

**Subscription Video-on-Demand in Everyday Life: A Qualitative Exploration of Saudi  
Audiences' Interpretive Repertoires**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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September 2025

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## Abstract

This study explores how younger Saudi audiences use global Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) in everyday life, focusing on how platforms and their content are negotiated within a complex, conservative cultural context. While there are growing international calls for audience-centred research into SVOD viewing practices, this gap is particularly evident in Saudi Arabia, where rapid sociocultural change and legal reforms have facilitated the rise of global streaming platforms offering content often censored in local media. This study aims to understand how younger Saudi audiences engage with SVOD platforms and how they construct and negotiate meanings from such practices. The research focused on Saudi audiences aged between 25 and 35 years old from diverse demographic backgrounds in the city of Riyadh. Grounded in an interpretive qualitative paradigm informed by scholarship on everyday life and reception studies, this thesis emphasises audiences' viewing practices and meaning-making as culturally rooted and contextually situated. Data were collected through participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Interpretive repertoires were used as the primary analytical tool to identify patterns in how participants talked about their engagement with, made sense of, and navigated their relationship with platforms. Findings revealed that audiences selectively appropriated platforms and their content, navigating these through both pleasures and tensions. Topics such as women's independence, empowerment, sexual content, and LGBT representation – often underrepresented in Saudi and Arab media – emerged as complex sites of discourse. Participants selectively embraced elements they perceived as beneficial to their personal lives or to broader social progress, while affirming core cultural values in opposition to those they viewed as detrimental. The study contributes to multiple fields of scholarship by offering a contextually grounded, audience-centred perspective on SVOD engagement in the Global South, providing insights for researchers and policymakers concerned with cultural negotiation, audience agency, and everyday SVOD use.

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## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank all the participants in this research whose time, experiences, and perspectives formed the foundation of this study. Without their participation, this thesis would not have been possible.

I am also grateful to the Saudi Cultural Bureau in the UK for their financial support, without which this invaluable cultural and educational experience would not have happened.

I also extend my gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Mark Rimmer and Dr Keith Johnston, who have been an ideal supervisory team. Despite the waves of redundancies at UEA, they always went the extra mile to remain professional, supportive, and present. I learnt so much from them, and I will always be grateful for their patience, generosity, and guidance.

This thesis is written in English, a language that a decade ago was just a series of random and difficult codes that I could not understand until I met Paige Hammer, one of the most gifted language educators I have ever met. I am deeply and forever thankful to her for making such a complicated language accessible to me.

Throughout my research journey, I was fortunate to be surrounded by people whose unwavering support made a difference in countless ways. My deepest gratitude goes to my friends from back home and here in the UK. Among them, my dearest Henry Morgan, who stood by me through some of the toughest times. He was both my family and my cultural eye in Norwich, and one of the greatest – perhaps the greatest – gifts of my time in the UK, on so many personal, social, cultural, and intellectual levels.

Last but not least, my sincerest apologies go to those I grew distant from during my time in the UK. In particular, I think of my late aunt Seham and her husband Ibrahim, who both passed away during my journey. I deeply regret not being there with them in their final days. Their absence has left a lasting void.

Finally, to my family: I know this path took me far from home for longer than I ever intended. Thank you for your patience and love, your unwavering support made this journey possible. This thesis is dedicated to my parents. Love you both!

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## 1. Introduction

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*Abdullah was fourteen when his father hit him for the first time over a movie. It was not pornography, nor violence, nor anything that broke the law. The movie was just from somewhere else. A different language. A different culture. But in that house, it was enough to bring fear, shame, and a stinging red mark across his cheek. He never stopped watching, though. He just got better at hiding it. Late at night, volume low and screen dim: foreign movies became something dangerous and sacred – whispers of another world in a life tightly held by traditions, religion, and the weight of expectations.*

*A decade later, many things had changed. Foreign stories no longer needed to be smuggled in. They arrived legally, uncensored, and played in 4K across many Saudi houses through Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+. With them came things that had always been kept out: kisses, queerness, rebellion, messy lives lived in the outside world. What was once hidden under schoolbooks, mattresses, and in hard drives was now normal – a holy part of the dinner routine.*

*But Abdullah's fear did not disappear. It just changed shape. Because for him, and many other young Saudis, watching is no longer the crime. It is what the watching awakens, and what it challenges, that still feels dangerous. This danger, sometimes, shows in behaviour: Abdullah may glance over his shoulder – not for fear of his parents, but because his partner might see too much, and shut it all down.*

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This preamble is drawn from a real participant's story, shared during our interview. He recounted being physically punished by his father as a teenager for owning a foreign DVD, and later, as an adult, having his Netflix subscription cancelled by his wife due to concerns over the morality of the content available on the platform. I offer it at the outset of this thesis to give readers a glimpse into the kinds of historical and current tensions that have shaped, and continue to shape, young Saudis' relationship with global media.

This study explores how younger Saudi audiences – those aged between 25 to 35 – engage with global subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms in everyday life, and how this engagement unfolds within a rapidly changing social and cultural environment that has long regulated the moral boundaries of media consumption. As suggested in the preamble, these global platforms have not only become an important media option in Saudi Arabia, but also mark a significant shift in how content is accessed globally: legally, uncensored, and in ways increasingly visible within everyday domestic and beyond domestic spaces. This shift represents not only a change in content, but also in how cultural boundaries are experienced, negotiated, and lived through everyday practices of media consumption. In this way, global platforms become sites where deeply held Saudi social and cultural values, norms, and narratives are subtly brought into conversation, tension, and contradiction – often through how content is watched, made sense of, shared, discussed, or avoided within everyday routines, family settings, and social conversations. This is especially important in light of ongoing cultural changes in Saudi Arabia, where negotiation over gender, identity, and modernity intersects after decades of heightened social and religious conservatism.

However, despite this complex context and the widespread popularity of global platforms in Saudi Arabia, existing scholarship on Saudi audiences remains limited – often relying on

quantitative and deterministic approaches that overlook the lived, interpretive, and everyday aspects of engagement (e.g., Alardawi et al., 2021; Alghamdi & Bajnaid, 2019; Azazi, 2019; Mansour & Al-Dhobaiban, 2022). Building on these observations, and in response to international calls for research into audiences' viewing practices (Livingstone, 2019; Lotz et al., 2022; Turner, 2019, 2021) and meaning-making (Lotz, 2025; Schröder, 2019; Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019, 2021), this qualitative study explores how younger Saudi audiences engage with global SVOD platforms in their daily lives. At its heart, this research is concerned with both meaning-making and everyday viewing practices: how people watch, what they choose to watch, with whom they watch, and how they navigate the pleasures, tensions, and contradictions that emerge when global content enters a conservative, rapidly changing society.

To further understand why this focus matters, and how it came to shape the study, the following sections of this chapter will take a few steps back to lay out the wider context in which this research is situated. The first section will engage with the sociocultural tensions and ongoing changes that have taken place over the past three decades in Saudi society. Organised chronologically, this section is important not merely in introducing background to Saudi society but also in pointing out the cultural environment in which my participants' generation came of age – from childhood to adulthood. The second section will highlight the nature of the Saudi and Arab media landscape, with a focus on longstanding issues around gender, morality, cultural sensitivities, and content regulation, and how these dynamics shaped the nature of the content that Saudi audiences have traditionally engaged with. This section will provide essential context for grasping the significance of the advent of global SVODs in Saudi Arabia and the shift brought about by these platforms. The third section will shift the focus to global SVODs themselves, outlining how these platforms became part of

popular culture, with increasing adoption that made Saudi Arabia the largest SVOD market in the region. This section will also explore the complexity surrounding these platforms in the country – a complexity that has introduced new narratives, pleasures, and tensions, sparking public debate, boycotting campaigns, and broader cultural unease in Saudi Arabia and the wider Arab world.

Together, these three sections and contextual layers are not just background details but are central to understanding why this study takes the approach it does. From there, and once these broader interconnected contexts are established, this chapter will introduce the research aims and questions, which emerge directly from the broader preceding context. Following that, the chapter will conclude by providing the overall structure of the thesis.

### **1.1 Saudi Sociocultural Change: The Struggle to Modernity**

Since the late 1990s, scholars have consistently described Saudi Arabia as a society in rapid sociocultural transformation (e.g., Al-Ghathami, 2005, 2015; Kraidy, 2012; Long, 1997).

This pace of constant change is remarkable given the country's historically conservative and insular position. David Long<sup>1</sup> (1997) argued that many outside observers overlook the fact that Saudi Arabia transitioned from a pre-industrial tribal society to an oil-driven modern state within just a few decades during the latter half of the twentieth century – without experiencing colonisation or the gradual institutional changes that characterised much of the modern world's development. This rapid transition created profound tensions, resulting in a society where swift modernisation coexists – both harmoniously and uneasily – with strong

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<sup>1</sup> David Long served in the US Foreign Service for 30 years, during which he lived in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. His field experience in the region led to several important publications on Saudi Arabia – written largely for, and from, a Western perspective (e.g., Long, 1976, 1986, 1990, 2005).

adherence to religion, traditions, and tribal values, reflecting the complex nature of change within the Kingdom (Long, 1997). Prominent Saudi cultural critic Abdullah Al-Ghathami offered compelling cultural readings of the story of Saudi modernity, focusing, among many aspects, on the gap between the material modernity brought by oil wealth and cultural and intellectual modernity. Writing in the early 2000s, Al-Ghathami described Saudi modernity as a state of “socio-cultural schizophrenia” – a fractured condition in which the material signs of modernity coexist uneasily with traditional norms and an unresolved fear and suspicion of cultural erosion (Al-Ghathami, 2005, p. 172; also see Kraidy, 2012, p. 238). The oil boom of the 1970s that Long (1997) praised for advancing and transforming Saudi society was criticised by Al-Ghathami (2005), who argued that it hindered the country’s gradual organic development. This criticism focused particularly on the reliance on imported means, labour, and expertise to drive progress in order to keep pace with the world – without recognising that sustainable development should also cultivate local minds and skills. Consequently, Saudi modernity, for Al-Ghathami (2005), became a modernity of appearance: an imported modernity that is not indigenous and therefore continually clashes with its deep conservatism and cultural reality.

Al-Ghathami’s (2005) work was as controversial in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world as his book, *Sin and Excommunication: From Structuralism to Deconstructionism* (1985), which, as Kraidy put it, “triggered an impassioned culture war” within Saudi society (Kraidy, 2012, p. 250; also see Lacroix, 2011). The culture war that Kraidy and Lacroix referred to is central to

the story of Saudi cultural transformations, in which the Saudi, British-educated Abdullah Al-Ghathami played a central intellectual role<sup>2</sup>.

When scholars write about Saudi cultural transformations, they refer to the notion of detaching from the extreme *Sahwa* conservative period that characterised Saudi society between the 1970s and the 1990s, leaving an enduring influence that persists to this day<sup>3</sup>. *Sahwa* can be translated into English as “woke” or “awakening,” though the definition of the term remains highly debated in the Arab cultural arena. In the West, however, the most prominent and frequently cited work – by French orientalist scholar Stéphane Lacroix (2011) – defines *Sahwa* as an Islamic activist movement that emerged when members of the Muslim Brotherhood fled persecution from the socialist regime in Egypt and sought refuge in Saudi Arabia. These members went on to work in Saudi universities, among other institutions, where their political activism merged with local religious conservative principles, sparking a period of heightened political-religious conservatism in Saudi history. During this period, the religious conservatives, driven by radical youth-led political-religious activism, substantially dominated the cultural and political arena. This dominance led to internal political and sociocultural struggles, culminating in the siege of the Grand Mosque of Mecca by youth seeking to establish an Islamic state, which led to hundreds of casualties in 1979. This gave

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Ghathami’s (2005) work was published in Arabic, yet select important segments of the book have been translated into English and analysed by Kraidy (2012). Other prominent scholars, such as Ayish, have also contributed to translating additional publications (e.g. Al-Ghathami, 2012). While Al-Ghathami is an English speaker, his publications are in Arabic, since his intellectual conflicts – and his broader cultural project – concern Saudis and Arabs (see Kraidy, 2012; Sabry, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Participants of this research were born between 1987 and 1997, all of whom lived during the *Sahwa* period, whether as children or early teens.

Sahwa popularity beyond Saudi Arabia – in countries such as Egypt, Kuwait, and other Arab states – yet its influence remained most profound within Saudi society<sup>4</sup>.

During the Sahwa period, the advent of satellite television at the end of the 1980s faced strong backlash, as it was seen as a path to moral and religious corruption. Figures of the Sahwa movement issued religious decrees strictly banning the possession, advertisement, sale, or purchase of satellite receivers (Al-Harhi, 2024). Other decrees even prohibited selling real estate to individuals intending to install satellite dishes, and reports documented people using rifles to destroy rooftop dishes (Al-Harhi, 2024). The street in Riyadh that once housed satellite stores was dubbed – and is still commonly referred to as – “Satan’s Street” or “Devil’s Street” (Al-Harhi, 2024). It should be noted, however, that the conflict and discourse around satellite TV were not primarily concerned with global or Western media content, which was arguably limited at the time, but rather with Arab channels – such as the Lebanese LBC and MTV – which were highly controversial for their liberal attitudes towards clothing, women, and, most notably, their use of mixed-gender settings (see Kraidy, 2009a; 2009b).

