



Arab Millennials' Articulation of Identity in Cyberspace: A study of three MENA YouTubers

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Abstract

This study investigates how three young Arab influencers negotiate their identities in cyberspace. Abdallah Al Maghlouth, Abdulrahman Mohammed, and Laila Hzaineh were selected for this study because they were listed among the top MENA influencers by the Arab Social Media Summit (2015) or by Stepfeed.¹ The article draws on the cultural hybridity perspective to demonstrate how these influencers articulate cultural identity across three themes: human engagement, women's empowerment, and cultural revivalism. Cultural hybridity gained prominence within a range of cultural and social theories beginning in the 1980s. Recently, it has come to be interchangeably used with Robertson's notion of 'glocalization' (Robertson 2012). Hybridity is a dynamic process necessary for cultural co-existence, continuity and for reconciling global sets of values with local (dominantly Arab-Islamic) social norms. Identity is informed by aspects of belonging or not to social groups; cyberspace is a new frontier for shaping and renewing social identities in the Middle East, with the majority of the population under 25 years and great levels of internet penetration, it is important to examine emerging sense of self and groups amongst Arab youth in cyberspace.

Introduction

The digital communication revolution, as marked by satellite television and the World Wide Web, has brought about significant social and cultural transitions to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. As elsewhere, a new generation of Arab Millennials has come to increasingly define the content and form of the emerging virtual sphere in a region marked by young demographics and economic uncertainties. In significant ways, MENA's young social influencers seem to be shaping the social sphere, not only through engaging millions of followers across the region, but also through articulating a hybrid cultural identity.

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¹ <https://stepfeed.com/our-list-of-top-20-arab-social-media-stars-9463>



An Arab youth study (ASDA'A Burston-Marsteller 2016, 5) noted there are 200 million young people in the Middle East and North Africa who, "always spirited, often frustrated, represent either the region's biggest dividend, or its biggest threat." An updated 2018 Arab Youth Survey (ASDA'A Burston-Marsteller 2018) found that young Arabs view the digital revolution as an important development that has shaped the region over the past decades. Cole (2014) notes that analysts have missed the more important, longer-term story of a generational shift in values, attitudes, and mobilizing tactics. Many of those youths have discovered profound fulfillment in the social media sphere, seeing it as an enabler for them to act as a constructive force in economic development and socio-cultural empowerment in their communities (Ayish 2018).

This article draws on the cultural hybridity perspective to demonstrate how three young Arab YouTubers: Abdallah Al Maghlouth, a motivational speaker; Abdulrahman Mohammed, a musical artist (seeking to synthesize the traditional and modern music); and Laila Hzaineh, a feminist vlogger, negotiate their identities in cyberspace. The authors analyze content created by the three influencers across three key themes: human engagement (Al Maghlouth); women's empowerment (Hzaineh) and cultural revivalism (Mohammed).

Cultural hybridity, as a scholarly path, gained prominence within a broad range of cultural and social theories since the 1980s, most notably within postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and globalization theory (Kraidy 2005). In recent years, its discussion has been accentuated by international debates over the impact of globalization on local realities in different countries, especially those on the periphery. Cultural hybridity has come to be interchangeably used with Robertson's notion of 'glocalization' to denote a vision of how the global and the local could be accommodated in our world (Featherstone, Lash, and Robertson 1995). In significant ways, hybridity has also been conceptualized as a dynamic process necessary for cultural co-existence and continuity. The authors argue that by cultivating large youth following and engagement, the three YouTubers are able to bring their progressive hybridized visions of Arab identity to bear on real-world values and behaviors of millions of young men and women in the MENA region.

Conceptual framework

Though identity basically denotes a sense of belonging to a group, the dynamics of its formation seem highly subtle. In many ways, it involves a convergence of multiple psychological, social, cultural, and political elements that the individual or group strives to accommodate within a single mindset. With the advent of the Internet and social media, identity is no longer defined by physical relations or space; it has come to find significant sources and expressions in cyberspace as well. As such, it suggests a process of cultural hybridization in which different cultural and spatial elements are synthesized.



