

The Impact of Exposure to the Game of Thrones on Saudi Male Identity

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of Game of Thrones on the cultural identity of young Saudi males. The study also discovered the reasons why Saudi males watch American TV series (Game of Thrones) from a critical cultural perspective. This study has collected the data using an online survey conducted on 63 Saudi male adolescents with age ranging from 15 to 25 years who regularly watched Game of Thrones. The results show that the cultural identities of Saudi males are not negatively impacted because there are only limited viewers of this American drama series. The result reveal that 81.0% participants have watched Game of Thrones “alone” but only for having fun, learning a new culture and passing time. The relationship between age, education with respect to time spent on watching Game of Thrones and respective opinions are statistically significant. The study concluded that learning English language, acting like characters of the drama series and watching their favorite actors and actresses are the main motives of watching this TV series.

Keywords: Game of Thrones, Saudi males, American TV series, cultural identity

1. Introduction

American movies and TV series play an important role in spreading American culture since 1960s when they were introduced to Middle Eastern countries (Akarsu, Foroudi, & Melewar, 2019). The acceptance of US brands, companies, services, and products has increased greatly since American movies and TV series have been introduced in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, TV dramas of a specific country substantially modify the acceptance of lifestyle, brand name preferences, and purchasing habits of audiences (Chattoo et al., 2018). Additionally, TV series can go beyond that to influence the culture and image of that country (Ağırseven & Örki, 2017).

Majority of the studies have indicated the impact of TV on daily life by discussing the power of TV programs. Such programs substantially affect contemporary social life (Al-Rawi, 2020). Media have provided diverse forms of entertainment; however, the soap operas have become more popular around the world (Cantor & Pingree, 1983). Historically speaking, the origins of dramas can be traced back to the 1920s with the origin of commercial radio programming. However, the term ‘soap opera’ emerged between 1930 and 1940 in the United States (Cox, 2009; Allen, 1984; Breerton, 2001; Hogedorn, 1995). Indeed, the concept of the soap opera was considered as a form of soaps American radio (Simmon, 1997; Scardaville, 2011) in that time the American radio provided different advertisement for diver’s types of soaps such as Dove, and Procter & Gamble, targeting women as a main consumer (Allen, 1985). The soap opera had initially lunched by the United States of America (Bhutto, 2019). In other words, American TV series have played a significant role in the spread of American norms, beliefs and values across the globe.

Over the last decade, American dramas have been broadly channelized to other cultures and countries (Luczaj & Holy-Luczaj, 2017). American dramas have been exported to different countries in different continents including Africa, Asia, Europe, Europe, and Gulf countries including Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia (Sayfo, 2020). The popularity of American dramas has elevated to a higher degree on account of different aspects such as music, tourism, fashion, and other cultural products and these dramas also represent American history and culture (Mastro, 2017).

American TV serials have gained the status of an industry with their continuous increase and they promote the

moral values and cultural norms of the country; inordinate effects made by dubbed series on the audiences, specifically on the adolescents who are greatly impressed by the American values projected in these series (Aljammazi & Asil, 2017). Quantitative increase is based on the increase of viewers, and the effect that it has made. Subsequently, it is essential to identify the effect of the series on the viewing audience, and the level of their impact and the changes they bring about (Alradimi & Al-Ali, 2019). The problem of this study lies in measuring the exposure of Saudi adolescents to the American series and its impact. Therefore, this study fills the gap as its objective is to investigate the impact of Game of Thrones on young Saudi males, along with the outcomes of its exposure. Time duration and the reasons of viewing series were specifically considered.

Investigating television programs, series, varied arts, and films are the significant part of the mass media studies. These studies answer a number of questions and inquiries. This study provides insights of the views of a wide and significant segment of the society regarding the TV series and the outcomes of viewing, and an effort is made to establish a database for the people working in Saudi TV. The findings of this study will also influence the policy of airing such series keeping in mind the effects that these series can make on adolescents.