Although heightened concerns and pushback against satellite television led to a brief ban on the sale of satellite receivers in the early 1990s, the ban was not strictly enforced (Kraidy, 2002). Some scholars therefore interpreted this ban as a political gesture used to briefly silence the radical conservative voices at the time (see Sakr, 2001, pp. 20-21). Nonetheless, this ban, even if not strictly enforced, reflected the intense conservative cultural atmosphere, in which progressive or opposing views were not only marginalised but often silenced altogether. For Al-Ghathami (2005), a key factor holding back cultural development in Saudi

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<sup>4</sup> For more detailed background information, see Lacroix (2011) and Al-Ghathami (2005; 2015).

Arabia during that period was the absence of a counterpart to conservative views. He argued that while countries such as France and the US may suffer from a form of deep conservatism, the presence of multiple coexisting worldviews in their societies allows for dialogue and mutual accountability – whereas Saudi society was dominated by a single conservative mode and a massive crowd that suppressed alternatives and hindered progress<sup>5</sup> (see Kraidy, 2012; Lacroix, 2011). However, sensitivity toward satellite media gradually decreased throughout the 1990s. Marghalani et al. (1998) – a team of researchers that included Douglas Boyd, one of the pioneers in conducting audience research in Saudi Arabia – found both high adoption and usage of satellite TV by the end of the 1990s (also see Kraidy, 2002). Although the study offered important insights into Saudi audiences’ relationship with satellite TV and how they used it for religious and personal needs, its quantitative approach and adoption of assumptions from the Uses and Gratifications tradition failed to produce deeper insights into the broader sociocultural dynamics behind this growing pattern of adoption. Yet, when viewed within the wider context, this increasing engagement with satellite TV marked not only a shift in Saudi audiences’ relationship with media, but also hinted at broader societal changes already taking shape. These became increasingly visible in the 2000s, as the influence of the Sahwa movement declined in light of emerging political and cultural transformations.

### ***1.1.1 The Decline of Sahwa: Political and Cultural Shifts***

The rise of Saudi progressive voices and the shift toward cultivating local minds in Saudi Arabia gained significant momentum in the early 2000s, marked by the establishment of

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<sup>5</sup> Al-Ghathami was declared a non-Muslim in the 1980s by some Sahwa figures. His works were frequently framed – as reflected in Saudi intellectual and academic texts, as well as mosque sermons – as Westernised, coming from an unbeliever, a “Satan’s slave,” among other provocative labels (see Al-Ghathami, 2005, 2015; Kraidy, 2012; Lacroix, 2011).

more than 15 public universities and colleges across regional provinces. Moreover, tens of thousands of students were sent abroad each year – sponsored along with their families – to pursue university degrees in various countries around the world. Furthermore, increasing cultural tensions and conflicts over social issues amid the rise of progressive views led to the establishment of a national dialogue centre, where 70 prominent intellectuals and figures – including liberals, conservatives, women, and cultural minorities – were appointed by the King “to debate reform and suggest remedies” (The Economist, 2004, para. 4). Such debates of reform concerned issues related to identity, radicalism, women’s rights and education, among other politically and culturally sensitive topics (see Thompson, 2011). This period marked political shifts in the country, including the introduction of municipal elections (The Guardian, 2005), along with gender equality laws for political participation, which were highly controversial. For instance, a minimum 20% quota for women’s representation in the Consultative Assembly<sup>6</sup>, was announced, along with reforms granting women the right to run as candidates in elections. Such decisions were met with strong backlash, as media documented people and clerics protesting by marching to the Royal Court, demanding a meeting with the King (e.g., Reuters, 2013). These rapid political changes were reflected in the 2015 municipal elections, where 20 women won seats in a historic vote (France24, 2015) – a result that marked a shift from the “Islamist win,” (BBC News, 2005), of the first ever municipal elections held in 2005.

These educational and political developments – accelerated by the gradual return of students and their families from overseas – arguably contributed to the sociocultural shifts subsequently noted by Al-Ghathami, Kraidy and others. For instance, Al-Ghathami (2015)

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<sup>6</sup> The Saudi Consultative Assembly is a council with the authority to propose and amend laws, question government officials, and carry out other key responsibilities in the country.

discussed cultural transformations in public discourse, which he described as a shift from singularity to plurality – an era in which conservative figures “lost the crowd.” He examined changes in discourse on a range of controversial topics, from the women’s veil and the right to drive – which was illegal for women at the time – to other social issues, arguing that these shifts signalled the “post-Sahwa” era (2015, p. 117). Al-Ghathami described what he saw as the “end of the rule of suspicion,” a long-standing feature of Saudi discourse in which Saudi liberal or progressive views were often portrayed as heretical, Westernised, or conspiratorial (2015, p. 146). While the role of education and the exposure of hundreds of thousands of Saudis to various cultures overseas may have paved the way for such changes, subsequent major national and legal reforms followed in the country.

### ***1.1.2 Vision 2030 and Beyond: Political and Cultural Transformations***

In 2016, Saudi Vision 2030<sup>7</sup> was announced, introducing significant reforms in a society where 70% of the population is under the age of 30 (BBC News, 2016). Gender equality laws – ranging from the resolution of decades-long, culturally intense and radical conflicts over the right to drive, to gender anti-discrimination measures in employment and mandated equal pay – were implemented, gender segregation was substantially reduced, cinemas were reopened after 35 years of sitting idle, and music concerts were reintroduced, among numerous other legal reforms affecting various aspects of everyday life (see Fadaak & Roberts, 2019). These legal changes marked symbolic cultural and social moments that sparked intense controversies, echoing what Kraidy emphasised in 2012 about the significance of “the

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<sup>7</sup> Saudi Vision 2030 is a long-term national strategy outlining the country’s cultural, social and economic goals, with a particular focus on diversifying the economy away from its traditional dependence on oil and improving citizens’ quality of life (see Vision 2030, 2025).

symbolic event” in Saudi society. Drawing on Al-Ghathami (2005), Kraidy argued that “The intensity [of controversial events] is crucial in a country like Saudi Arabia, whose social conservatism can only be shaken by extreme outbursts of controversy” (Kraidy, 2012, p. 248). Intense societal debates that had persisted for decades – on topics such as women driving, the women’s veil, cinema, and music – began to shift focus towards cultural and social issues that were just starting to appear. These included mixed-gender environments, women’s independence, unarranged marriages and dating, amongst others. These areas of controversy reflect ongoing sociocultural changes, as young Saudis seem to embrace new lifestyles that were difficult to imagine, let alone practise, just a decade ago (see Thompson, 2021). For instance, in the small, conservative Shia towns of the eastern part of the country, Al Arabiya reports that young men and women now sit together in cafés and restaurants, engage in mixed-gender settings, listen to loud music, and smoke hookah – practices that have sparked resentment and dismay among religious conservatives in these historically isolated towns (Al Arabiya, 2023). While Kraidy (2021, p. 105) briefly engaged with the idea that young Saudis are actively embracing the ongoing cultural transformations, Thompson (2021, p. 816) pointed to the emergence of “generational fault lines” in light of the rapid pace of social change.

In writing this brief account of the story of recent cultural struggles and changes in Saudi society, I found it – much as Long (1997) did in the 90s when writing for Western readers – immensely difficult to convey the pace and nature of social transformation. Writing about such changes carries the risk of offering a portrayal that may not fully capture the complexities and nuances of the situation, especially in light of the absence of sophisticated, or at least comprehensive, intellectual and academic contributions on the topic. Legal reforms, for instance, may not translate into immediate social and cultural change, nor do

Western-style youth music events and public spaces filled with mixed-gender interactions necessarily reflect the actual cultural tensions and ambivalences in Saudi society. Certainly, social change is visible on the streets and can be felt, at least by us as young Saudis, yet it is by no means a reflection of a liberal stance on cultural views regarding issues such as gender equality, social freedoms, and, more broadly, ways of life. Nevertheless, while the Saudi intellectual arena has yet to produce sophisticated work that fully accounts for the ongoing cultural transformations<sup>8</sup> – especially after the announcement of Vision 2030 – the foregoing overview has aimed to highlight the broader cultural context shaping Saudi society today. Young Saudis – especially those who lived through the Sahwa period and its aftermath, including my research participants – have grown up amid rapid social change and cultural tensions, navigating shifting norms around tradition, modernity, and identity. The decline of conservative dominance alongside shifting political, legal, and social norms underscores the complex environment in which these cultural changes have been unfolding. Understanding this context is, then, essential for grasping the broader social transformations currently taking place in Saudi Arabia.

Having outlined the cultural context in which global SVOD platforms have emerged, I now turn to the local media landscape of Saudi Arabia. As Lotz et al. (2022) argued, attention to the specificity of the local media environment and its dynamics is crucial for understanding broader issues related to global SVOD platforms worldwide. Therefore, the following section provides a foundation for understanding the significance of the advent of global SVODs and the wider issues they raise within Saudi society.

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<sup>8</sup> In May 2025, Al-Ghathami announced a new book project; however, it had not been published at the time of writing this thesis.

## 1.2 The Saudi and pan-Arab Media Landscape

The media landscape in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world is complicated and notably unique in its nature and dynamics. To begin with, the Saudi media policy consists of 30 articles that outline the country's ideological and regulatory framework for media (Ministry of Media, 2024). These articles generally address and emphasise the importance of adhering to Islamic teachings, as well as Saudi and Arab traditions, values, and norms (Ministry of Media, 2024; see also Alotaibi, 2019, pp. 42-44). "Islam" is mentioned repeatedly throughout the policy, underscoring not only the central role of religion in Saudi society, but also its significant influence on media regulation<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, media policies and regulations in other Arab countries, especially in the Gulf region, follow similarly strict laws regarding religion, values, and cultural norms (see Ali, 2019). This, historically, has resulted in Arab media being largely aligned in their offerings, avoiding cultural and political sensitivities with the aim of securing national unity and contributing to national development plans (see Khalil & Kraidy, 2009; Richter & Kozman, 2021).

Historically, major Saudi private media groups and channels such as MBC and Rotana have operated from outside the country; namely London, Rome, and more importantly, Dubai Media City. The story behind this operational decision dates back to 1991, during the cultural conflict over satellite television in Saudi Arabia, when two Saudi businessmen established the MBC Group in London, creating what is now a media empire and the largest media group in the region, targeting both Saudi and pan-Arab audiences (see Khalil & Kraidy, 2009). Since the early 2000s, major private Arab media groups and satellite channels targeting Saudi and

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, Article 1 states that all Saudi media content must adhere to and protect Islamic teachings and exclude anything that contradicts Islamic principles (Ministry of Media, 2024).

pan-Arab audiences have operated from Dubai Media City: an economic free zone with relaxed regulatory demands and numerous incentives to attract both investment and media organisations (Zayani & Khalil, 2025; also see Richter & Kozman, 2021). For Zayani and Khalil (2025), this kind of independence and media-business-friendly environment has empowered Arab media to grow, moving away from state control – though it has also become both an asset and a liability, as it may pose cultural and political challenges (also see Khalil & Kraidy, 2009; Richter & Kozman, 2021).

Saudi audiences' high uptake of satellite television in the early 2000s changed the dynamics of the media landscape in the Arab world. The significant difference in purchasing power between Saudis and Arabs from other countries, along with Saudi Arabia's large population compared to the smaller, wealthier Gulf nations, made Saudis the primary target of satellite channels seeking to attract advertisers, as even local Lebanese channels began offering Saudi programming in 2002 (Kraidy, 2009a). This, at least partly, resulted in pan-Arab media becoming a triangle in which three countries play central roles in funding, production, distribution, and consumption. These countries are: Saudi Arabia, with its audiences that attract advertisers; Egypt, as the cinema hub of the region; and Lebanon, with its creative media industry and arguably liberal values that frequently spark controversy in the Arab world<sup>10</sup> (see Khalil & Kraidy, 2009; Kraidy, 2009a). Pan-Arab media are the most prominent type of available media in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world, operating from free zones and aiming to reach a large segment of the 300 million Arabic speakers. According to Kraidy (2009a, p. 23), there were more than 450 pan-Arab satellite TV channels in 2009, providing a

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<sup>10</sup> Lebanon has historically been known for its cultural liberalism in the Arab world – at least until the rise of religious fundamentalism there over the past decade.

wide range of content – from religious programming to entertainment and news. While there are international channels that target pan-Arab audiences, they are primarily focused on political news and are owned or funded by governments such as the UK, China, the US, Russia, France, and other European nations. However, the Saudi-owned pan-Arab MBC channels remain the most popular choice for entertainment in the region, while the news sector is divided between the Qatari-owned Al Jazeera and the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya.

As suggested in the foregoing broad overview of regional media regulation, Arab media content is traditionally aligned with Arab norms. Though some channels display Hollywood movies and series, they are censored – as is all Arab media content – in accordance with both written and unwritten laws (see Khalil & Kraidy, 2009; Richter & Kozman, 2021). Generally, Arab media content is “culturally contentious” (Khalil, 2024, p. 6). This contentiousness is most visibly seen in public backlashes and parliamentary debates, particularly against both Lebanese female pop stars and Arab reality TV shows. On these issues, Kraidy has produced several sophisticated works that delve into questions of gender, religion, and politics (e.g., Kraidy, 2009a). The music videos of Lebanese female pop stars are often morally controversial. For instance, Haifa Wehbe “recurrently provokes parliamentary debates and moral campaigns throughout the Arab world” over perceptions of her suggestive sexual hints (Kraidy, 2009a, p. 80). The video clips of female pop stars such as Haifa Wehbe and Nancy Ajram, among others, have frequently faced challenges, including bans from many Arab channels due to moral issues, claims, and public complaints. With regard to Arab reality shows, mixed-gender settings have provoked moral campaigns for more than a decade across the Arab world. The Arab version of *Star Academy*, for example, sparked protests in many Arab countries over its perceived moral decay, and Saudi religious figures issued religious decrees forbidding the viewing of such shows (Jaafar, 2008; Kraidy, 2009b). Another

example is the Arab version of *Big Brother*, which the Saudi MBC decided to cancel after only a week due to protests, public outcry, and heated debates that even reached the Bahraini parliament (Kraidy, 2009a). Here the focus was upon issues of morality and mixed-gender interaction, as contestants lived together in one house. These reality TV shows did not include kissing, sexual hints, or physical contact, and to avoid religious sensitivities, *Big Brother* even featured separate prayer rooms, according to Kraidy (2009a). However, the very concept of mixed sexes living together was viewed by many conservative religious and political figures and commentators as a path to moral decline – a corrupting influence that threatened the younger generation in the Arab world.