According to Frello (2012), cultural hybridity is closely related to an increased awareness of global cultural flows, influences, and interdependences, both historically and contemporarily. It “is inevitably associated with flux, in-betweenness, the interstitial, and the liminal. It is about being out of sync with a familiar past and a half-grasped future” (Chadwick 2013: 8). Historically, hybridity has grown out of discussions of the notion of “glocalization” which sees a perceived homogenizing role for globalization (Robertson 2012). According to Robertson (2012), “glocalization” describes the tempering effects of local conditions on global pressures. At a 1997 conference on “Globalization and Indigenous Culture” Robertson stated that glocalization “means the simultaneity - the co-presence - of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies.” Hybridity, on the other hand, according to Kraidy (2005), is an instrument and lens for cultural analysis and the description of various scenarios of associating various genres. It is postulated as a “communicative space and practice” (Kraidy 2002: 318). Chow (2006) critically defines hybridity as the notions and images allowed by the “dominant culture” to maintain the continuity of its own “equilibrium”. Hybridity, in Chow’s view, is possibly calculated and counter-balanced by the social forces of the influential cultural forces.

In this article, cultural hybridity is used to denote a synthesis of universal and indigenous cultural features that give rise to a hybrid culture; this hybrid culture owes its existence and continuity to evolving symbioses and long-term co-existence between both sets of cultures. It is conceived as a cross between two separate cultures: Arab and Western. As a cultural project, hybridity is an effort to maintain a sense of balance among practices, values, and customs of two or more different cultures. In the context of this article, the three influencers engage in constructing a new identity that reflects a dual sense of being, which resides both within and beyond the margins of the Arab world. The authors will not be making any value judgments on the nature of the virtual cultural hybridity generated by the three influencers. They rather observe that the resulting hybrid cultural identity is a function of a convergence of digital/social media and young demographics in a region long characterized by conservative ideas and practices. Though the writers see a strong sense of determinism in defining how demographic and technological transitions drive hybridity, there is still ample room for social intervention to determine the shape and content of hybridization.

Literature review

In recent years, the role of social media influencers in marketing, politics, and culture has attracted increasing scholarly attention. *Forbes* defines influencer marketing as a form of marketing in which focus is placed on specific key individuals rather than on the target market as a whole (Forbes.com 2017) as intermediaries to reach for the target audience. Fredberg (2010) notes that social media influencers represent a new type of independent, third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media channels.



Glucksman (2017) argues that social media influencers promote brands through their personal lives, making them relatable to the average consumer. He notes that through sites like Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, social media influencers create content promoting certain brands with the goal of obtaining a following and brand recognition. The basic concept underlying influencer marketing is that social influencers' endorsement of products would lead consumers, who see influencers as role models, to positively relate to those products. By the same token, social media influencers also have much to bear on election campaigns. According to the UAE-based think tank, Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARS), social media affects elections in several ways including voting trends and turnouts (2017). Murphy (2016) notes that a candidate could win the youth vote by leveraging social influencers as candidates who could connect to millennial voters through "a very influential figure, in their eyes, to gain support, rather than run traditional ads that many might not even see." (p. 1)

Influencers' impact on culture in its broadest sense has also received significant scholarly attention within marketing or social advocacy discussions. It has been argued that influencer marketing is not only about selling goods and services, but also about introducing and reinforcing cultural attitudes, values, and mindsets. Influencers, through sharing their talents in fashion design, music, film, and the arts at large, and their advocacy of women, children education, and community welfare, are able to induce significant transitions in their societies. This influence has been most conspicuous in the context of young demographics where the youth normally find much relevance in what their peer millennials preach online.