This study is organized as follows: Section 2 presents theoretical background. Section 3 presents empirical review of literature. Section 4 presents methodology based on the data collection and analysis phases. Section 5 presents results and discussion. Section 6 presents overall conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study has used the critical analysis cultural theories in two perspectives. Firstly, the cultural identity theory (CID) proposed by Hall (1972) was used to focus on groups of people living together and was based on their ideas, values, languages, attitudes, social practices, and their same cultural identity (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). In other words, people who have clearly defined and different cultural identities should primarily differ in their languages, behaviors and attitudes. Consequently, audiences might be influenced by media, which in turn has an impact on their identity; for the same reason, CID has been adapted by different studies to evaluate the changing nature of a range of cultural elements. This theory was also used to find the answer of the main research question dealing with investigating the impact of exposure to Game of Thrones on the cultural identify of Saudi males by discovering the change in social values, attitudes, language, and reality.

Secondly, the cultivation theory (CT) proposed by Gerbner & Gross (1976) illustrates the connection between audiences' exposure to media content such as television and their perception of social reality. The concept of CT was based around the proposition that if audiences consume more mass media, they would subsequently be more negatively predisposed to their first-hand and real-life perception of the world. Consequently, heavy TV viewing experience can have a greater impact on their behaviors, attitudes and identities than first-hand experience. For example, people can create different (positive or negative) perceptions and stereotypes about everyday life by simply viewing TV, especially with repeated exposure to a specific type of television program. This indicates that repeating the represented media message frequently will assist in cultivating certain values within consumers. As Shanahan and Morgan wrote 'these repeated exposures tend to dominate the consciousness of heavy viewers by means of exactly those "mechanisms" proposed by cultivation: repetition, frequency' (1999:191). As a result, this theory is helpful to understand the impact of exposure to Game of Thrones on the perception of social reality of Saudi males who watched this series with specific reference to those who have high exposure to the series as compared to those who have less exposure.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Mass Media Consumption and Cross Cultures

Various scholars have focused on the cross-cultural studies, which primarily compared American and Asia media. The rationale behind it is that American scholars have produced a large number of soap operas which paved the path towards modernity and progress. This highlights the fact that the American media industry was drastically expanding and influencing the world (Colista & Leshner, 1998). For instance, Xu (2018) explored how viewing the online American TV series influences perception of reality, cultural, and identity of the Chinese audience. The results showed that Chinese viewers stereotyped the American soap and found that cultivation effect does exist; however, most Chinese viewers were determined to understand whether the exposure to the American culture is acceptable or not, in the light of their cultural values. Also, the study documented that the audience's motives for viewing American TV series were a significant factor in estimating any cultivation impact.

Yue Wu (2015) adopted the uses and gratifications theory, social cognitive theory, cultivation theory, and the reactance effect to examine the influence of American drama series on Chinese internet users. It articulated that Chinese viewers were motivated to watch the American dramas in order to have entertainment, sociability,

learning, and escape with anticipated five dimensions of effects. Zhou (2011) assessed the significant increase in the popularity of American television programs in China and established its effects on the college students. The study has elucidated that millions of the adolescents in the country tend to prefer entertainment from online channels because of the rapid advancement made in the internet. The findings have offered observations to view patterns of the selected individuals. However, the findings did not explain a substantial difference in the change of adolescents' values.

Abdulrahim, Al-Kandari & Hasanen (2009) applied the uses and gratifications theory, cultivation theory to examine the impact of American TV series on endorsement of equal gender roles and liberal attitudes to life in Kuwait. The study has suggested four aspects of the programs that influence the perceptions: performance, value, trans-cultural awareness and details on American popular culture. Among these four fields, only the perception among utility predicted the creation of a liberal perspectives on life, but did not predict the acceptance of equal gender roles. Audience of American TV series was more likely to support fair gender roles and a liberal perspective of life.

Surprisingly, existing literature has made efforts to estimate the effect of dubbed content on the Arab viewers. Qudah & Tahat (2013) have explored the level of exposure to television transmissions in Jordanian adolescents; the motives for viewing; the reasons of exposure of adolescents to dubbed series and to demonstrate the influence of the display.