Hence, historically, one of the main challenges for Arab media producers – especially in regard to entertainment – has been the complexity of navigating cultural sensitivities (Kraidy, 2009a; also see Haddad, 2023; Richter & Kozman, 2021). This was pointed out by Kraidy, who met a number of MBC managers and noted that they have to take immensely difficult measures in order not to risk damaging the brand image (Kraidy, 2009a). The role of cultural sensitivities is fundamental and central in Arab media production, as channels often cannot find advertisers willing to take even slight risks (Kraidy, 2009a). As a result, the space for creativity in Arab media is limited, especially for screenwriters (see Haddad, 2023). This media environment has, in turn, influenced what audiences in Saudi Arabia and the wider Arab region have typically engaged with – content that have longstandingly aligned, in many ways, with Arab and Islamic norms and values.

That being said, while Saudi and pan-Arab media have long been shaped by cultural sensitivities and structural limitations, the advent of global SVOD platforms introduces a new set of dynamics. These platforms not only bring with them different production logics and

content standards but also challenge established norms and practices within the Arab media environment. The following section turns to the emergence of global SVODs and explores how they operate within – and in some cases disrupt – the cultural, institutional, and regulatory frameworks discussed so far.

### 1.3 The Advent of Global SVODs

Within the contentious and complex Saudi and Arab media and cultural landscape, Netflix entered the region's market in 2016, rapidly becoming part of popular culture in the Kingdom. Within two years of its launch, the platform's influence was evident during a major Saudi football league match, where home fans unveiled a *La Casa de Papel*<sup>11</sup>-themed tifo<sup>12</sup> and entrance display (Arab News, 2018). The choice of theme was not random, as the team's supporters often positioned their team as a victim of corruption, mirroring the series' narrative of resistance. Saudi media picked up on the event, sparking local discussion about both the show and Netflix. Within two months, Netflix capitalised on the story by filming a group of Saudi fans in the same city singing *Bella Ciao*<sup>13</sup>, and then shared it on YouTube (Arab News, 2018). In the next season of *La Casa de Papel*, a scene referenced the Saudi tifo, with an actor stating that people were supporting their resistance mission and demonstrating against corruption from Brazil to Saudi Arabia. Within these initial two years of its presence, Netflix positioned itself in Saudi Arabia by signing a number of

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<sup>11</sup> *La Casa de Papel / Money Heist* (Pina et al., 2017-2021).

<sup>12</sup> Tifo is a large banner or coordinated visual display held by football fans before, during or after a match to show support for their club or certain players.

<sup>13</sup> *Bella Ciao* is a traditional Italian protest song that gained significant international popularity through its use in *La Casa de Papel* (see Olivier, 2021).

commissioned content deals, along with various promotional campaigns aimed at appealing to the main target of Arab satellite and media advertisers.

By 2019, it was estimated that more than half of Netflix subscribers in the Middle East and North Africa were Saudis (Digital TV Research, 2019, as cited in Khalil & Zayani, 2021, p. 208). Recognising the opportunity, Amazon entered the Saudi market in 2020 after acquiring the largest Arab online shopping company, Souq (Paracha, 2020). This allowed Souq's 25 million customers to use their existing login details and benefits to access Amazon's services. The high purchasing power of Saudis, along with the available high-end digital infrastructure, was appealing to global companies, as Apple TV+, Disney+, and other major global SVODs were all available in the country by 2022.

Generally, as Khalil (2024, p. 5) noted, there is a lack of reliable data around Arab audiences and SVODs. However, official Saudi reports showed increasing levels of SVOD adoption and consumption, with nearly 40% of the population claiming to have a Netflix account in 2020 (The Communications, Space & Technology Commission, 2021; also see Singh, 2021). Moreover, government annual reports on internet penetration from 2020 to 2023 positioned Netflix among the top ten highest data consumption apps/websites in the country, while Amazon ranked in the top ten most visited; yet there were no details about subscriber numbers or any available data on other platforms (The Communications, Space & Technology Commission, 2024). In the absence of detailed data, Arab scholars use other indicators that point to the popularity of online videos and digital consumption in the country. For instance, Saudi internet penetration has consistently remained above 97% from 2020 to 2023 (The Communications, Space & Technology Commission, 2024). According to market research, Saudis have the highest YouTube penetration per capita worldwide at 95.8% (Ceci,

2025b) and also lead globally in TikTok usage, with 88% of the population using the app (Harper, 2023; also see Ceci, 2025a; Zayani & Khalil, 2025). The digital turn of Saudis, and Arab societies more broadly, was explored by Khalil and Zayani (2022), who noted that the satellite era was losing ground by 2015, especially among younger audiences who shifted to streaming services for various technical and cultural reasons (also see Zayani & Khalil, 2025).

### ***1.3.1 Regulatory Struggles***

Global streaming platforms marked their presence in the region with largely uncensored content, in sharp contrast with Saudi and Arab media, while simultaneously offering investment opportunities in local content and promoting it on a global scale. This posed a significant regulatory challenge in Saudi Arabia and the wider Arab world, where broader economic, political, and cultural factors are integrated into, and complicate, the long-standing dynamics of Arab media power structures.

This challenge becomes clearer when situated within the broader Saudi and pan-Arab media systems, which can be understood across three distinct layers of regulation and constraint that structure the environment in which global platforms operate. First, local Saudi media institutions and outlets are subject to direct state regulation through broadcast and publication licensing requirements, content classification systems, and laws governing media content. Compliance with such laws is overseen by the Saudi General Authority for Media Regulation, which monitors media content and receives public complaints through its official website. Breaches of local media regulations can result in administrative fines and, in some cases, licence revocation. Second, pan-Arab media outlets that operate outside the Kingdom

are not formally governed by Saudi regulations; however, they practise self-censorship regarding social and cultural sensitivities in order to function within the region, as demonstrated in the previous section. Pan-Arab media's dependence on regional advertisers, market access, and ownership networks tied to ruling elites (see Kraidy, 2009a) generates continuous and systematic self-censorship (also see Khalil & Kraidy, 2009). Moreover, while many pan-Arab outlets operate from cities such as Dubai, Doha, or Cairo, they remain subject to the legal frameworks of those states, which do not differ markedly from Saudi regulatory approaches, resulting in media content that aligns with Arab and Islamic values. The third layer is where global SVODs can be located. Given their American and European headquarters, these platforms fall outside both Saudi and wider Arab territorial jurisdictions (Khalil & Zayani, 2021). In contrast to pan-Arab media, which are constrained by regional economic dependency, global platforms are subscriber-funded and operate on a far larger scale, with the Arab market remaining relatively small compared to Europe and North America. These jurisdictional limitations, along with the limited bargaining power of Saudi and Arab states, have constrained regulatory attempts – an issue discussed by scholars examining the regulatory struggles faced by the Global South in relation to global SVODs (see Lobato, 2019; Ramasoota & Kitikamdhorn, 2021). Nevertheless, global platforms remain vulnerable to pressure from multiple directions in Saudi Arabia, including governmental takedown requests and threats of legal action, as well as public outcry and coordinated campaigns led by social media users, religious commentators, public figures, and journalists. Such campaigns frequently call for content removal or platform boycotts on moral, cultural, or political grounds, as will be detailed in the next section. These regulatory layers create a fragmented and complex environment in which global platforms must continuously negotiate their presence in Saudi Arabia and the broader Arab world.

One of the earliest and most visible manifestations of these regulatory tensions emerged shortly after Netflix entered the Saudi market. In 2018, a censorship incident occurred when Netflix removed a political title from the Saudi catalogue following pressure from the Saudi regulator. The incident went viral on a global scale, and Netflix faced a public relations crisis following its CEO Reed Hastings' comment: "We're not in the truth to power business, we're in the entertainment business" (Alexander, 2019). This incident was arguably a case in which both the state and the platform tested their limits, with both parties, as Khalil and Zayani (2021) argued, showing flexibility in accommodating and understanding their interests. Nevertheless, to date, this remains the only publicly known censorship incident since the advent of global SVODs in Saudi Arabia, and Netflix has continued to release politically sensitive titles – e.g., *Aadujeevitham: The Goat Life*<sup>14</sup> – without either censorship or public comment from local authorities. Therefore, Kraidy (2021, p. 104) argued that global platforms – using Netflix as an example – pose a challenge to the Saudi state and its "official narratives." This challenge extends beyond political figures or government positions to deeper issues such as the representation of cultural values, gender equality, freedom, and other socially, culturally, and politically complicated principles.

Yet despite such concerns, streaming platforms today remain accessible across Saudi Arabia and in most Arab states. Recent work by Zayani and Khalil (2025) provides important insights regarding the lack of legal clarity surrounding digital media in the Arab world, where the complexity of economic benefits intersects with political and cultural concerns. Although Zayani and Khalil (2025) did not engage specifically with the case of Saudi Arabia, their broader observations about the region are applicable to the Saudi context. For instance, in 2024 alone, Netflix featured a politically charged title about the state of immigrant rights in

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<sup>14</sup> *Aadujeevitham: The Goat Life* (Blessy, 2024).

Saudi Arabia, *The Goat Life*, but also promoted the country's profile as a tourist destination – locally, regionally, and internationally – through titles such as *Horizon*<sup>15</sup>, a multiple award-winning documentary highlighting Saudi wildlife, as well as a sports documentary series titled *Saudi Pro League: Kickoff*<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, Netflix also commissioned a number of Saudi films and series, and sponsored Saudi filmmakers' training and awards, contributing to the Saudi Film Commission's plans to advance the local industry in light of Vision 2030 (see Baxter-Priest, 2023; Foley, 2025; Netflix, 2024). Thus, Zayani and Khalil (2025, p. 10) argued that Arab states are in a complicated and constraining position, “reconciling the desire to promote digital adoption and boost economic growth and the need to maintain control over cultural norms and moral values.”

Apart from the jurisdictional limitations and economic growth, a major issue in regard to the regulatory struggle with platforms is the widespread piracy in the region. Despite the strict copyright laws in Gulf countries, copyright legislation in most other Arab states is either weak or non-existent (Khalil & Zayani, 2022). This has resulted in media content, including platform titles, being constantly – albeit illegally – available online for free (Khalil & Zayani, 2022). For instance, despite piracy websites being blocked across Gulf states, a study on Saudi audiences of *Game of Thrones*<sup>17</sup> showed that nearly 43% of the sample watched the series through different websites rather than OSN – the platform that holds the show's exclusive rights in the region (Alardawi, 2020). Khalil and Zayani (2022) engaged with various interpretations of the piracy culture in the region, arguing that audiences are not yet accustomed to the pay-TV culture after decades of free access to government or advertising-

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<sup>15</sup> *Horizon* (Lemaire, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> *Saudi Pro League: Kickoff* (Cole et al., 2024).

<sup>17</sup> *Game of Thrones* (Benioff et al., 2011-2019).

funded satellite channels (also see Zayani, 2015). As a result, piracy plays an important role in highlighting the limitations of regulation – both by reducing states’ leverage in negotiating with platforms and by ensuring that content remains accessible through illegal websites and IPTV services, even if platforms comply with local censorship requests or regulations.

### ***1.3.2 Cultural Tensions and Capitalising on Controversies***

Since 2016, there have been a series of ongoing moral and boycott campaigns warning against global platforms and raising concerns over perceived moral, social, and cultural issues (see Khalil, 2024; Mansour & Al-Dhobaiban, 2022). To put this in context, what platforms introduced to the region substantially exceeded the areas of contention that Arab debates about media have traditionally centred on. Explicit nudity, prolonged sexual scenes, affirmative LGBT content, and atheism – among various other new controversial issues – marked a significant departure from the boundaries of Saudi and pan-Arab media screens, where even mixed-gender settings could provoke controversy. Khalil (2024) engaged with various instances in which Netflix faced strong cultural opposition. For example, in 2022, Netflix released the original Arab film, *Perfect Strangers*<sup>18</sup>, in which the content not only featured prominent Arab actress Mona Zaki removing her underwear, but also included an affirmative gay character, boldly crossing a range of Arab cultural red lines and taboos (see Khalil, 2024). The title trended across the region, and Mona Zaki faced a harsh hate campaign for immodesty and supporting homosexuality – prompting Netflix to issue public statements of support. The movie led to several lawsuits against the platform across the region, with accusations of “promoting homosexuality”, alongside parliamentary debates aimed at banning Netflix (see Saber, 2022).

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<sup>18</sup> *Perfect Strangers* (Smayra, 2022).