In the MENA region, the so-called digital generation has been shown to have developed increasing dependency on virtual space for information, communication and entertainment. A survey of more than 3,000 digital users in nine countries described how digital technology was influencing the Arab Digital Generation (ADG) and giving it the potential to shape the region (Strategy &. 2013). The survey revealed that 83% of ADGs use the Internet daily; 78% prefer the Internet to TV; 16% access the Internet from schools or academic institutions while 76% access it from home; 41% search the Internet in both Arabic and English, while 21% chat in both languages; 40% stated that education does not prepare students for the job market; 43% would like to start their own business, and 24% believe that media content is totally controlled by government (Strategy &. 2013).

Method

This case study draws on the analysis of content generated by three MENA influencers to identify features of a hybridized cultural identity in three major strands: human engagement, women's empowerment, and cultural revivalism. For each influencer, five YouTube episodes were non-randomly selected for qualitative analysis; YouTube videos with the highest viewing stats as appear on the video network are selected for analysis. The sample videos of each influencer were



analyzed across a single theme depending on the nature of their content. The researchers observed large number of video posts and interviews for each influencer, before determining the theme based on which to conduct the analysis.

For Al Maghlouth the theme was *human engagement*, for Hzaineh *women's empowerment*, and for Mohammed *cultural revivalism*. The three selected themes are specific to the videos produced by each influencer and appear to bring together aspects of both the local culture and global influences. This approach draws on the notion of cultural identity as a multi-faceted concept that is defined by multiple actors who constitute a collective cultural entity. Human engagement describes a focus on the intrinsic universal values that define us as human beings regardless of gender, race, or culture. Women's empowerment refers to social, economic, and political efforts that aim to enhance the status and role of women.

The three influencers

Abdullah Al Maghlouth

Abdullah Al Maghlouth is a Saudi media personality born in 1978 with extensive experience as a columnist for several newspapers including *Al Yawm*, *Al Hayat*, *Al Watan*, *Eialph*, *Al Qafela*, and *Forbes Arabia*. He has a Bachelor's degree in communications and marketing from the University of Utah and a Master's degree in the same field from the University of Colorado, USA. He also earned a PhD in media and communication from the University of Manchester, UK. He currently contributes a weekly column to *Al Watan* newspaper and appears on media platforms to discuss social and cultural issues. His publications include *Aramcoion*, *Saudi Interneters*, and the *Black Box*. He gained popularity from his YouTube show, *Yeshbabak* (Looks Like You), which earned him extensive popularity as he sought to foster a sense of doing good in one's community.

Abdulrahman Mohammed

Abdulrahman Mohammed is a Saudi singer, musician, and freelance videographer. He has a Bachelor's degree in media from King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia and a Master's degree in documentary practice from Brunel University in West London. Abdulrahman first gained recognition as one of the finalists of the reality TV show "Super Star" in 2008. He is now famous for musical composition on his YouTube channel. With his friend Muhab Omar and the band Breaking the Boundaries, Abdulrahman has more than half a million followers.

Laila Hzaineh

Laila Hzaineh is a Jordanian-Palestinian feminist who has been challenging societal norms in the Arab world using social media, specifically video. As a vlogger, Hzaineh courageously tackles issues women in the region are often faced with, including sexism, harassment, and domestic violence. Laila first began making



headlines after a video she posted on social media went viral. The video was a response to a man who suggested that women bring sexual harassment onto themselves by wearing provocative clothing.

Analysis and discussion

The following section draws on the analysis of a total of fifteen YouTube videos that reflect the hybridized cultural outlook promoted by the three influencers based on the abovementioned themes of human engagement, women's empowerment, and cultural revivalism. The analysis also includes reference to engagement with online users.

Human engagement in Abdullah Al Maghlouth's videos

An important feature of Al Maghlouth's social content is his projection of the human face of Saudi communities in the age of globalization. The five sample episodes of his *Yeshbahak* YouTube show harness values of tolerance, love, empathy, and human resilience to tell stories of real people who have stood up to life challenges and emerged victorious. In effect, Al Maghlouth presents a vision of the power of the human will to overcome. In doing so, Al Maghlouth harnesses three major features for engaging Saudis with human values: the power of human resilience and will; the universality of human sentiments, and the deterministic nature of human good.