Khaghaninejad (2019) has used the Corpus of Contemporary America (COCA) to throw light on the attitudes towards American culture and those of selected minority consultants with Lewis model of cultural categorization in 2006. The findings have revealed that the America is portrayed as a land of freedom and aspirations, while the other countries were depicted as one-dimensional nations that should be remembered for their lost art and culture, entertainments and fractured family system. In addition, Al-Jenaibi (2017) has studied that dubbed films are prominent on TV channels. A large percentage of UAE citizens watch dubbed movies for approximately four hours every day. Consequently, the findings have recommended that adults should be encouraged to view programs that assist in protecting the cultural and national identity.

It can be clearly seen from previous literature reviews that American TV series have been a source of the spread of American norms and customs such as liberty and freedom life, and reflect the image of American culture in other countries.

3.2 American TV Series and Arab Audiences

American TV series entered the Saudi media in 1990s. However, it presented the American story of wealthy families, business, luxurious homes, modern lifestyle, and romance. American TV series were aired with classic Arabic subtitled on many satellites such the ARBSAT, Orbit, ShowTime, and ART(R), "Falcon Crest", "Knot Landing", "The Bold and the Beautiful", and "Dallas". According to Fiske (1990), Dallas is very popular in the Third World audiences. They designed their study in such a way that they could investigate different levels of conflicts (family vs. business) in the program recognized by various subgroups on the themes of nationhood, ethnicity and gender' (1990: P44). In fact, there are many different social and cultural differences between Saudi and Westerns cultures in terms of religions, status of women, educations, languages, relationships, values, fashion, marriages, etc. Even though, Saudi audiences might prefer to interact, watch, and follow these TV series by the classic Arabic subtitles, they prefer to watch them in order to identify new issues, experiences, and beliefs.

A study done by Basfar (2007) has investigated the perceptions of Saudi university students on the impact of movies and TV programs on Saudi society. Results revealed that the movies and programs influence Saudi cultural beliefs, especially those related to status of women and family values. Also, the study found that the American movies are most commonly viewed by Saudi students followed by Egyptian and Indian movies.

Al-Ghamdi & Bajnaid (2019) have also conducted a study to investigate the impact of American TV series on the values system of new generations with reference to conservative Arabic Islamic social structures. The result showed that the American and Spanish dramas are most prominently viewed by the Saudi audiences. Regarding acceptance of social values, the study has shown that the romantic relationships are commonly acceptable by Saudi audiences; however, infidelity was unaccepted by Saudis.

Abboud (2008) has shown that the adolescents are satisfied with the series and emphasized that the most essential motivations to view is to become acquainted with the norms of the new society in order to deal with them accordingly. Qudah (2012) has revealed the impact of foreign satellite television stations on the attitude of Gulf youth. The findings have indicated that the exposure has negative effect on a number of behavioral elements. Hadidi (2006) has identified the motivations of the Arab adolescents to view satellite television

programs. The findings have shown that adolescents prefer the drama and films channels. Mustafa (2006) has identified the level of the interest of Arab adolescents in foreign drama and determined their perceptions towards the ethics of the context presented in the drama while emphasizing on the level of the awareness of the Arab youth of their actual reality and the values presented in these dramas. Bakir (2005) has revealed the patterns of viewing and its motivations and satisfaction in the Arab adolescents. The findings have indicated that the drama presented social issues directly and that the adolescents prefer such dramas as a remedy for social problems.

3.3 The Game of Thrones

Game of Thrones is a fantasy show focused on the plots of a song: Ice and Fire. Its setting is the fictional seven Kingdoms of Westeros and the Essos world. The series chronicles violent dynasty struggle of the noble families of the Iron Throne, while other family members fight for independence from the Iron Throne. The final seasons marks the conclusion of the two main conflicts of the series: The Great Battle against the Dead Army and the Last Fight for the Iron Throne. Game of Thrones is not a traditional modern fiction, with more focus on combat and diplomatic intrigue and less attention on magic and sorcery (Croidhe áin, 2020). Game of Thrones was aired on the TV screen by HBO in 2011 (Tan, 2018).