The issue with this title, in terms of its perceived promoting homosexuality, was not primarily about the content being affirmative or sympathetic to the gay character, but rather that the mere existence of the character was inherently problematic. For instance, in 2011, the Saudi comedian Fayez Al-Malki played a gay role in which he heavily critiqued and mocked homosexuality and homosexuals alike. Despite the content clearly opposing homosexuality, the attempt to engage with this topic – even in a non-affirmative way – was described by Arab drama critics as “artistic suicide” (Al-Jazirah, 2011, para. 2). Indeed, the controversy and consequences of his work reached the courts. Al-Malki faced harsh criticism both online and in the media, framed as promoting homosexuality, among various accusations with no clear grounding. In 2015, Al-Malki lost a high-profile defamation case and, to this day, that role he played continues to be referenced in discussions about his personality and beliefs (Al-Shaya, 2015).

That being said, political and cultural tensions between the Arab region and the West during 2021-2022 perhaps significantly contributed to the increasing controversies regarding platforms. Specifically, LGBT rights were under political and cultural spotlight during this period due to the 2022 World Cup in the region (see European Parliament, 2022). For instance, the US and UK embassies faced significant backlash in the Gulf after flying Pride flags in Abu Dhabi, in what was described by Western media as a “historic regional first” (Turak, 2021). During Pride Month of 2022, Netflix and Disney+, among other global SVODs in Saudi Arabia, sent emails to subscribers expressing support for LGBT communities. This year marked not only the release of *Perfect Strangers* but also other controversial titles, along with Disney+ releasing children’s content that featured LGBT characters. Akin to Kraidy’s (2009a) argument that politicians and parliaments capitalise on

media controversies to gain support, platform controversies became a site of political opportunism (see Khalil, 2024), with conservative, liberal, and nationalist discourses each leveraging the debate. The intensity of the regular moral and boycotting campaigns during this period resulted in various government responses – from a collective Gulf statement, along with Egypt, warning Netflix over violations of Islamic values, to multiple parliamentary hearings and statements (see Sullivan, 2022). Of course, some have claimed that global platforms capitalise on such controversies as a marketing tool to gain more viewers and attention (e.g., Khalil, 2024). However, these controversies may reflect underlying cultural tensions or differences in values and expectations between Saudi – and more broadly, Arab – audiences and global platforms; an issue that calls for further investigation into how audiences use, perceive, and make sense of such platforms. This brings us to the core issues that this study has sought to address, which the following section will outline.

#### **1.4 Research Problem**

Despite Saudi Arabia being the largest market for SVODs in the region, little is understood about Saudi audiences' viewing practices and their wider relationship with global platforms. The three sections and contextual layers outlined above – the rapid sociocultural change, the nature and dynamics of Arab media, and the increasing popularity and controversy of global SVOD platforms – highlight the complex frame in which this study is situated. Therefore, this study has sought to understand how Saudi audiences use and make sense of global SVODs, further grounded in the need to examine how digital platforms are culturally embedded and continually adapted in the Arab world (Khalil & Zayani, 2022), particularly within a context where popular culture intersects with tensions around social change and

enduring complex gender dynamics (Kraidy, 2009a). The following section outlines the study's specific aims and research questions.

### **1.5 Research Aims and Questions**

The aims of this research are to explore how younger adult Saudi audiences use global SVOD platforms in everyday life, and how meanings are created and negotiated through such practices. The research was conducted in three nonlinear stages. The first stage explored Saudi audiences' everyday practices and use of SVOD platforms within their sociocultural contexts. The second stage examined what meanings – concepts, thoughts, and perceptions – emerged from SVOD use in daily life. Finally, the third stage investigated how these meanings were negotiated in light of the apparent tensions between Saudi laws, traditions, religion, and global SVOD content. Throughout these stages, the research was informed by scholarship and theory focused on the concepts of everyday life and the traditions of reception studies (de Certeau, 1988; Hall, 1980; Hermes, 1995; Morley, 1986).

**The research questions of this study were as follows:**

**RQ1:** How do younger Saudi audiences (ages 25–35) use global SVOD in everyday life?

**RQ2:** What meanings emerge out of younger Saudi audiences' use of global SVODs in everyday life?

**RQ3:** What tensions emerge within meaning-making process where Saudi laws, traditions, and religion contrast with global SVOD content?

## 1.6 Overview of Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured in eight chapters. After this introductory chapter, Chapter Two reviews the key existing literature on the topic from three different angles. First, it highlights the recent comeback of the media imperialism thesis in the literature, which has emerged in light of the ways platforms have reconfigured not only the supply and demand of content but also challenged media theories and assumptions about, for instance, the importance of cultural proximity. Given the increasing questions surrounding the popularity and consumption of global content, this chapter stresses the importance of audience agency in meaning-making as a way to unpack the emerging trends of cosmopolitan consumption. The chapter then examines audience studies on how SVODs fit into everyday life and the complexity of household and gender dynamics, identifying questions, gaps, and areas in need of further contribution. Lastly, it focuses on the Arab context, highlighting scholarly debates to which this thesis aims to contribute, as well as the research limitations it seeks to address.

Chapter Three details the methodological framework guiding this qualitative and interpretive study. It outlines the philosophical stance, theoretical grounding, research context, data collection methods, and analysis procedures. The chapter presents the fieldwork process from beginning to end, with a strong emphasis on reflexivity and transparency, in line with the traditions of reception studies. It also offers reflections on the challenges I faced during fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, contributing insights into the complexities of meeting and interacting with the opposite gender – insights that may benefit future research in Saudi Arabia and similarly Arab conservative contexts.

Chapter Four provides an account of how younger Saudis use SVODs in their everyday lives across domestic and non-domestic spaces. It focuses on illustrating when, where, and how

participants engage with SVODs. The chapter first examines domestic viewing practices, distinguishing between single and married participants to highlight different routines and social dynamics. It then explores three key non-domestic spaces – istirahat, transit, and work – offering insight into how SVOD use extends beyond the home. By doing so, this descriptive chapter sets the foundation for the following chapters by positioning and situating participants' engagement with platforms within the broader contexts of everyday life, with the deeper analysis of the cultural and social logics, including the tensions and negotiations inherent in some viewing settings, and the meaning-making processes underpinning these practices (as addressed in subsequent chapters).

Chapter Five delves into how Saudi audiences engage with SVOD platforms through the intertwined concepts of taste and pleasure. It explores the deeper personal and cultural significance of SVODs for my participants, examining how their personal and social circumstances influence both their choice of content and the meaning-making process. The chapter considers not only the textual and experiential pleasures derived from viewing but also investigates forms of enjoyment linked to SVOD usage that extend beyond the screen.

Moving from aspects of pleasure to issues of tension, Chapter Six examines how Saudi audiences negotiate and navigate tensions that arise when SVOD content contrasts or clashes with local cultural and religious norms. It focuses on how participants negotiate certain content, particularly in relation to gender roles, women's independence, LGBT themes, and sexual content. The chapter examines how such tensions play a role in viewing experiences, how they are navigated across gender lines, and how these moments relate to broader meaning-making processes in such a culturally sensitive context.

Chapter Seven explores how my participants reflected on the broader social and cultural role of global SVODs within their rapidly changing society. It examines how participants spoke about public debates surrounding these platforms during my fieldwork, alongside concerns related to children's content and ongoing cultural shifts in Saudi Arabia. These distinct reflections collectively engage with the perceived complexities surrounding the current and future place of global SVODs in Saudi society.

The final chapter brings together the key findings of this thesis, reflecting on how younger Saudi audiences make sense of and engage with global SVOD platforms in their everyday lives. This chapter revisits the research aims and questions, drawing out the central themes that emerged across the empirical chapters – including everyday engagement, pleasure, tensions, and broader societal reflections. It also considers the wider contributions and implications of these findings for audience studies on SVODs across global, Arab, and Saudi contexts. Finally, it outlines the study's limitations and suggests directions and inquiries for future research in both Saudi Arabia and the wider Arab context. Having outlined the research aims, questions, and structure of this thesis, the next chapter turns to a review of the relevant literature.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Global SVODs have reconfigured the supply and demand of media content in various markets worldwide. While these platforms primarily offer foreign content to local audiences, their popularity often competes with – and in many cases surpasses – that of local and regional platforms. These shifts raise questions about “key theories and assumptions” developed in the era of linear television, from the priority of cultural proximity to broader debates about the power dynamics of global media trade (Lotz et al., 2022, p. 512). Of course, such transformations vary across national markets and between platforms; however, common concerns persist across contexts, particularly regarding the imbalance of information flow and the lack of research on how audiences engage with and make sense of global SVOD platforms in their everyday lives.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive review of the existing literature on global SVODs, first from a global perspective and then within the Arab context. Given the complex cultural, industrial, and audience-related issues surrounding global SVODs, this review will be structured thematically. It will be divided into three main sections, each addressing key scholarly debates that will inform this thesis. In doing so, the chapter will highlight gaps in knowledge and point to emerging approaches and directions from existing research that the thesis will take forward.

The first section will explore how the global expansion of SVOD platforms has reignited debates on the imbalance of information flow and cultural imperialism. It will address both traditional concerns about asymmetrical cultural power and emerging perspectives on cosmopolitan consumption, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of the

audience's role in meaning-making. The second section will shift attention to audience studies, emphasising the lack of scholarly focus on contemporary viewing practices on SVOD platforms. While there is growing interest in situating SVOD consumption within the context of everyday life, this section will review recent studies that explore viewing habits, content choice, and the mutual domestication of platforms and audiences. This will highlight gaps in research, particularly regarding the lack of attention to the complexity of household dynamics and sociocultural negotiations in everyday viewing practices. The final section will narrow the discussion to the Arab context, where both cultural concerns over Western hegemony and gaps in audience research intersect. It will review existing literature on the complex dynamics between the nation-state, global platforms, and the audience. Following this, the section will engage with published audience studies in the region, identifying key limitations, including deterministic frameworks and methodological shortcomings that this thesis will address. Together, these three sections will provide a foundation for the thesis's research focus, emphasising the role of audience agency in meaning-making and reinforcing the need for a more nuanced exploration of how global SVODs are integrated into people's everyday lives within their sociocultural contexts.

## **2.1 Global SVOD Platforms and the Evolving Media Landscape**

The expansion of global SVODs has reignited long-standing debates about the imbalance of information flow and cultural imperialism. Scholars have extensively examined the role of global platforms in content production, circulation, and consumption, as the dominance and prominence of US-based platforms and titles have revived concerns from the satellite era. While some argue that platforms reinforce asymmetrical cultural power, others call for a more nuanced understanding that moves beyond the rigidity of traditional paradigms of cultural imperialism versus globalisation. In what follows, I first explore how global SVODs

have revived debates on cultural imperialism and one-way information flow, focusing on regulatory responses, national sovereignty concerns, and the evolving role of global platforms in content distribution. Following this, I will shift focus to cultural proximity theory and cosmopolitan consumption, examining how platforms challenge the long-standing counterpoint to cultural imperialism arguments – that audiences gravitate toward culturally familiar content. It will also underscore the importance of understanding emerging audience preferences, particularly in relation to the growing trend of cosmopolitan consumption. Together, these discussions highlight the need for audience-focused research, as existing scholarship remains predominantly textual and often neglects the active role of the audience, potentially perpetuating concerns and speculative assumptions about the global media landscape.

### ***2.1.1 Global Platforms and the Revival of Cultural Imperialism Debates***

The issue of information flow in the context of global SVODs has received considerable attention in the literature, reanimating the legacy debates about one-way information flow and cultural imperialism from the satellite era (Iordache, 2022; Lobato, 2019; Lotz et al., 2022). Roman Lobato showcased how debates around Netflix and cultural policies in Europe and Western liberal democracies continue to engage with issues of “national sovereignty” and “cultural imperialism” (Lobato, 2019, p. 150). These concerns are manifested not only in various regulatory attempts to protect local cultures and languages through quota requirements and the discoverability of local content, but also in research areas that examine the ways in which global platforms disrupt public broadcasting, local cultural industries, and, more importantly, the imbalance of information flow (see Iordache, 2022; Lobato, 2019; Lobato, Douglas, et al., 2024; Lotz et al., 2022). Beyond the West, however, the complications of information flow lie in the way global platforms override national cultural

and regulatory frameworks that Western powers can negotiate and implement (see Lobato, 2019; Ramasoota & Kitikamdhorn, 2021). This is not merely about quota requirements but also concerns cultural and political sensitivities that differ from Western stances. A widely cited example of this issue is Lobato's discussion of Netflix in India, where local media faces strict censorship – even for using words such as “hell,” “beef,” and “sex” – while Netflix operates in a grey zone, bypassing many local regulatory and censorship restrictions (Lobato, 2019, p. 123). The Indian case echoes the situation in many countries in the global South, where low bargaining power complicates national attempts to limit the perceived consequences of the imbalance of information flow (see Ramasoota & Kitikamdhorn, 2021). Taken together, the European measures in cultural protectionism, the reaffirmation of the sovereign nation-state, and the regulatory struggle reanimate the legacy debates about the information flow from the satellite era (Iordache, 2022; Lobato, 2019). This perhaps aligns with Livingstone's (2019, p. 179) argument that “many of our contemporary debates not only have long roots but also risk repeating old problems as hopes and fears about the abuses of media power rise again.”