Resilience and human will

Resilience and human will are key features of Al Maghlouth's *Yeshbahak* YouTube episodes, referring to the ability of individuals to overcome obstacles and achieve aspired goals. In one episode entitled "My Father is a Hero,"² Al Maghlouth tells stories of injured Saudi soldiers with families expressing their ability to overcome the physical problems and keep their spirits high to serve the homeland. The episode, shot at a Saudi hospital, featured other injured soldiers who spoke about their country with pride and in defense of the Kingdom. Consistent with the theme of resilience, all soldiers shown in the video were in high spirits and smiling with their loved ones looking on.

The episodes included close-up shots of soldiers and their families, some features, expressions, and even tears were clearly visible. In one *Yeshbahak* episode entitled "Unseen Light", Al Maghlouth told stories of individuals with physical deformities, highlighting their potential to contribute to society.³ Telling the story of Joseph Carey Merrick, an Englishman with severe facial and body deformities who was exhibited as the "Elephant Man" as part of freak show in the 19th century, Al

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QzBql7cI-k&list=PLvtUJqCCJXa0Vu0R-CTKJa-YuLe3UAIuH>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFW6Ri2Rz4A&t=11s>



Maghlouth went on to share the story of a Saudi girl named Amani Al Shaalan, known for having the best smile on Twitter. Amani suffers from health problems including blood pressure, nerve issues, and cancer, but her tweets made her an inspiration for many people online.

Human resilience was also highlighted in an episode entitled “Cut from a Tree,”⁴ where a young man who came to discover his unknown parents made it to the highest professional level in his occupation because he had the will to do so. A similar feature was found in an episode entitled “A Father’s Childhood,”⁵ where a man with down syndrome managed to overcome difficulties and establish a family that took care of him when he was old. Finally, the episode entitled “This is How Light Sneaks In,”⁶ tells the story of Saudis with multiple sclerosis, who carried on their lives with high spirits and hope in a good future. All those characters would eventually revert to their intrinsic human nature to negotiate their relations with their communities.

Universal human appeal

Another important feature of Al Maghlouth’s motivational videos is their inclusiveness; addressing people of different colors, ethnicities, religions, and genders. This feature is meant to suggest that Saudi society, no matter how different it is from other societies, is intrinsically part of a collective human entity, that lends its emotions and sentiments to universal origins shared by other communities around the world. His approach to this draws on combining international and Saudi human experiences to show common features. In the episode about Saudi soldiers injured on the southern military front, Al Maghlouth provided both verbal and visual evidence to suggest that Saudi soldiers and their loved ones grieve, smile, laugh, cry, and shed tears exactly like other soldiers who sacrifice their lives for their countries. This feature is quite common in visual content dealing with patriotism, particularly in a military context.

In the “Unseen Light” episode, Al Maghlouth relates the suffering of Amani Al Shaalan to the agony of people facing similar challenges in other countries. His reference to Merrick is significant in universalizing the Saudi human experience. In the episode “This is How Light Sneaks In,” Al Maghlouth does an excellent job in relating the suffering of two Saudi people, a woman and a man, to that of accomplished international figures who went through similar painful experiences. These include Egyptian writer Taha Hussein, British Physicist Stephen Hawking, racecar driver Trevor Byne and Fox News Channel’s presenter, Neil Cavuto.

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4TRCGxa_BI&t=6s

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wpXx2I7wDoM>

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvJCwX_0uug&t=17s



Human determinism

Al Maghlouth's *Yeshbehak* episodes also encompass a strong sense of determinism about positive conclusions to painful life experiences. In the five videos covered by this study, one sees optimism overcoming despair, and pain giving way to happiness. In the episode entitled "My Father is a Hero," Al Maghlouth shows how soldiers with amputated legs are turning into a source of inspiration for others. In the "Father's Childhood" episode, Saeed, the man with down syndrome, becomes a living example of a difficult journey that concludes with him as the head of a healthy family. Al Maghlouth seems to suggest that we should not judge life by individual instances of pain, and remain optimistic about the future.