Game of Thrones is one of the most popular American TV series around the world. It is very popular in a large number of audiences, especially in teenagers and young adults. According to the report published by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) '[T]he show is so enormously popular that millions will watch it for the first, second or third time and dozens of blogs and podcasts will continue to discuss and review the seven seasons for the rest of 2018.' (English 2018: P1). Recently, the popularity of this series has explicitly increased to exceed millions of viewers as confirmed by the Watson, "Game of Thrones has taken the world by storm and ends its run as one of the most popular television shows of all time". The show's seventh season, regularly drew in over 10 million viewers to HBO, with millions more watching the episodes illegally online across the world' (2019: P1).

However, for the other side of world, according to the report of the Arab News Arabic audiences, the Game of Thrones has become significantly popular in the Arabic audiences; for example, Mohammed Mansour, an Egyptian student, was obsessed to watch this American TV drama that he said '[The final episode had some emotional and surprising scenes, so it kept me hooked.]' (Kadabashy, 2019: P3). In fact, this American TV drama has spread some negative social values; for example, it highlighted the sexual content which is unacceptable in Saudi society. Even though, the Saudi young males still watch; it can be justified for doing this study after presenting this literature review, and the popularity of this series among Saudi male.

It became evident that studying American drama series was significantly beneficial to this study in terms of content; given that previous studies have addressed the contents of the dubbed series. The findings of the previous studies revealed that the dubbed series are extremely popular in viewers.

3.4 Hypothesis Development

Based on the above discussion, following hypothesis have been proposed.

H1: There is a relationship between age and hours of watching

H2: There is a relationship between hours of watching and Education

H3: There is a relationship between education and opinions towards the series

4. Method

4.1 Study Design

A descriptive, correlational study design was applied to obtain scientific findings, and the study design intended to investigate the characteristics of a particular group or a specified position. A survey method was selected, which is a systematic scientific effort for collecting data, information, and descriptions of a phenomenon. It is implemented to accomplish any of the following objects: to develop the fundamental base of data and information needed in a specific field, to identify the authenticity of current circumstances by comparing the collected information, to determine the methods and practices for treating a specific issue and to use this comprehensive data in establishing policies and drawing up plans based on knowledge of elements of a situation.

4.2 Participant Characteristics

The study population consisted of 63 Saudi male adolescents selected on the basis of different social, cultural, and economic levels. The age of participant ranged between 15 to 25 years and all of them had watched the Game of Thrones.

4.3 Study Sample and Data Collection Process

The sample of this study included 220 students of college of communication and media sciences. These students participated to fill-in the questionnaire. Data in this study was collected through an online survey and printed questionnaires were sent to individuals in-person. The objective of using survey method was to determine the emotions and insights of the participants related to the topic. Since participants were easily accessible online, the survey approach was easy for the researchers as it mitigates the use of manual approaches, duplication of copies, and downloading of software.

A combination of personal copies and online surveys, both consisting of the similar questions were distributed to male adolescents. The questionnaire comprised both structured and unstructured questions due to their favorable benefits. One of the major advantages of using structured questions is that they show increased response rate and support participants in providing exact information. In addition, the structured questions are easy for investigating and coding, making it easy for the researchers to analyze the responses. On the contrary, unstructured questions are open-ended and make participants provide their answers openly. In return, only 63 questionnaires received with complete responses out of 220 questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 28.63%. Participants were required to think critically due to the nature of questions, resulting in the low response rate of unstructured questions in comparison to that obtained for structured questions.

4.4 Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was sent to a group of referees after it was completed for checking its validity and reliability. The questionnaire was, subsequently amended on the basis of their comments and confirmation of the reliability of their application. A pilot test was undertaken on a sample of 30 male participants to establish the validity of the tool for developing the clarity of the questions and the level of understanding of these questions. As such, the tools or measures are valid in case the difference in findings is simple or the correlation increases between the findings of the two tests. The reliability of the questionnaire was found to be ranging between 0.971 and 0.981, which is a better value and indicative of the validity of the tool.

4.5 Data Analysis

The researcher decoded the questionnaire responses, after collecting the requested data. The data was also edited for avoiding errors and maintaining the quality of the data collected. The researcher used descriptive statistics, figures, and tables for investigating the findings and for clarifying the data. Means and frequencies were used to present the responses, while Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between the variables. All the tests were performed using SPSS version 25.0. The significance value was set at 0.05.