That being said, commercial interests and European quota requirements have led platforms to facilitate new forms of content circulation and cultural exchange that theoretically challenge the thesis of one-way information flow – from the US to the rest of the world (Cunningham & Scarlata, 2020; Iordache, 2022). As global platforms have entered local markets, commissioning, acquiring, and co-producing content, the number of US titles on some platforms has steadily declined. While this development has resulted in some Asian and European content becoming globally successful (see Lotz & Lobato, 2023), concerns about the authenticity of locally produced content have also emerged, especially in light of the ways platforms commission and co-produce content with the aim of attracting transnational

audiences (Khalil, 2024; also see Cunningham & Scarlata, 2020; Higson, 2021; Ildir, 2023; Ildir & Celik Rappas, 2022). This shift complicates the issue, especially for catalogue studies, as the country of origin is no longer a sufficient marker for examining information flow. This is particularly the case for non-Western content, where locally commissioned and co-produced content has been written about as clashing with the very values of these nations (e.g., Khalil, 2024). This, among many other cultural, political, and economic factors, has led to an increase in scholarship addressing platform-driven imperialism and orientalism from both old and new perspectives (e.g., Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2024; Davis, 2023; Elkins, 2019; Kwet, 2019; Maatouk, 2021; Park et al., 2023; Salsabila, 2021). Within such debates, arguments range from the “Americanization” of European and Asian content in an attempt to reinforce American cultural, economic, and political dominance (Salsabila, 2021, p. 21; see also Park et al., 2023), to the “systematic avoidance of accountability to regulation” (Davis, 2023, p. 1144) and “reinventing colonialism” (Kwet, 2019, p. 3). While the comeback of the thesis of cultural imperialism remains fragmented, many studies focus on platforms’ claims and approaches to cultural diversity and multiculturalism. For instance, Araujo and de Albuquerque (2024, p. 511) argued that Netflix’s approach to multiculturalism is imperialistic because it positions itself as the definitive interpreter of “what multiculturalism is, from a US perspective,” quoting Bourdieu and Wacquant’s argument that “cultural imperialism rests on the power to universalize particularisms” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999, p. 41). Similarly, Elkins (2019) argued that initiatives and the discourse around cultural diversity and global connection are ways in which global platforms present themselves as benevolent and cosmopolitan, while in reality engaging in imperialistic practices by dominating global markets. Such imperialistic practices are not limited to market dynamics; they have also been argued to operate through representational strategies that shape global understandings of identity and culture (e.g., Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2024; Hachenberger,

2019; Maatouk, 2021; Salsabila, 2021). For instance, Hachenberger (2019) analysed the stereotypical representation of Latinos in Netflix's *Narcos*<sup>19</sup>, suggesting that these portrayals construct Latinos as inferior *Others*, influencing audience perceptions and reinforcing cultural hierarchies that subtly sustain US imperial dominance through ideological and representational means. Nevertheless, Straubhaar et al. (2023) suggested that while imperialism theories apply to the broader economic and structural trends in light of the US dominance in information flow, they neglect audience agency, especially in regard to preferences and meaning-making (also see Straubhaar, 1991). Although Straubhaar's work on cultural proximity and audience preferences in the 1990s contributed to a relative discrediting of the cultural imperialism thesis, arguments have been made that global platforms have implications for Straubhaar's theory, requiring further examination of the growing trend of consuming foreign content (e.g., Lotz et al., 2022; also see Lotz, 2025).

In her call for renewed audience studies, Livingstone (2019) argued that shifting understandings about "mediatization"<sup>20</sup>, media power and dynamics have facilitated discourses in which audiences, explicitly or implicitly, are once again portrayed as relatively passive. While recent and emerging literature on imperialism has offered new insights into shifting power dynamics, Livingstone highlighted the need for audience studies that engage with people's social and cultural contexts, including how they interpret and make sense of media, to avoid ungrounded assumptions and the repetition of old debates. As Lobato (2019, pp. 143-144) has noted, when it comes to learning from old lessons of the imperialism debates: "The challenge of explaining international television flows is not so much about

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<sup>19</sup> *Narcos* (Bernard, et al., 2015-2017).

<sup>20</sup> Mediatization is a theory that describes how media and their institutional logic – the principles guiding how media operate – have become more central to, and influential on, political, economic, social and cultural life (see Livingstone, 2019).

picking one paradigm over another (globalisation vs. cultural imperialism) but rather about making careful distinctions between distribution and reception, economic structure and audience/buyer agency...” While global platforms are undeniably dominated by American companies and remain unregulated in many parts of the world (see Cunningham & Scarlata, 2020; Lobato, 2019), this does not inevitably translate into erosion of local cultural identities, norms, or values (see Tomlinson, 1991). Certainly, the prevalence and popularity of such platforms raise important questions about their cultural role and power (Lotz, 2021b), yet these cannot be understood without considering the active meaning-making role of audiences (see Hall, 1980). This is particularly important in light of the growing global trend of foreign content consumption, even within the US (Limov, 2020; also see Lotz et al., 2022; Jaquet, 2021). Of course, this does not undermine the importance of industry and policy debate about cultural imperialism and the asymmetrical power inherent in global information flow.

However, a more nuanced look into audiences in various national contexts is needed in order to avoid ungrounded assumptions. This is not just about understanding the reasons underpinning the popularity of these platforms, but also how they are incorporated, and more importantly, interpreted within audience members’ wider social and cultural contexts.

### ***2.1.2 From Local to Global: Rethinking Cultural Proximity in the Age of Streaming***

Cultural proximity theory has long been an important counterpoint to narratives of cultural imperialism and concerns over the imbalance of information flow, playing a vital role in understanding the dynamics of content production and consumption. Based on empirical data, Straubhaar (1991) argued that audiences naturally gravitate toward content that reflects their own cultural realities, including language, values, and experiences. While cultural proximity operates at multiple and complex levels, it largely emphasises the importance and priority of local and culturally familiar content. However, the popularity of global platforms around the

world – which offer little to no domestic content in many markets, along with the increasing popularity of Asian, European, and Latino content, has challenged this theory, suggesting other reasons that go beyond proximate linguistic, cultural, social, and geographic factors (Lotz et al., 2022; also see Asmar et al., 2023; Iordache, 2022; Jaquet, 2021; Limov, 2020; Lotz, 2025). Recognising these limitations, Straubhaar et al. (2021) proposed alternative explanations for the popularity of foreign content, exploring notions of cosmopolitanism – i.e., an openness to and interest in the *Other* – that better account for the increasing consumption of, and demand for culturally diverse content in Latin America. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital (1984)<sup>21</sup>, they framed this cosmopolitan consumption as a recognisable form of cultural capital that certain audiences seek to acquire in order to socially distinguish themselves. For example, Straubhaar noted how his Brazilian students expressed their appreciation for *House of Cards*<sup>22</sup> and *Orange is the New Black*<sup>23</sup> during his lectures, as “a fairly obvious way of trying to show how culturally sophisticated they were” (Straubhaar et al. 2021, p. 232). Havens (2018) engaged in similar discussions regarding content production strategies, arguing that streaming platforms have increasingly emphasised highly specific local elements through cinematography and sub-languages to create a strong sense of place and authenticity. For Havens (2018, para. 7-8), this “conspicuous localism” is intended to attract a cosmopolitan international audience, where the consumption of seemingly authentic, diverse content serves as a form of cultural capital that signals global

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<sup>21</sup> Cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu, can be understood as “familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society,” which includes knowledge, skills, and cultural expertise or proficiencies that contribute to social benefits and advantages (Bourdieu, 1984). Although this quoted definition is widely cited and attributed to Bourdieu’s book *Distinction*, this exact wording does not appear in the English translation of the book.

<sup>22</sup> *House of Cards* (Willimon et al., 2013-2018).

<sup>23</sup> *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan et al., 2013-2019).

awareness and sophistication. For global platforms, diversity, inclusion, and authenticity play a vital role in appealing to these audiences, where the motivation for consumption goes beyond cultural proximity to become a source of social distinction (see G.-Stolz, 2021; Havens, 2018; Straubhaar et al., 2023). However, in their discussion of cultural imperialism and information flow, Lotz et al. (2022, p. 513) critiqued Straubhaar et al.'s approach for not incorporating updated qualitative audience research, arguing that theorising about cosmopolitanism remains speculative without empirical grounding. Rather than relying on theoretical assumptions, they called for audience-focused studies to examine how viewers actively engage with the storytelling of streaming platforms and its cultural and ideological dimensions, citing Gray (1992), Morley (1986), and Wood (2009) as key examples of research that provide deeper cultural insights (also see Lotz, 2025). While Straubhaar et al.'s argument offered a valuable perspective on shifting viewing preferences, our understanding of the appeal of global platforms, as well as its broader cultural role, remains limited and constrained by the lack of audience-focused studies.

Nevertheless, recognising the complexity and uniqueness of local audiences, as demonstrated by early research on global and transnational media (e.g., Straubhaar, 1991; Chalaby, 2005), a range of studies have explored how global platforms appeal to local audiences. In contrast to transnational TV channel audiences, which are geographically defined and aggregated for advertisers (Chalaby, 2008), Lotz (2021a) argued that platforms' technological capabilities and available user data allow global SVODs to serve "tastes and sensibilities that fail to become significant when aggregated within a nation" (p. 207). While Lotz acknowledged the uniqueness and importance of national context and identity, she argued that large platforms such as Netflix and Amazon remain powerful in their ability to define and target audiences based on taste clusters rather than national aggregates, as in the satellite era (Lotz, 2021a;

also see Iordache, 2022; Lotz, 2018; Straubhaar et al., 2021). However, the notion of transnational “taste clusters” – by which Netflix claims to group its subscribers, remains contentious, as it “celebrates the possibilities of cross-cultural taste similarities while erasing difference” (Elkins, 2019, p. 383; also see Frey, 2021). Nevertheless, focusing specifically on Netflix originals, Asmar et al. (2024, p. 15) suggested that Netflix extends beyond communities of taste by fostering “communities of conversation”, connecting audiences through shared cultural and identity politics. By actively engaging with cultural and identity-based discussions – ranging from race to female empowerment – the platform resonates in different national contexts while also being strategically localised to specific ones (Asmar et al., 2024). This becomes especially powerful in contexts where certain topics or representations are underrepresented or underserved in national or regional media. For instance, while Arab media feature fewer women in leading roles, global platforms showcase female-driven narratives, making them more relatable and appealing to audiences seeking such representations (see Higson, 2021; Samy, 2023). Of course, global platform strategies differ and evolve rapidly through trial and error as they expand and adapt to local regulations and cultural realities (Lobato, 2019). For instance, Jenner (2024) noted how Netflix’s strategies have evolved from those noted in her earlier work (Jenner, 2018), shifting to a more explicit reliance on superficial diversity and “visibility politics” while avoiding politically charged and nationally specific issues to maintain and balance its global reach. However, despite the ways platforms evolve, their reliance on negotiating relevance through racial, gender, sexual, and, to a lesser extent, cultural diversity has been seen as key to broadening their global reach (see Asmar et al., 2024; Elkins, 2021, 2024; G.-Stolz, 2021). While research in this area oriented towards textual analysis, what is crucially left out is how audiences perceive, engage with, and even contest such negotiations. This is especially significant given that gender, sexual, and racial issues are culturally specific and understood

differently across diverse contexts. Questions about the extent to which audiences feel engaged, challenged, represented, or alienated therefore remain open ones that require further empirical study in different national contexts. More importantly, as global platforms continue to shape the circulation of stories and representations, understanding how they resonate – or fail to resonate – with different audiences is essential to assessing their cultural role amid renewed concerns about the imbalance of information flow and cultural imperialism.

In summary, section 2.1. has examined two key dimensions of the ongoing debates surrounding global SVODs: the revival of the cultural imperialism paradigm and the shifting dynamics of cultural proximity and cosmopolitan consumption. The first part has demonstrated how global platforms both challenge and reinforce historical asymmetries in global media production and distribution, prompting regulatory interventions and discussions on national sovereignty. The second section has explored the increasing popularity of cosmopolitan consumption, challenging traditional notions of cultural proximity as audiences embrace diverse narratives believed to be forms of cultural capital and distinction. Together, these discussions reveal how global SVOD platforms might simultaneously reinforce and disrupt traditional notions of cultural imperialism. On the one hand, the dominance of these platforms extends the longstanding imbalance in global media flows; on the other, shifting audience preferences call not only for a re-evaluation of established theories about audiences, but also for a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which audiences engage with emerging patterns of media consumption. While the research underpinning these debates offers valuable insights, its focus remains predominantly textual and industry-focused in nature. As a result, it often overlooks how audiences might actively interpret and engage with global platforms. This thesis contributes to these discussions by shifting the focus to audience perceptions and meaning-making processes. By examining how audiences negotiate and

navigate global platforms' content, it aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the broader cultural role these platforms play within a specific cultural context.

## **2.2 “Reviving Audience Studies”: SVOD Consumption in Everyday Life**

This section examines the current state of audience research, particularly the lack of scholarly attention to contemporary viewing practices of SVOD platforms. It will begin by highlighting the growing calls to “revive audience research” and the increasing academic interest in resituating television and VOD consumption within everyday social and cultural contexts.

The discussion will then turn to recent and emerging studies that explore the everyday dynamics of audience engagement, focusing on content choice, habitual consumption, and the influence of household and social contexts on viewing practices. Finally, the section will conclude by identifying a critical gap in research on how viewing practices are culturally negotiated within individual routines, household dynamics, and broader sociocultural contexts.