Al Maghlouth's description of Merrick, the "Elephant Man", has much to say about the good things awaiting people with self-confidence and belief. Both Merrick and his Saudi counterpart, Aman Al Shaalan, have transformed their agonies into a state of more enduring good where they saw their inner potential unlocked for greater human creativity and engagement. Again, it is the recurring theme of good endings that Al Maghlouth wanted to emphasize: Don't give up because of this moment of passing pain because there is something good for you in the future. The same theme was conspicuous in the "This is How Light Sneaks In" episode, where two Saudis, a man and a woman, with multiple sclerosis, found fulfillment in good things in life such as painting, academic study, and social engagement. In significant ways, Al Maghlouth's human-orientation suggests a universal human identity in which individuals share key features with others of different cultural, geographical and religious backgrounds. For Al Maghlouth, human identity transcends all political, social, and cultural divides that generally create tensions and conflicts across communities.

Women's empowerment in Laila Hzaineh's videos

Laila's videos relay a complex sense of cultural identity that embraces the national, transnational, and the global. Her views on women's rights and the position of women in Arab societies are ostensibly relatively liberal, yet they are clearly critical of common cultural discourses that expect Arab women to keep silent and remain marginalized. She calls upon Arab women to resist traditionally-determined roles and responsibilities in society, culture, and politics. Traditional Arab artifacts and designs appearing in her cadre testify to a strong sense of national cultural belonging; yet the fact that she subtitles many of her videos in English attests to her international outlook and supports her attempts to give her messages a global reach. Laila records her videos in a room with walls decorated with the map of historic Palestine and a giant key icon, a symbol of the Palestinian refugees' right of return. The cadre in her videos shows bookshelves and large posters with both Arabic and English inscriptions.⁷

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2_jPjI2-Ws



Contesting women's bodies and clothing

Hzaineh does not shy away from stirring up debates on taboo topics in the Arab context, including Arab perceptions of women's virginity and sexual harassment. The issue of the female body is a dominant topic in many of Laila's videos selected for analysis. This appears in titles including "Honor and Hymens in Arab Countries"⁸; "The Reality of the Difference Between the Veiled and the Non-Veiled"; "It is a Crime to Justify Harassment";⁹ "On Covering A Scandal in Arab Countries";¹⁰ "Group Rape of a Young Woman with Learning Difficulties in Morocco."¹¹

In videos selected for analysis, Laila responds to pan-Arab events affecting women, and to public comments by both Jordanian and Palestinian YouTubers such as Mohamad Kaddah¹², Yousif Al Khatib¹³, and Wasim Shehadeh¹⁴, who criticize women for their appearance and for their public role. Her vlogging activities started in response to a Jordanian vlogger who published a post claiming that women are harassed because of their (immodest) clothing (Poulson 2018). By vlogging, Hzaineh advocates a more fundamental approach to studying, understanding, and portraying women that supersedes appearance and clothing, in an attempt to humanize them in a male-biased, patriarchal society. She counters mainstream arguments and social narratives justifying violence and sexual harassment against women based on their looks and dress or on grounds of being provocative.

Women's rights in the Arab context

Hzaineh benchmarks the position of Arab women and their rights against international feminist discourses of gender equality and human rights. Women's right to work, equal pay, choice in marriage, mobility, education, safety, sporting and driving (in reference to restrictions placed on Saudi women prior to 2017) have been featured frequently in Hzaineh's videos. A message of resistance or a manifesto for freeing and empowering Arab women to stand up to inhibitive social norms in the context of their expected and stereotypical roles was the topic of her video "A Message to Every Arab Woman in the World."¹⁵ In the description of the video, Hzaineh writes: "Be the first to learn, the first to travel, be the first to challenge the oppression of your father, brother, or husband. Be the first and you won't be the last, each one of us is capable of creating a revolution."¹⁶ Hzaineh responds to her critics on the issue of a woman's right to freely dress the way she likes by arguing

