through discourse in the captions and frequent use of the Saudi flag emoji (Madani, 2022: 7). Yet for many what has been termed a 'hyper-nationalist' message, reflected in online campaigns and hashtags such as 'Saudi Arabia for Saudis' and 'Saudi Arabia is Great' (Al-Rasheed, 2021: 141–142), alongside Vision 2030 references to 'modern Islam', was code for personal loyalty to the Crown Prince and commitment to a national rather than a religious identity. Coining of the Arabic term *watanji* (roughly meaning jingoist or chauvinist, from the word *watan* for homeland) reflected dismay among sections of the population at the activities of regime-orchestrated 'hyper-nationalist' cyber-trolls who would denounce any critic of the political leadership as a traitor or foreign 'embassy agent' (Al-Rasheed, 2021: 171; Alhussein, 2019: 12).

The same environment has seen signs of culture being leveraged in 'the service of regime legitimation' with co-option of cultural producers used as a means of control 'in which non-participation may not be an option' (Exell, 2025: 35). Nora Derbal (2021) found a debate among artists in Jeddah about the loss of autonomy that comes with joining state-sponsored projects and the consequences of not joining. Evidence has surfaced of YouTubers being coerced by judicial and extra-judicial means (Hubbard, 2018; Kalin and Toonkel, 2024). Such pressures highlight the possibility that relatability in content, referring to recognition and familiarity, may not always entail authenticity, in the sense of a deeper, inward-looking, multidimensional examination of society.

Edginess and the limits of authenticity

A state-backed drive for authentic storylines in the form of what an MBC executive called a 'unique Saudi production for the youth, by the youth' (Middleton, 2019) was already evident in 2018, ahead of the establishment of MBC Studios or the relaunch of Shahid VIP, with filming of a series called *Boxing Girls*, aired on MBC4 in early 2019. With the director, lead actor and main character all Saudi, MBC publicity said the story of Nojoud, a young female boxer, would take viewers 'deep into the lives of the average Saudi woman, from stories of peer pressure and bullying, to abuse and obesity'. An unprecedented reliance on national input has been prominent since then in settings, sources for scripts and acting and directing talent, with an exponential rise in the profiles of young Saudi writers, actors and directors as outlets for their work multiplied. The following examples, selected from a large portfolio, illustrate defining aspects of the policies implicit in production choices.

The ten-episode fantasy adventure, *Rise of the Witches*, shown on Shahid VIP in 2024, told the story of a struggle between two rival witch covens in ancient Arabia. The size of its budget, not specified but known to include the cost of ambitious special effects and three purpose-built sets at NEOM, testified to a state commitment to this particular production through its investment in MBC. In acknowledging the existence of pre-Islamic culture in Saudi Arabia, part of promoting tourism associated with Nabatean remains at AlUla in the northwest of the country that were closed off to non-Saudis before 2019 and never publicised when Islam was front and centre of official Saudi identity, the series reflected the secular nationalist narrative espoused by Mohammed bin Salman. In treating witchcraft as folklore and not criminal activity it negated past judicial codes under which sorcery could be punished by imprisonment or even death. In featuring two Saudi women in lead roles, one of whom (Ayda al-Kusay) was born in 1996, it demonstrated how screen acting involving stunts and fight scenes had become normalised as a career option for women. It also drew on the work of a contemporary Saudi novelist, Usama al-Muslim, who spent part of his childhood in the US and started out aged 38 with a self-published novel entitled *Khawf* (*Fear*) in 2015 before becoming a bestselling author with more than 30 novels to his name by 2024. His work was adapted for screen by a team that included two Saudi women, one of whom (Nora Aboushousha) was brought up in Jeddah and the UK town of Hastings and is said in her online biography to favour topics like 'gender, class, love, and purpose'.