The state of audience research has received increasing attention in recent years, particularly as SVODs have become central to everyday media consumption. While extensive research has focused on industry practices, platform algorithms, content libraries, and business models, SVOD audiences themselves have remained largely understudied. As Graeme Turner noted, there is “some justification for Jonathan Gray’s comment that currently ‘we know embarrassingly little about audiences’ and that therefore we need to ‘revive’ audience studies” (Turner, 2019, p. 223; Gray, 2017, p. 81). Despite a rich literature on fan studies and certain consumption trends, audience research has yet to adequately account for how platform consumption is embedded in daily life, especially within broader social and cultural contexts (see Turner, 2019, 2021). Specifically, there is a growing need to explore how SVOD

platforms are socially and culturally negotiated, and how they are situated within personal routines and the social dynamics of household life. While reports from various national contexts have documented sharp rises in subscription rates and overall viewing time, particularly during and after COVID-19 (e.g., Ofcom, 2020, 2022; The Communications, Space & Technology Commission, 2022), relatively little is understood about audiences' broader relationships with these platforms. Although there has been an increase in "binge-watching" studies – especially focused on the lockdown period (e.g., Boursier et al., 2021; Ghazal & Eman, 2024; Kumar et al., 2021; Rahman & Arif, 2021; Sigre-Leirós et al., 2023) – as Turner (2021, p. 228) has suggested, "the concept [of binge-viewing] has reached the point where it has outlived its usefulness for television studies" (also see van Es, 2024). This is not merely due to the term's overly broad and "imprecise" nature (Turner, 2021), but also because it reinforces industry-driven narratives and claims that, as van Es (2024) argued, obscure a fuller understanding of how content is consumed on VODs. Understanding audiences in this context is especially important given the assumed power of platforms on consumption, raising important questions about audience agency, engagement, and cultural negotiation – questions that industry and policy studies tend to overlook. As Gray (2017, p. 82) argued in his call for "reviving audience studies": "Reading some accounts of global media, one can almost forget that the world is full of people, not just media corporations, so let us 'repopulate' global media studies with people, with audiences."

While methodological and theoretical limitations have been identified as factors constraining contemporary audience studies, several scholars have emphasised the need to revisit earlier audience inquiries and models that situate people's experiences within their social and cultural contexts (Gray, 2017; Livingstone, 2019; Schröder, 2019; Turner, 2019, 2021). Foundational works – such as those by Radway (1984), Morley (1986), Gauntlett and Hill

(1999), Silverstone (1994), and Lull (1990), among others – have been recognised as valuable references and starting points for approaching contemporary issues, particularly in their attention to media consumption as a social and cultural practice within the complexities of domestic contexts and everyday routines (see Gray, 2017; Livingstone, 2019; Turner, 2019). Certainly, this requires adapting earlier approaches to better account for the more fragmented and personalised nature of viewing in the streaming era, while still recognising the complexity and significance of everyday life in media consumption practices (Schröder, 2019; Turner, 2019). For Turner, television audience studies have, in recent years, provided a range of viable research approaches (e.g., Bury, 2018; Evans, 2011; Jenner, 2018; Müller & Röser, 2017). Drawing on Evans’s (2011) study of transmedia television in everyday life, for example, Turner highlights the value of asking questions such as what devices are used, where, when, with whom, and why to understand the complexities of audience engagement (Turner, 2019, 2021). Similarly, Bury (2018) engaged with questions of social contexts and the living room, exploring how digital television consumption is embedded within household routines and negotiations. While such studies offer valuable frameworks and insights for approaching audiences, the need for situating people’s experiences within their social and cultural contexts remains vital if we are to better understand contemporary challenges and unpack the role and place of streaming services in diverse societies.

Recent and emerging audience studies have increasingly focused on the everyday dynamics of consumption, albeit most significant contributions have been regarding content choice. For instance, Frey (2021) provided key insights into UK and US audiences, challenging deterministic assumptions about the power of algorithms by demonstrating that viewers did not rely as heavily on recommendation systems as often assumed. Rather, viewers relied on multiple factors and processes – including traditional methods such as word of mouth and

reviews – to guide their viewing choices. Another example is Johnson et al. (2024), which engaged with how UK audiences discover and choose content within the complexity of technological affordances, habitual behaviours, household dynamics, and social contexts. Working together with scholars involved in another audience study in Australia that used a similar design of interviews and ethnographic walkthroughs (Lobato, Scarlata, et al., 2024), Johnson and colleagues proposed the concept of “default viewing” (Johnson et al., 2025). They defined this as “everyday, habitual behaviours learned and acquired through experience of socially situated media technologies that provide shortcuts and facilitate the choice of what to watch” (Johnson et al., 2025, p.6). What is important about the proposed concept of “default viewing” modalities is that it accounts not only for technical and behavioural aspects, but also for the complex household power and gender dynamics that have traditionally played a vital role in TV viewing (e.g., Lull, 1990; Morley, 1986). While there are other important audience studies that engage with content choice, discoverability, and prominence (e.g., Iordache et al., 2023), the emerging focus on the role of the ordinary, mundane, and everyday routines within the complex social contexts proves valuable in understanding the dynamics between audiences and platforms.

Apart from content choice, recent and emerging audience studies have explored other aspects of consumption in relation to habits and everyday life. For example, Shao (2024) explored the role of daily habits in shaping viewing practices among Netflix users in the United States. Using in-depth interviews and browser tracking, the study found that participants’ routines influenced not only when they watched but also how and what content they chose to engage with. Similar to the importance of habitual behaviours identified by Johnson et al. (2024) in content choice, Shao found that Netflix viewing was a routine, habitual activity, particularly before bed, during meals, or as background to another task – a pattern also observed in Siles

et al. (2019), Tay (2022), Valiati (2019), and Giglietto et al. (2019). These habitual activities also played a role in content choices, as participants gravitated toward familiar programmes, and in some cases, they had already watched before, as these required less attention and provided comfort. Although Shao did not provide a detailed descriptive account of the results, many of their findings – along with those of Siles et al. (2019) and Tay (2022), regarding habitual patterns, such as using content as background to other activities – seem to echo viewing behaviours and practices highlighted in foundational early works on television audiences (e.g., Lull, 1990; Morley, 1986). This may align with Turner’s (2021) argument that contemporary viewing behaviours and practices may not be remarkably different from the past, despite industry assumptions and our lack of evidence (also see Evans & McDonald, 2014). However, while Shao’s study highlighted the repetitive and routine-based nature of Netflix consumption in daily life, the fact that data were gathered during the COVID-19 quarantine may well have reinforced consistent viewing patterns and the preference for familiar content as a coping mechanism (see Johnson & Dempsey, 2024). Nevertheless, the findings around habitual consumption and “default viewing” underscore the significant role of daily routines in shaping media engagement, highlighting the need for a deeper exploration of household and social contexts to fully understand the dynamics of streaming platforms’ engagement in daily life.

Beyond the role of habits, growing attention has been paid to expanding the domestication theory of Silverstone to the context of SVODs (e.g., Ben Moussa et al., 2024; Siles, 2023; Siles et al., 2019; Zaid et al., 2023). The work of Siles et al. (2019) is a key reference in this regard, focusing on how Costa Rican audiences adapt Netflix to fit their personal needs and everyday structures, while Netflix, in turn, through its algorithms and affordances, actively shapes audience behaviours and practices. Siles et al. (2019, p. 500) referred to this process

as “mutual domestication,” highlighting the complexity of audience agency in light of the role of personalisation, recommendations, and algorithmic features in viewing habits. While the study provided valuable insights into viewing practices and audience relations with algorithms, their relative neglect of the importance of social contexts, household and gender dynamics, power structures, and other social and cultural factors might limit their outcomes. The same applies to Zaid et al. (2023), who, despite their broader engagement with the role of cultural sensitivities in the mutual domestication process, did not explore how these sensitivities were negotiated within the complexities of social contexts and household dynamics. Although Zaid et al. (2023) shed light on how participants utilised the skip button to bypass culturally sensitive content as part of the domestication process, they did not examine how these sensitivities shaped or reshaped the viewing setting – from content choice to the power dynamics embedded in social contexts. However, these studies remain valuable in many aspects, particularly in illustrating how deeply Netflix is embedded in daily life. For instance, Siles et al. (2019) found that participants used torrent apps to download Netflix original content unavailable in the Costa Rican library, along with using VPNs to access US and UK libraries, as it “allowed them to be a part of global conversations spurred by Netflix” (Siles et al. 2019, p. 512). These efforts to be part of these conversations suggest that streaming platforms are not merely sources of entertainment but possibly also function as avenues for cultural capital, as argued by Straubhaar et al. (2021). However, while existing studies employing domestication theory on SVODs have provided valuable insights into audiences, current applications tend to focus on algorithms and affordances, relatively neglecting the complexities surrounding the social and cultural contexts that play a vital role in viewing settings, behaviours, and practices along with how that relates to aspects of meaning-making.

While existing studies on content choice, habitual consumption, and mutual domestication have illuminated key insights into audiences' viewing practices in the context of everyday life, there is a clear need for further exploration of the complex social and cultural dynamics that most of the studies mentioned above relatively neglect to consider. Certainly, the work of Johnson et al. (2024) engaged with social context and household power dynamics, yet their study's focus on content choice limited the scope for exploring other dimensions of these dynamics – including aspects of meaning-making – and their role in broader engagement with platforms. More broadly, there is a need for contributions that explore how global SVODs are socially and culturally negotiated and embedded within the complexities of household dynamics and personal routines in daily life. Since streaming platforms predominantly offer foreign content in most national contexts, a critical question remains: How do audiences adapt and integrate global platforms into their daily lives, with local cultural norms, values, and household dynamics shaping their viewing practices – and how can insights into meaning-making (see Das & Ytre-Arne, 2017; Schröder, 2019; Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019, 2021, Lotz, 2025) - an aspect often neglected in existing research – deepen our understanding of these practices? The need for understanding the complexities of cultural negotiation was signalled by Tay (2022), who noted in relation to Turkish audiences: “The dominance of Netflix in society, according to participants, is tied to conveying American culture to daily life as global, popular, and trendy” (pp. 42-43). The cultural negotiation here is not merely an aspect of the meaning-making process, but also plays a vital role in daily viewing practices and consumption, as highlighted earlier in the mutual domestication process (Zaid et al., 2023). This is especially important beyond Western countries, where global platforms often reflect cultural values that differ from local norms in light of the imbalance of information flow. As a result, social context and cultural negotiation become essential factors in how audiences adapt and integrate these platforms into their daily viewing

practices. Despite this, existing research has largely overlooked how sociocultural contexts actively shape engagement with global platforms and their integration into everyday life. Therefore, this research offers a closer examination of the often-neglected sociocultural context and complex dynamics surrounding viewing practices – an essential contribution to understanding the nuances of global platform consumption through the lens of a different local cultural reality.

In summary, this section has explored the current state of audience research on SVOD use and engagement, highlighting the lack of scholarly attention to contemporary viewing practices on SVOD platforms. It has emphasised the growing interest in engaging with the social and cultural contexts of audiences' daily lives, while also addressing recent studies on content choice, habitual consumption, and mutual domestication. However, there remains a pressing need for further contributions that examine how viewing practices on global SVOD platforms are culturally negotiated within everyday routines, household dynamics, and broader sociocultural contexts. This research aims to provide a deeper exploration of these issues. By focusing on how cultural norms, household routines, and social dynamics influence the ways audiences engage with and adapt global streaming platforms to their daily lives, this study seeks to offer insights into the intersection of global media and local cultural realities, particularly outside Western contexts.

### **2.3 Global SVODs in Arabia**

The advent of global SVOD platforms in the Arab world, and specifically in Saudi Arabia, presents a complex landscape shaped by unique political, cultural, and socio-economic dynamics. This section will review the existing literature on the region to explore these dynamics, focusing on three key areas: the interplay between global SVOD platforms, the

nation-state and audiences; Gulf audience studies on global SVODs; and, finally, research on the Saudi global SVOD audiences and its theoretical and methodological limitations. By examining these interconnected themes, this section aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of scholarship on global SVODs in the Gulf and Saudi context, highlighting both the contributions this thesis draws upon and the gaps with which it seeks to engage.

### ***2.3.1 The Complex Dynamics: The Platforms, the Nation-State, and the Audience***

The interplay between global SVODs and government authorities in the Arab region has received little attention in the scholarly literature<sup>24</sup>, particularly in terms of how platforms negotiate and navigate power structures and regulatory concerns. To date, Khalil and Zayani have been the only scholars to explore some of these aspects, drawing on a Netflix censorship incident as a case study. In 2018, Netflix, under pressure from Saudi authorities, removed a political title that was deemed to violate local media laws. Khalil and Zayani (2021, p. 201) argued that this incident portrayed “a symbiotic relationship” between the Saudi authorities and Netflix, whereby both parties accommodated each other’s interests and needs “in the context of de-territorialized digital capitalism.” For Khalil and Zayani, this relationship requires both parties to make compromises, as the Saudis “are willing to tolerate the liberal aspects of Netflix as long as it steers clear of the internal affairs of the kingdom” (2021, p. 212). However, this argument was challenged by subsequent developments in 2022, when Netflix received a warning from the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, regarding “immoral

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<sup>24</sup> Despite the significance of this research area, Arab researchers have historically been constrained by political sensitivities that have limited scholarly engagement with various topics – a tension discussed in detail by Amin (2008, p.70). See also Pavan (2021) for a more recent analysis of the realities and complexities surrounding available publications on and about the region.

content” that violates local cultural and religious values, as well as local media laws. While recently Khalil (2024, p. 7) suggested that Netflix’s investments in Saudi content are “a political move” to ease tensions with the authorities, little is understood about the dynamics at play and the ways in which both the state and the platform navigate the complexities of cultural and political sensitivities. This is especially evident with other global SVODs – e.g., Amazon Prime, Disney+, Apple TV, etc. – where there is no publicly known regulatory feud, tensions, or investment in local content. Certainly, the jurisdictional limitations contribute to the ongoing ambiguity and vagueness in the nature of the relations and their dynamics, an issue that is documented in different national contexts beyond Arab countries (see Isa et al., 2020; Lobato, 2019; Ramasoota & Kitikamdhorn, 2021). However, the question remains: how does this ambiguity play a role in the audience experience in light of the ways in which platform content may contrast, contradict, or even clash with cultural values, norms, and traditions?