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

63 male adolescents living in Saudi Arabia have completed the questionnaire (Table 1). Out of 63 participants, 52.4% participants were 22-25 years old, followed by 19-21 years (25.4%). 44 participants received private education, followed by international education (22.2%) and government education (7.9%). Majority of the participants were in university (73%), followed by middle school (19%) and high school (7.9%). Majority of the participants watched Game of Thrones 2-3 hours a day (74.6%). Participants mostly watched the series on websites and OSN.

Most of the respondents gave multiple reasons for watching the series (69,8%); for instance, “for fun” (17.5%), “to spend spare time” (4.8%), “for fun and to spend spare time” (3.1%), “for fun and practicing the English language” (3.2%), and “for spending spare time and practicing the English language” (1.6%) (Table 2).

Table 3 shows responses towards the behavioral development of male participants after watching the Game of Thrones. Majority of the participants indicated that they watched the series to know “what is shown in the series” (M = 3.397), “I remember the names of the actors and actresses” (M = 3.286), “I envision myself as the hero in the series” (M = 3.191), “I talk to my friends about the series frequently” (M = 3.095), and “I want to know personal information about actresses and actors” (M = 3.048).

Most of the respondents (36.5) answered that the emotional relationships, love relationship associated with sex, fantasy themes and topics related to revenge and violence were the commonest subjects covered in Game of Thrones (Table 4).

Table 1. Demographics

		Percent	Frequency
Age	15-18 years	22.2%	14
	19-21 years	25.4%	16
	22-25 years	52.4%	33
Type of education	Government Education	7.9%	5
	Private Education	69.8%	44
	International	22.2%	14
Level of education	Middle school	19%	12
	High school	7.9%	5
	University stage	73%	46
How many hours per day do you watch <i>Game of Thrones</i> ?	Less than an hour	14.3%	9
	2-3 hours	74.6%	47
	Less than 4 hours	11.1%	7
Which channel is used for watching <i>Game of Thrones</i> ?	OSN	42.9%	27
	Netflix	7.9%	5
	Joy TV	1.6%	1
Who do you watch mostly with <i>Game of Thrones</i> drama?	Television	4.8%	3
	Websites and other	42.9%	27
	With Friends	19%	12
Currently, with the Corona pandemic, has your view of <i>Game of Thrones</i> increased?	Alone	81%	51
	Yes	63%	40
	No	37%	23

Table 2. Reasons for Watching *Game of Thrones*

Items	Frequency	Percent
For fun	11	17.5%
To spend spare time	3	4.8%
For handsome actresses and their beauty	0	0%
To learn about the culture of American society	0	0%
Because everyone from my generation watches it	0	0%
To practice the English language	0	0%
For fun and to spend spare time	2	3.1%
To spend spare time and to practice the English language	1	1.6%
For fun and to practice the English language	2	3.2%
Most of the above	44	69.8%

Table 3. Behavioral Development after watching *Game of Thrones*

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Result
I learned the unacceptable (vulgar) words from watching the series	2.286	0.869	Sometimes
I want to belong to American culture.	2.222	0.832	Sometimes
I speak with my friends in English.	3.064	1.190	Often
I talk to my friends about the series frequently.	3.095	1.174	Often
I'd love to bring back some intimate viewing shots.	2.857	1.330	Often
I see that what is shown in the series can happen.	3.397	1.115	Always
I remember the names of the actors and actresses.	3.286	1.170	Always
I want to know personal information about actresses and actors.	3.048	1.197	Often
I envision myself as the hero in the series.	3.191	1.176	Often

Table 4. Subjects covered in Game of Thrones

Items	Frequency	Percent
Emotional relationships, love relationship associated with sex, fantasy themes and topics related to revenge and violence	23	36.5%
Romantic relationships, love relationship associated with sex, fictional themes, a struggle between good and evil, and topics related to revenge and violence.	22	34.9%
Less than above	18	28.6%

5.2 Hypotheses Testing

This section presents hypothesis testing based on Pearson correlation analysis to test the following hypotheses. It was observed that there was statistically significant but negative relationship between age and hours of watching the series, and between hours of watching the series and education (Table 5). From Table 6, the relationship of education was statistically significant with the first (I learned the unacceptable (vulgar) words from watching the series) and second opinion (I want to belong to American culture). No statistically significant relationship was revealed between education and rest of the items.