A USD16 million eight-episode crime action thriller, *Rashash*, shown on Shahid in 2021, marked a production policy innovation in being based on a true local story of the late 1980s, involving a long-running criminal investigation in which Rashash al-Otaibi, a Saudi bandit, drug trafficker and murderer who terrorised the local population, was caught partly through the efforts of a police officer from the same tribe. Although MBC was long known for its MBC Action channel targeting young Arab males with Western content, *Rashash* was the network's first foray into making a high-action drama of its own. Depicting real life events, the series angered the true-life character's family, who said they had not been consulted and objected to the bad publicity and opening old wounds. In previous cases where Saudi tribes had objected to featuring in historical series made by Syrian production companies for privately owned Saudi TV stations, which then included MBC, the government in Riyadh stepped in to halt screening, as happened with *Finjan al-Damm* (Cup of Blood) and *Saadoun Al-Awaji* (a proper name) in 2008 (Samin, 2014: 270). In the case of *Rashash*, however, with the state controlling MBC and the crown prince displaying disregard for tribal consensus, controversy was allowed to reverberate.

Reactions to *Rashash* showed that teenagers were watching this novel content, even though it was not intended for under-18s. Videos circulating across social media showed young admirers celebrating the criminal by copying the screen character's unkempt hair (Obaid, 2021). Social media activity also indicated young audiences' engagement with Shahid's Ramadan 2025 series *Sharea al-Asha* (Al-Asha Street), set in a popular neighbourhood in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1970s and reinforcing a message repeated by Mohammed bin Salman at home and to foreign media that the kingdom's exceptional conservatism prior to Vision 2030 was only introduced after 1979 in response to the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamist extremists (Sakr, 2023: 35). Fans of the

television series, drawn from *Love Stories on Al-Asha Street* written by Saudi author Badria Al-Bishr (2013) and exploring relationships among people from different classes and religious ideologies, shared edits of characters and scenes on TikTok.

Examples like these suggest that 'edgy' is a fair characterisation of subject matter where creative risks were taken in dealing with magic, true crime and love entanglements. But some types of edginess have been excluded, either through market pressures or decisions taken by MBC. The impact of YouTube 'institutionalisation', whereby YouTube launched a special site for Saudi Arabia and made it easier to access advertising revenue, started to be seen after 2013. Advertisers were concerned about politically uncomfortable material that attracted 'more dislikes than likes' and YouTubers themselves were motivated to produce content that 'linked smoothly with advertisements', taking them into the 'realm of professionalism' where they 'could not remain absolutely independent' (Fakih, 2021: 47–48). Hisham Fageeh, the male lead in *Barakah meets Barakah*, a co-founder of Telfaz11 and a creator with Fahad Albutairi and others of the landmark satirical 2013 YouTube video *No Woman No Drive*, distanced himself from Telfaz11 in 2016 as being no longer 'edgy' or 'cool' enough for his liking (Saito, 2016).

MBC's management negotiated a deal with the youth-focused digital media company Vice and then backtracked because of disagreements over content. Sam Barnett said in 2023 that Vice is 'edgy', 'youth focused' and 'brings a kind of level of openness and a new edge to some of the things that we've done in the past' (Vivarelli, 2023). A joint venture between Vice and MBC launched in January 2023, with staff operating from the cultural district of Jax in Riyadh to create lifestyle content in Arabic in keeping with Vice's countercultural image and the kingdom's social transformation under Vision 2030. By August 2023 these two aims had proved incompatible. Vice items related to human rights were repeatedly blocked on grounds of maintaining the safety of Vice staff in Saudi Arabia (Waterson, 2023). Vice also uploaded a film in its *Investigators* series about the Crown Prince and then deleted it. The film apparently drew on work by two *Wall Street Journal* reporters who published a book about Mohammed bin Salman in 2020, which its paperback cover blurb described as 'explosive' (Hope and Scheck, 2021).