Recent studies on Arab audiences have employed Khalil’s (2016) characterisations of the power dynamics of Arab entertainment media to situate audiences’ tensions with global platforms. Khalil (2016, pp. 3638-3641) characterised Arab media dynamics as “twin processes” of “business push and audience pull,” where, amid broader complex forces, media push is driven by investments that aim to reach a homogenised Arab audience, while public pull is shaped by demands for nationally relevant and locally specific content. In their studies on Arab audiences of Netflix, Ben Moussa et al. (2024) and Zaid et al. (2023) situated their participants’ cultural sensitivities and reservations towards Netflix within these dynamics, interpreting the pushback against certain sensitivities as a pull factor. While this slightly changes the nature of Khalil’s emphasis on the audience preference for local, nationally relevant content to a more defensive, morality-based resistance, there may be some

justifications for the way Ben Moussa et al. (2024) and Zaid et al. (2023) stretched the dynamics in light of the significant backlash and boycotting campaigns against global platforms in Arab countries. Certainly, this pull factor is not an outright rejection of platform content, yet it perhaps points toward some sort of reconfiguration of power dynamics in light of various developments such as challenges to governments' ability to regulate global platforms (see Khalil & Zayani, 2021) and the region's broader digital turn (Ayish, 2021; Zayani & Khalil, 2025). For Ben Moussa et al. (2024, p. 2102), the complexity and tensions between commercial interests and cultural considerations are "characterising de-territorialised media capitalism expansion in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa]." While a full discussion of the reconfiguration of power dynamics is beyond the scope of this thesis, this study offers a nuanced, empirically grounded look into how Saudi audiences use and make sense of global SVOD platforms. In doing so, it provides insights that inform ongoing debates about the interplay between global platforms, the nation-state, and audiences in the Arab world.

### ***2.3.2 Audience Research and Global SVODs in Arabia***

Audience research in the Arab world and the Gulf remains scarce and is constrained by well-documented theoretical and methodological limitations. While a few studies on Arab audiences of global SVODs have offered valuable insights, many fall into recurring theoretical and methodological issues, resulting in findings that lack nuance, rigour, and depth in understanding the relationship between platforms and audiences. This subsection will begin with a brief historical overview of the development and critiques of Arab audience research over the past decade, providing necessary context for the prevailing deterministic approaches and the emerging trend of cultural studies-based frameworks. The focus then will shift to existing audience research in the Gulf, followed by a more focused examination of

published studies on Saudi audiences, highlighting the theoretical and methodological limitations of each – limitations that this thesis aims to address.

Arab audience studies have long been critiqued for their theoretical and methodological limitations, particularly for adopting approaches that fail to adequately address various issues – from audience agency to the production of nuanced findings (Amin, 2008; Mellor, 2013; Zayani, 2012). These issues stem from a heavy reliance on quantitative methodologies, as well as deeply rooted cultural and political factors such as “countering cultural hegemony” (Mellor, 2013, p. 201; also see Amin, 2008). In the edited volumes *Arab Media: Power and Weakness* (Hafez, 2008) and *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field* (Sabry, 2012), prominent Arab scholars – including Kraidy, Amin, and Zayani – stress the importance of qualitative, interdisciplinary approaches and cultural studies frameworks for developing a deeper understanding of Arab audiences. However, the rise of the Arab uprisings<sup>25</sup> marked what Richter and Bader described as “the return of the school of ‘massive effects,’” wherein deterministic and outdated paradigms regained prominence, offering “convenient explanations for complex realities” (2018, pp. 147-148). Richter and Badr (2018, p. 155) argued that the cultural studies-oriented approach remains rare in the region, calling for “people-centred analyses of media practices”. Within this broader context, audience research on global SVODs has begun to emerge in the region, navigating the tension between calls for cultural studies-oriented approaches and the region’s longstanding theoretical and methodological traditions.

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<sup>25</sup> The Arab uprisings, starting in the early 2010s and ending with the Syrian regime’s collapse in 2024, were protests aimed at overthrowing some Arab governments. Social media’s role in these events has led to research often portraying platforms as drivers of democracy and political change in ways that are arguably simplistic and deterministic (see Richter & Badr, 2018).

While two studies have investigated Gulf audiences' engagement with global SVOD platforms, offering valuable insights into audience practices and perspectives, both suffer from certain limitations. Zaid et al. (2023) examined how young adults in Gulf countries adopt and adapt Netflix to fit their cultural and personal needs. Through qualitative in-depth interviews with 18 Gulf nationals, the study demonstrated users' deliberate engagement with the platform, incorporating it into their temporal and social routines. Although Zaid et al. (2023) adopted Silverstone's domestication theory, providing a rare and valuable application of this conceptual framework in the context of SVODs, the study falls into a recurring issue in Arab studies: the assumption of a homogenised Arab audience (Khalil, 2016, p. 3633; also see Haddad, 2023; Khalil, 2013). This grouping of Arab audiences – from across the Gulf region – neglects to consider the national, socio-economic, political, and cultural particularities of individual countries (see Khalil, 2013, 2016). In fact, one such particularity is reflected in the platform experience, posing a challenge for Zaid et al. to conceptualise key findings around Netflix's recommendation system. For example, in countries such as the UAE and Qatar, where expatriates account for almost 90% of the population, Netflix's interface and recommendation system routinely prioritise Indian and Pakistani content due to the prominence of these nationalities, who represent over 40% of the population (Zaid et al., 2023). This issue is irrelevant to Saudi Arabia and Oman, where the majority of the population are nationals. While Zaid et al. critiqued Netflix's recommendation system, they did not provide a comparison with other Gulf countries where expatriate populations are far smaller, nor did they explore how these disparities impact local audience experiences. Instead, their approach treated audiences in the Gulf states as a singular entity, emphasising shared concerns and appreciation. This does not detract from the valuable insights provided by their study, particularly regarding people's use of technological affordances to, for instance, harness local content and bypass sensitive scenes. However, such studies, by nature,

do not have the scope to delve into various issues that are culturally, politically, and socio-economically specific to a certain nation – let alone how such issues affect the platform experience and functionality, as in the case with the recommendation system.

Even when attempting to establish and acknowledge the differences between Gulf contexts, the findings of such studies remain limited. Alkebaisi (2017) interviewed 13 Gulf nationals to examine Netflix’s emergence in the market, focusing on how content is perceived in light of the platform’s strategy of overlooking the cultural specificity of the region. In contrast to Zaid et al. (2023), Alkebaisi acknowledged the differences between Gulf cultures; however, this acknowledgment did not extend beyond labelling certain countries as “ultra-conservative”<sup>26</sup> (2017, p. 4). Alkebaisi predicted that Netflix would face difficulties in its expansion and that it would be costly in the long run as competition rises. Nevertheless, the study did not examine how these challenges vary across different Gulf countries, or how being “ultra-conservative” influences this dynamic compared to being merely “conservative.” This reinforces Khalil’s (2016, 2013) critique of overlooking the significance of national distinctions between Arab audiences. By addressing this issue, the present study aims to provide a more nuanced and localised analysis of the Saudi context, offering insights that create opportunities for comparative research with other localised Gulf and Arab contexts.

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<sup>26</sup> Although Gulf societies share a range of common tribal values and beliefs, there are significant socioeconomic, cultural, and religious differences among them. For example, the GDP per capita in Qatar is approximately £60,000, compared to £24,000 in Saudi Arabia and only £16,000 in Oman (World Bank, 2023). These differences go beyond socioeconomic factors, underscoring the limitations of grouping Gulf societies into a single category.

### ***2.3.3 Audience Research and Global SVODs in Saudi Arabia***

In contrast to earlier studies in the Gulf context, which adopt a qualitative and arguably, as in the case with Zaid et al. (2023), sophisticated theoretical approach, audience studies in the Saudi context rely heavily on the tradition of quantitative methodologies, which relatively neglect the nuances of audience experiences and perspectives. Although a range of studies have explored Saudi audiences of SVODs, only one study has looked – at least partly – into viewing practices. Mansour and Al-Dhobaiban (2022) examined university students’ viewing practices and attitudes toward Netflix. Based on quantitative survey responses from 229 students, the study explored respondents’ perceived awareness of Netflix’s impact on themselves and wider society, as well as their support for boycotting the platform. The findings highlighted viewing habits of multiple hours daily, with comedy and romance genres being the most preferred content choices. Notably, despite students’ perceived awareness of Netflix’s impact on matters such as “promoting abnormal ideas” and “attacking Islam through drama,” which were predetermined response options in the survey (p. 31), participants showed limited support for boycotting the platform. The authors suggested that “such results may indicate a kind of addiction or repercussions of binge-watching Netflix drama” (p. 39). Although the study provided the field with valuable quantitative raw data regarding students’ viewing practices, the study’s broader treatment of audiences as relatively passive receivers of information reflects a long-standing issue in Arab audience research (Amin, 2008; Mellor, 2013). Such studies negligent of audience agency are driven by what Mellor (2013, p. 201) calls “countering cultural hegemony”; a trend she traced back to the last century, which was a result of overlapping cultural and political factors in the Arab world. Mellor’s argument can be observed in many Saudi audience studies, where the authors often go further to frame their findings with recommendations calling to protect youth and society from Western and Eastern cultural hegemony. For instance, Alghamdi and Bajnaid

(2019) analysed the series *How to Get Away with Murder*<sup>27</sup> and identified specific values, which they then used to quantitatively measure the views of 400 respondents regarding these values. While the authors found that respondents were aware of cultural differences and expressed apprehension toward the content, they concluded by recommending “attention to preventive education by parents and educational institutions to protect generations and shield them from foreign values that are inconsistent with the culture and values of Arab and Islamic societies.” (Alghamdi & Bajnaid, 2019, p. 271). The same applied to studies that quantitatively looked into the impact of *Game of Thrones* on Saudi males (Alardawi, 2020), and the impact of Turkish drama on Saudi females (Alardawi et al., 2021), adopting cultivation theory among other conceptual frameworks that ultimately produce results falling into the narrative of the need to counter cultural hegemony. This perhaps explains Mellor’s (2013) argument that Arab researchers commonly place “themselves in a knowledge hierarchy above the subjects of their research” (p. 201), ultimately positioning themselves as “a cultural authority capable of revealing Western hegemony” (p. 204).

Moreover, a commonality among the cited Saudi audience studies is their reliance on quantitative methodologies, reflecting a longstanding tradition in Arab audience research. This methodological dominance has contributed to a reductive understanding of Saudi audience engagement with media (including SVOD platforms), failing to capture the nuances of everyday viewing behaviours, decision-making processes, meaning-making, and social contexts, as well as technological affordances – ultimately leading to oversimplified conclusions that, in their pursuit of greater “objectivity”, risk overlooking depth and subtle distinctions. In contrast, only a few Saudi audience studies have adopted qualitative approaches, exploring how viewers engage with specific content on SVOD platforms. For

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<sup>27</sup> *How to Get Away with Murder* (Nowalk et al., 2014-2020).

instance, Alardawi and Brereton (2025) explored why *Squid Game*<sup>28</sup> became popular among young Saudis, focusing on their engagement and enjoyment. Using a mixed-methods approach, including an online survey and focus groups, the study highlighted key factors behind its success, such as the engaging storyline, the COVID-19 lockdown, and the role of emotional involvement in the viewer experience. Another study, Qutub et al. (2021), explored how Saudi viewers perceive and justify the crimes in *La Casa de Papel* through in-depth interviews with 17 participants aged 19 to 22. The authors found that viewers empathised with the robbers depicted in the show and felt emotional distress when they were harmed or caught, recommending that future studies examine the impact of such series on young audiences. Although such studies provided valuable insights and valuably employed rarely-used qualitative approaches in the Saudi context, our understanding of broader issues surrounding Saudi audiences and platforms remains limited. This limitation stems largely from the predominant focus – whether quantitative or qualitative – on studying the audiences of particular popular texts rather than the audiences of platforms (see Turner, 2019, 2021). While most published Saudi studies examined the cultural impact of foreign content, the emphasis on specific texts risks making assumptions about what audiences actually watch within the abundance of available content and the fragmented nature of platforms (see Lotz, 2021b), let alone neglecting the broader social and cultural contexts, as well as the platform experience and its integration into everyday life. Our limited understanding of how Saudi audiences engage with SVODs reflects a broader trend in Arab media audience research – a tendency that Amin (2008) identified in relation to television, namely that studies of Arab audiences rarely moved beyond surface-level engagement and often failed to probe deeper social and cultural dynamics. Similarly, current SVOD studies in the Saudi context risk repeating this pattern, overlooking deeper questions of how platforms are integrated into

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<sup>28</sup> *Squid Game* (Hwang & Kim, 2021-2024).

everyday life. This study directly addresses this gap by shifting the focus from audience engagement with specific, often popular, SVOD texts to a broader examination of how Saudi audiences both engage with and make sense of the content provided by these platforms in their everyday lives and within their social contexts. By centring audience agency, this qualitative study moves beyond the limitations of previous Saudi audience research.