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RP-vKSzMUoU>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRkx16K79gg>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQDXW-R2mik>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxuWDGs6Ys0>

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EmK6VmdBbA>

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUYL7SM0Moo>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ekwYYae09k>

¹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2_jPjI2-Ws

¹⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2_jPjI2-Ws



that clothing is not the only determinant of women's freedom. She notes that "women's choice to dress the way they like is an integral part of their freedom and independence."¹⁷

The voice and the face

By choosing to vlog rather than write, Hzaineh makes a statement about aiming to be seen and heard, as she wants to break the social silence on violence against women. Video also seems to be a more effective way for Internet users to stay connected with her and to see what kind of person she is. As a child of eight, she was herself a victim of sexual violence - she has stated that this was a motivating factor for her to vlog about rape. In a video she says, "I am shaming the rapists and empowering the victim...I want people to understand that our experiences with rape and harassment do not define us. We have nothing to be ashamed of." (Paulson 2017) Hzaineh appears to speak on behalf of the victims of rape and sexual harassment who were silenced to avoid social exclusion and stigma. In an article she had published in the Swarthmore College Newspaper in Pennsylvania, USA, where she studied, Hzaineh argues that if a girl loses her hymen because of rape, that it does not matter for her family - if it is lost, it is lost. She added that when it comes to the issue of virginity, people in Arabian communities do not seem to have compelling arguments as to why this forced situation women find themselves in should matter much (Chattopadhyay 2017).

Overall, Hzaineh's messages bring a lot of attention to the situation of Arab women, serving as an eye opener for many young people in Arab countries. Her narrative is based on the Western liberal human rights tradition, gender equality, and feminism. Yet, her messages are targeting Arab women, addressing issues that are relevant to their social position, role and future.

Cultural revivalism in Abdulrahman Mohammed's videos

The arrival of satellite television in the 1990s opened the stage for music industry leaders in the Arab world to tap into the change in young people's taste and the growth of a new wave of music production labeled as "Shababi music," or music of the youth. This music genre was considered largely by critics and observers as "low" or "lacking taste" (Khairi, Sahan, and Adnan 2018)¹⁸. Such judgment on changing music, visuals, and lyrics seems to have been largely informed by the generational gap in the Arab world where advocates of traditions appear resistant to modern ideas and values.

Abdulrahman Mohammed is a part of the indie (short for independent) music movement in the Arab region in which talented musicians and performers start their music careers, depending on low-budget, non-commercial production and

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUYL7SM0Moo>

¹⁸ <https://qafilah.com/ar/الأغنية-الشبابية/>



social media to reach audiences with new music genres and formats. There is sufficient evidence verifying that Arab Indie musicians tend to experiment with a variety of music genres, traditions, instruments, and melodies. Mohammed, in particular is famous for his synthesis of traditional Arab Sufi and *Gazal* poetry (celebrating love) with Western melodies and instruments.

In his performances and recordings, Mohammed focuses on, and accentuates, the leading role of the musical instrument using solo performances of a variety of instruments within his songs.¹⁹ The classical poetry of platonic love is celebrated by Mohammed: his lyrics come from this perennial genre of Arabic poetry, in addition to the musical practice of *taqsiim* (improvization) (Ayari & McAdams 2003), he mixes *taqsiim* with musical experimentation and *tajdid* (modernization). By doing so, Mohammed brings the classical Arabic platonic poetry into an environment entrenched in popular lyrics and visual fascination.