It is notable that formats acquired by MBC have tended to be the scripted kind (the UK's *The Office* and *Dr Foster*; Japan's *Mother*) or reality TV competitions that are not aired live. Talk in November 2022 of MBC creating a Saudi version of the semi-scripted Netflix series *Dubai Bling* (Arab News, 2022b) remained just talk by 2025. Scripted drama series with youth appeal that were performing well in 2023-24 according to periodic reports by Parrot Analytics, a specialist in streaming metrics, dealt essentially with interpersonal dynamics. *Shabab al-Bomb* ('The Bomb Guys'), is a comedy following the traditional 30-episode format that has been shown every Ramadan since 2012 and was the most searched-for title in a list of films and TV shows as reported by Google in 2023 and 2024. It launched on state TV as a series of 10-minute sketches proposing solutions to young people's problems, but then transferred to Rotana Khalijia in 2016, after which it ran into censorship issues over unspecified but allegedly 'offensive and inappropriate' scenes, which social media exchanges at the time suggested referred to dating, harassment and casual sex (Traboulsi, 2017). When harassment featured in an episode in Ramadan 2025, it was not censored.

Two popular Shahid shows in 2024 were a fictional sports drama centred on the lives and challenges of a local football team named *Forsan Graih*, striving to attain its former glory, and *Thanaweyat al-Naseem* (2024) (Al-Naseem High School). *Forsan Graih's* ten 30-minute episodes combined sports action with personal and social narratives about ambition and teamwork. *Thanaweyat al-Naseem*, which ran to eight 40-minute episodes following the (mis)fortunes of a new teacher who hopes that modern methods will be effective with unruly students, won an award for best original regional drama production from BroadcastPro Middle East, a trade publication owned by CPI Media based in Dubai. It featured Fahad Albutairi, seen most recently on television in *Al-Maktab*, MBC's Arabic adaptation of the BBC mockumentary *The Office,* and before that in *Alkhallat*.

Conclusion

It is unusual for a national government to have both the financial means and political will to invest USD64 billion in local television and film production over 10 years primarily for the benefit of local youth audiences as well as exports. In Saudi Arabia the bid to create a homegrown screen entertainment industry took effect in 2018 as part of the Vision 2030 project that sought to link cultural innovation aimed at young people with loyalty to the crown prince, couched in a narrative of national identity and 'modern Islam'. The state's forcible acquisition of a majority stake in the region's leading pan-Arab television group, MBC, gave it a vehicle to produce content to meet the challenge of competition posed by Netflix's arrival in Saudi Arabia. Along with these two coinciding phenomena – the ascendancy of Mohammed bin Salman and Netflix's pitch to Saudi youth – was another that was equally influential. That was the existence of a cadre of young Saudi creatives who had been learning the art of making successful video for national audiences since they first started uploading comedy and drama series to YouTube at the start of the 2010s. These people were convinced by various means to apply their skills to state-sponsored production.

In exploring how a preoccupation with national identity was applied in developing television output for a youth constituency under Mohammed bin Salman, issues highlighted by various strands of cultural proximity theory come to the fore. Straubhaar's observation (2021: 31) about the critical need for a variety of genres is borne out by MBC's production policy once it came under state control. With major state-supplied funding for big budget projects and foreign expertise, MBC tested out genres and formats not previously made locally or in Arabic, with the aim of providing a slate of titles for its video-on-demand services to suit a range of tastes and timetables. MBC management attributed the success of its Shahid VIP subscription service vis-à-vis Netflix to this approach. At the same time relatability was achieved through extensive reliance on national input, including Saudi faces and voices already known nationally through YouTube, and a preference for 'edgy' topics. Viewers' familiarity with Netflix catalogues, and MBC's competition with Netflix, suggests that the production values and subject matter selected for dramatisation in original Saudi series met the criteria for relatability in the sense of identification and recognition (Varga, 2021: 277) that are a dimension of cultural proximity at work.

When it comes to social class stratification (Straubhaar, 2021: 30) and authenticity, the Saudi case, with its stark socioeconomic divides and marginalisation of religiously conservative communities, calls for these to be considered together. Khalil's (2025: 503) interpretation of authenticity as something other than the unidimensional, homogenising approach adopted to appeal to a transnational audience offers criteria for assessing how closely television content examines society. An overview of series on MBC and Rotana Khalijia that were watched by young people indicates general alignment with the political leadership's prioritisation of globally connected urban social groups deemed open to changing norms. Edgy content was explicitly part of a bid for authenticity but, as this analysis shows, some forms of edginess proved to be off limits.

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