Table 5. Correlation between Age, Education, and Hours Watching the Series

		Age	Education
Hours	Correlation Coefficient	-.343**	.249*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.049
	N	63	63

Table 6. Correlation between Opinion and Education

Opinions on the series	Items	Coefficient (P-value)
1	I learned the unacceptable (vulgar) words from watching the series	-0.381 (0.002)
2	I want to belong to American culture.	-0.318 (0.011)
3	I speak with my friends in English.	0.018 (0.886)
4	I talk to my friends about the series frequently.	0.113 (0.380)
5	I'd love to bring back some intimate viewing shots.	0.104 (0.416)
6	I see that what is shown in the series can happen.	0.091 (0.479)
7	I see that what is shown in the series can happen.	0.067 (0.604)
8	I remember the names of the actors and actresses.	0.077 (0.548)
9	I want to know personal information about actresses and actors.	0.054 (0.673)
10	I envision myself as the hero in the series.	0.099 (0.440)

6. Discussion

Most of the respondents watched "Game of Thrones" drama for 2-3 hours per day using websites and OSN channel. Approximately 81% participants had watched "Game of Thrones" drama alone and during Corona virus pandemic (63%). Learning vulgar words and American culture were some of the reasons for watching the series. After watching the series, participants were often able to speak with their friends in English and also about the series. Hypotheses testing confirmed the relationship between ages, education, hours of watching series, and opinions and, therefore, H1 and H2 were accepted completely, and H3 was accepted partially.

Most of the participants were educated in private schools and they put a great emphasis on learning English in comparison with the participants who were educated in government schools. According to the cultivation theory perspective, there were fewer Saudi males watching this American drama; this means they are not impacted negatively after watching Game of Thrones. This result shows that Saudi students (69.8%) spend spare time in searching beauty in actors, learning American culture, practicing English language, and watching the sex scenes.

From the cultural identity perceptive, participants are not impacted in negative way by watching the Game of Thrones; they only admire the actors, learn an American culture, and enjoy visual images. In other words, the elements of their cultural identity such as religion, language and social values are not negatively impacted by viewing the Game of Thrones. They only watched to have fun and entertainments as most of the respondents (63%) answered that they had been watching drama for more time during Corona pandemic.

On the other hand, this result does not agree with the result of the question of how they watch the Game of Thrones as majority of the respondents (81%) had been watching it “alone” and only a few of them watched it with friends. None of participants preferred to watched it with their family because this American TV dramas contained adult scenes.

Western scholars are engaged in a raging debate regarding the intensive sexuality, nudity and violence against women depicted in the Game of Thrones series as Larsson said ‘Game of Thrones contains more sex and nudity’ (2016: P17). Hudson also wrote that ‘Game of Thrones has been scrutinized for its graphic depictions of nudity, sex, and violence against women. Focusing on issues such as gender stereotypes, feminism, and graphic depictions of rape,’ (2020: P20). To make matter worse, it depicts incestuous relationship between siblings which is explicitly unacceptable to all civilized humans as it is a forbidden relationship. Additionally, vulgar language is frequently used in the series. It seems that the Game of Thrones do not follow any censorship criteria.

To conclude our discussion, many people are unable to watch Game of Thrones in different channels on account of these ethical issue even though others could watch it in illegal ways. Portraying the sexual conduct, violence and women nudity are forbidden in Islam and unacceptable for Saudi culture and society as it might corrupt the morality and Islamic identity of young Saudis.

Nevertheless, this study was successful in establishing different factors that encourage male adolescents to watch American drama series. In addition, this study has found different insights about the matter such as the role that language and accent plays in encouraging the male adolescents of Saudi Arabia to watch the drama series. Moreover, this study has identified the lack of Saudi cinematic content and for the same reason, the local population feels deprived and opts to resort to international media.

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