Mohammed's work and biography testify to the uniqueness and hybridity of his musical choices. As a performer and a musician, he shows pride in classical Arabic lyrics for renowned Sufi and romantic poets like Bin Arabi, Al Hallaj, Inb AlFarhid, and Yazid bin Muaweya. Harnessing both Western musical instruments and lyrics in standard traditional Arabic, he brings the best of the two cultural streams of music together, fusing them in a beautiful manner and expressing a unique sense of his musical and cultural identity whilst offering a new appeal. He synthesizes classical and modern music, marrying the traditional *oud* (Arabic instrument close to lute in its sound) with the modern *org* (keyboard), piano and guitar in his live performances (Kalam Annas 2016).²⁰ As Frith (1996) notes, music "must reflect or represent the people in their current living experiences." (p. 107) The type of lyrics used in Mohammed's compositions reflect subtle views about the self and the other, some have profound reflections, not only about social and emotional relations, but also about human existence at large. The use of illustrations alongside musical compositions helps shed light on the intense ferment within the performer regarding 'the other' who could be an individual, a community, or the Divine. Lyrics describing alienation and rejection echo subdued criticism of social norms and practices that are highly homogeneous and faceless. They suggest a millennial identity in upheaval yet to come to terms with its cyber and physical surroundings through more balanced and consistent hybridity that accounts for tensions in evolving identities.

Saudi Arabia, Mohammed's home country, has the largest share of media companies in the Arab World and young Saudi talents have many mainstream commercial media platforms that could support their talents and promote their works. Peers of Mohammed who share his talent could go mainstream by singing more familiar songs in *Khaliji* (Gulf dialect), Egyptian, or Lebanese Arabic. His

¹⁹ <http://culturewheel.com/ar/event/2017-05-05/2365>

²⁰ <https://kalaman-nas.com/حفل-جماهيرى-للننان-السعودي-عبدالرحمن/>



choice of going for a free and open global platform like YouTube demonstrates a non-commercial approach and highlights his conviction that this kind of music is not welcome by the largest labels in the region, including Rotana, Platinum Studios, and others.

By synthesizing traditional Arabic poetry with modern Western instruments and techniques, Mohammed, challenges the mainstream Arabic music scene that favors more populist lyrical compositions over Arab poetry, which is largely deemed obsolete and inferior. That trend started in the early 1990s with the advent of Arab satellite television and the growth of specialized channels. By fusing both art forms, Mohammed unravels the potential of the wealth of traditional Arab poetry, and affects the prospects of its appeal through a wider audience.

Mohammed introduced *Asabak eshqun* (You are Hit by Passion), a poem by AlYazid bin Muawya that was composed during the Omayyad period (662-750 A.D.). The song scored more than 91 million views on YouTube.²¹ Another famous song of his is entitled *Berouhi Fatat* (A Girl Within My Soul... Baptized in Chastity). The pre-Islamic Arab poet is not identified, yet the song received around 37 million views on YouTube.²² Mohammed's particular interest in Sufi *Ghazal* love and *othri* (innocent) platonic poetry carry a strong message about his cultural values as he approaches love from a spiritual and platonic perspective. This choice represents a departure from the material Arab-Islamic culture, that is based on "outward looking" rituals and on collective societies, towards a more spiritual outlook to Arab-Islamic tradition. Mohammad focuses on the spiritual facets of the Arab-Islamic literary past and casts it in a modern Western format by employing innovative musical beats and instruments. By using poetic lyrics in modern music, he makes a strong statement of belonging to the Arab tradition, as poetry is the Arabs' *Diwan* (Arab proverb whose author is not known).

Prior to Mohammed's revivalist attempt, this tradition of cultural revivalism had a history amongst major Arab musicians and composers including Umm Kulthum in Egypt, The Rahbani Brothers and Wadih El Safi in Lebanon, Sabah Fakhri in Syria with his *Aleppo Kuddod* (a music genre associated with the city of Aleppo in Syria), Nazem AlGhazali in Iraq, and others. The popularity of these music icons was believed to have impacted the popularity of the songs, including their classical lyrical choices. In the case of Mohammed, it is apparent that his lyrical choice and synthesis of Arab and Western music is what led him to stardom. It is the power of the synthesis that helped bring old poetry back to life among Arab youngsters after it was deemed dead. Among other things, this suggests an identity drawing on both traditional and modern elements of music as an effective means of artistic communication. As in the case of Mohammed, the synthetic nature of music would

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXoJDHUC63I>

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZYyEhMhtqY>



maintain strong ties to the past while engaging with the future as reflected in global trends.

Conclusion

The above discussion has shown that the three Arab YouTubers have successfully harnessed social media channels, in this case YouTube, to re-define communication in a region long dominated by rigid, oral, and tradition-based formats. Across the 15 videos examined, one sees hybridity as a remarkably conspicuous feature. The three influencers sought to generate a middle-of-the-road vision of their communities and worldviews. This synthetic approach to human challenges, women's empowerment, and cultural revivalism has proven highly successful in these case studies.

Though the three YouTubers sought to support their claims by drawing on global features relating to human behavior, women rights, and musical innovation, their connections with the local remained solid and visible. Their highly eclectic approach to non-Arab values and practices suggests strong keenness on bringing about a discourse that incorporates global cultural features without compromising local values and traditions and maintain a respectful outlook to these values. The main thread running through videos created by the three influencers is that Arab concerns and challenges are not unique, but rather, share significant parts of their form and substance with those of other nations and regions. Like other people around the globe, Arab people continue to grapple with gender inequality, facelessness, balancing the local with the global, and past-present tensions.

Al Maghlouth's focus on the power of communication to give Saudi Arabia and the region a human face that seamlessly fits in with global and humanitarian values and attitudes is a remarkable development. For many years, Arabs have been demonized as bloody terrorists, backward, oppressive to women, and extremely senseless. Al Maghlouth's videos convey a powerful statement that those stereotypes are not real because Arabs display relatable human feelings, passions, ambitions, and pain. Over the past six decades, demonic images of Arabs dominated Western media and public perceptions, and contributed to increased cultural divides and clashes between both sides. By using English subtitles in his videos, Al Maghlouth intended to go global in his endeavors to humanize Arabs by including basic human features that connect people of different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. In this case, social media channels are serving as effective empowering tools that enable others to better grasp the human face of the region.

Hzaineh's videos demonstrate the remarkable power of online visual media to promote women's issues and concerns. The hybridity thread continues to be visible in Hzaineh's videos as she addresses women suffering that is not fully condoned by genuine traditions. Her invocation of international norms and practices relating to women's rights is meant to show that this issue transcends the MENA region to other global frontiers. Her critical approach to local perceptions of women



addresses gender equality more as a function of mal-practice and perception than as faulty morals and norms. By doing so, Hzaineh suggests a critical gap between what is perceived as good norms and values, and evil perceptions and practices. This schism in the Arab character gives way to existing women's oppression, objectification, and disempowerment in the region. When Hzaineh uses subtitles to illustrate her message in English, she sees a huge potential for sharing gender concerns with millions around the world.

Cultural hybridity is a key feature of Mohammed's musical innovations that blend instruments and lyrics of the past with those of the present to create a synthesized model of art that lends itself to both the past and the present, to the local and the global. As part of the Arab Indie music tradition, Mohammed harnesses his vision of this art to show that the past will continue to be part of our modern living experience. By doing so, he has gone against the mainstream Arab music establishment that sees creativity in copying international experiences in rock 'n' roll and rap music and making them part of the Arab World's music industry. By cultivating such a huge number of followers, Mohammed has proven that the region's youth are not fully detached from their past. It is true that they find a lot of fulfillment in modern progressive ideas and genres, but they still see that their cultural identity is very much rooted in their past. In Mohammed's case, the past comes in the content of lyrics, the instruments he uses and the way he delivers his work.

In conclusion, these case studies of three Arab YouTubers have demonstrated the power of social media, not only to communicate new narratives, but also to bring the past to bear on those narratives. The process of hybridization undertaken by the three influencers suggests how Arab youth are articulating their cultural identity online by seeing both the past and the present as two integral components of their evolving identity.

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