In summary, the literature on SVODs in the Gulf and the Saudi context reveals a field characterised by both valuable insights and significant gaps. While the interplay between platform, nation-state, and audiences highlights complex negotiations and possible reconfigurations of power structures, audience research remains constrained by methodological limitations and the challenge of capturing the nuances of diverse audiences. In the Saudi context, the reliance on quantitative methodologies and narratives of cultural hegemony has further constrained our understanding of audience engagement with SVODs. By addressing these gaps through a qualitative exploration that delves into deeper questions of contexts, practices, and meanings, this thesis aims to contribute a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on the case of SVODs in Saudi Arabia.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed the existing literature on global SVOD platforms, highlighting concerns about cultural imperialism, audience research, and the specific dynamics of these platforms in the Saudi and Arab contexts. By synthesising key debates across these areas, this chapter has established the foundation for the thesis's contribution by engaging with the findings of existing work and identifying areas for further inquiry.

The literature reveals that global SVOD platforms simultaneously revive long-standing concerns over cultural imperialism while challenging the traditional theory of cultural proximity, as audiences increasingly engage with content that transcends national and linguistic boundaries. However, as noted, much of the existing scholarship remains focused on textual and industry-level analyses, often overlooking the active role of audiences in meaning-making, interpretation, and the negotiation of content. Moreover, scholarly attention to audience engagement remains limited – not only in terms of meaning-making but also in understanding the everyday practices of SVOD consumption. While recent studies have started to explore audience experiences in everyday life, there remains a need for a more nuanced examination of how viewing practices are culturally negotiated within personal routines, household dynamics, and broader sociocultural contexts.

Within the Arab context, the literature reflects both concerns over cultural hegemony as well as a lack of nuanced understanding of audience engagement with global platforms. Despite a few valuable contributions, the scarcity of studies – along with theoretical and methodological limitations – has constrained the development of Arab scholarship in this field. By relying on deterministic frameworks and quantitative methodologies, Saudi audience studies have often failed to capture the complexities of audience engagement. By synthesising these discussions, this chapter highlights the need to move beyond deterministic frameworks and speculative assumptions about audiences. This thesis seeks to contribute to various ongoing scholarly debates by focusing on audience agency, cultural negotiation, and everyday engagement with global SVOD platforms, providing a richer, contextually grounded understanding of global SVOD consumption. Through a qualitative exploration of Saudi audiences' practices and perceptions, this study offers important insights into the intersection of global media flows and local, culturally specific realities. Ultimately,

this research contributes to broader debates on imperialism, global content consumption, audience agency, and SVOD viewing practices, while enhancing our understanding of the role of global SVOD platforms in shaping contemporary media landscapes. Having discussed the relevant literature, the following chapter presents the methodological framework underpinning this research, as well as detailing the fieldwork conducted in Saudi Arabia.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodological approach of this research, which investigates how younger Saudi audiences engage with and make sense of global SVOD platforms in their everyday lives. The chapter will begin by highlighting the philosophical standpoint adopted with regards to research methodology, shedding light on the ontological and epistemological assumptions that guided the research. It will then move into the theoretical framework, detailing the key aspects within reception studies and the everyday life approach that shaped my approach to this study. Following this, the chapter will describe the population and setting of the data collection, followed by a discussion of the research methods, tools, and procedures that were used during fieldwork. Subsequently, the focus will shift to the analysis approach, explained how the data were handled and examined. The chapter will also address issues of quality and validity before concluding with a discussion of ethical issues. Together, these elements provide a comprehensive overview of how this research was conducted, covering both the theoretical and practical aspects of the research journey.

This chapter is intentionally more detailed than what is often found in methodology chapters for two key reasons. First, it addresses the close connection between theoretical assumptions and methodological choices in media audience research. Because the way audiences are conceptualised directly shapes both the research design and the possible scope of findings, the chapter begins by setting out the theoretical premises that underpin this study. This framework, in turn, necessitates a detailed and reflexive account of the research process and choices – one which prioritises openness and transparency in line with the tradition of reception studies (see Morley, 1992) – not simply a matter of preference but a necessity. Second, the context of conducting fieldwork in Saudi Arabia adds a layer of complexity that requires further elaboration. Given the lack of studies on the process and challenges of

conducting fieldwork in the region – particularly in Saudi Arabia – I believe that sharing both my positive and negative experiences can offer valuable insights for future researchers working in similar settings. These reflections are meant to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges faced in this specific national context.

### **3.1 Philosophical Stance**

The philosophical assumptions underlying this research shaped how I approached the study. Ontologically, the study adopted a constructivist perspective on reality, which holds that reality is shaped by social and cultural interactions and is dependent on the particular social, cultural, and individual contexts in which it occurs (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). A constructivist ontology stresses that these realities are not fixed, static, or universal, but are continuously co-created, shaped, and negotiated within their specific social, cultural, and individual contexts. From this perspective, individuals do not passively receive meaning from media content but actively construct it based on their cultural, social, and individual contexts (see Hall, 1980). In approaching younger Saudi audiences, this constructivist approach entails the assumption that their use of SVOD platforms is shaped by the broader realities of Saudi society, including its traditions, values, and norms, as well as their personal experiences and interactions with global media content.

Epistemologically, the study was guided by interpretivism, which focuses on understanding the subjective, personal, and unique meanings that individuals attach to their social actions and lived experiences (Bryman, 2012, p. 28). Interpretivism aligned with the study's aim to explore how younger Saudi audiences used global SVODs in their daily lives, what meanings they derived from them, and how tensions were negotiated when content conflicted with Saudi values, religion, and laws. By focusing on participants' perspectives, interpretivism

allowed for an in-depth understanding of how global SVODs and their content were interpreted and negotiated by audiences in relation to their contexts, as individuals actively derive subjective meanings from content within their unique social, cultural, and personal environments. This approach was particularly suitable for this research, as it sought to uncover the nuanced ways in which audiences engaged with global media in a culturally and socially complex and rapidly changing environment such as Saudi Arabia.

### **3.2 The Practices of Everyday Life and Reception Studies**

This research drew on the reception studies tradition within cultural studies to understand audience engagement with media. Alongside this, it incorporated the practices of everyday life as a conceptual lens to explore how audiences actively navigated, appropriated, and sometimes resisted media within the routines and constraints of daily life. Rather than treating audiences solely as interpreters of media texts, this approach considered how media was embedded in, shaped by, and shaped the ordinary practices and lived experiences of everyday life. Michel de Certeau's work is particularly influential in this regard. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1988) described everyday reading – or media engagement more broadly – as an active, tactical process. He argued that “the reader produces gardens that miniaturize and collate a world” (p. 173), suggesting that audiences do not passively consume but creatively rework media in ways that are shaped by their own social, political, and cultural contexts. His concept of “poaching” illustrates how people engage with texts through a series of advances and retreats, playing tactical games with meaning that are not fully governed or controlled by media producers or institutional power (de Certeau, 1988, pp. 174-176).

In contrast to the semiotic traditions and reading positions of early reception studies (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980), de Certeau's approach is not only related to the level of interpretation but also to how people re-route, appropriate, and adapt media in different and creative ways to fit their lives. John Fiske (1989) was instrumental in introducing de Certeau's conception of everyday practices into the consumption of popular culture (see Hermes, 1995; Moores, 1993), engaging with, for instance, how the pleasures of subordinate audiences of popular culture can reflect both resistance and accommodation. While de Certeau's work has been integrated into reception studies (e.g., Hermes, 1995), his limited attention to the importance of social structures, power dynamics, and the potential idealisation of everyday resistance (see Moores, 1993, p. 622) necessitates further engagement with the broader tradition of reception studies, which more fully addresses these questions.

Reception scholars have always paid particular attention to not treating media consumption as abstract or isolated, but as deeply rooted within complex sociocultural dynamics. Morley's work highlights this by arguing that broader social, cultural, and personal contexts play a vital role in media engagement – from reception and interpretation to the mundane, everyday practices in which media is embedded (see Morley & Brunson, 1999, p. 130). This attention to context and experience is most notably evident in Morley's *Family Television* study (1986), which laid the foundation for further examination of the place of media in domestic and beyond domestic spaces in daily life (e.g., Ang, 1995; Gray, 1992; Lull, 1990; Moores, 1993; Silverstone, 1994). In this sense, media is conceptualised as embedded and rooted in people's lives at a physical level, and on multiple overlapping and interconnected cultural and social levels (Moores, 1993). Therefore, as Bird (2003) argued, understanding the deeper role of media in people's lives requires studying how media operates within the routines and lived realities of everyday life. This includes attention to social and gender dynamics, daily

routines, and the habitual, and even dull aspects of everyday life (see Bird, 2003; Hermes, 1995; Lull, 1990; Markham, 2017; Moores, 1993; Morley, 1986).

In this regard, Michel de Certeau's work on everyday practices emphasises the meaning-making, tactical, and creative appropriation of media by audiences, while reception studies scholars draw attention to how these practices are negotiated and shaped by social contexts, power dynamics, and cultural norms. Drawing from these perspectives, and for the purposes of this study, everyday life is understood as comprising ordinary routines, habits, and practices that are socially and culturally embedded, shaped but not rigidly determined by deeply rooted social and cultural logics, including gender dynamics, spatial, and temporal conditions. This understanding recognises the everyday as a context where media is not simply consumed, but can be tactically employed, reworked, or resisted within the context of people's lived experiences. This is central to how this study conceptualises Saudi audiences' interaction with global SVOD platforms – not only in how they make sense of content, but in how they engage with, or perhaps re-route and appropriate, these platforms and their content to fit their social, cultural, and personal lives.

The everyday life approach thus offers a productive framework, I believe, for answering my research questions about how Saudi audiences engage with global SVODs. By conceptualising these platforms as something that is *lived with*, rather than merely watched or interpreted in isolation from cultural and social context, this study seeks to avoid assumptions about audiences' lives and the place of media within them (see Livingstone, 2019). That is, audiences do not just reject or absorb media – they tactically engage by, for instance, skipping scenes, watching privately on personal devices, or discussing content selectively with peers (see Zaid et al., 2023). Similarly, households can function as micro-sites of

resistance, where both families and individuals subtly regulate, reshape, or repurpose these platforms in daily life (de Certeau, 1988), in ways that are also shaped by the social and gendered dynamics of the domestic space (Lull, 1990; Morley, 1986).

While other approaches within reception studies – such as cross-cultural readings, which contributed to the early debates around cultural imperialism (e.g., Liebes & Katz, 1993) – could be applied, this research prioritises the everyday life lens for its ability to capture both the uses and meanings of SVOD platforms, in ways that are sensitive to its distinctive – and rapidly changing – Saudi Arabian context. In doing so, it positions audience practices as situated and negotiated, reflecting broader social and cultural contexts, while remaining attentive to the ways in which global media becomes part of everyday life.

### **3.3 The Population and Context of the Study**

The focus of this study was on younger Saudi adults, aged between 25 and 35 years old, who represent a critical age group for various reasons. First, the Saudi population is predominantly young, with approximately 71% under the age of 35 in 2022 (General Authority for Statistics, 2023). However, audience research in Saudi Arabia has typically focused on university students aged between 18 and 25 years old (e.g., Alardawi, 2020; Alardawi et al., 2024; Azazi, 2019; Mansour & Al-Dhobaiban, 2022; Qutub et al., 2021). This focus on university students leaves older young adults underrepresented and, to date, unexplored in the context of viewing practices and engagement with SVODs. Second, the chosen demographic, aged 25 to 35, represents a generation at the vanguard of social change in Saudi Arabia. They are navigating evolving conceptions of family and parenting, new approaches to careers and lifestyles, and shifting expectations around relationships. These shared experiences

contributed to common social dynamics that were likely to have shaped their meaning-making processes and engagement with global SVODs. Third, since global SVODs were launched in the Saudi market in 2016, my chosen age group had experienced the world both before and after the introduction of these platforms and could compare their media use, which provided additional insights for the study. Although the age range of the sample in this study was relatively narrow, this choice allowed for a focused and in-depth exploration of this specific segment of the Saudi audience.

The geographic boundary of this study was the city of Riyadh, the capital and largest city in Saudi Arabia. The choice of this city stemmed from various reasons. First, the city is diverse and serves as the cultural and economic hub of the country, providing an opportunity to capture a wider spectrum of different social groupings and access a representative range of attitudes among young Saudis. Second, I was born and raised in this city, which provided me with valuable insights into its cultural dynamics, as well as the ability to establish rapport with participants and understand the city's diverse tribal and regional accents. Lastly, my familiarity with Riyadh enabled me to effectively identify different segments of young adults to ensure that my research sample reflected a broad spectrum of social and cultural groups.

### **3.4 Research Methods, Sampling, and Data Collection Procedures**

This research adopted a qualitative approach, in this way bringing it broadly into line with key philosophical premises and traditions of reception studies (see Schröder et al., 2003; Schröder, 2019). The adoption of a qualitative methodology, when effectively operationalised, enables reception researchers to capture detailed and nuanced results by

uncovering the complex and varied ways in which audiences use, interpret, negotiate, and make sense of media (Livingstone & Das, 2013; also see Schröder, 2019).

My approach therefore draws on and is inspired by various earlier studies in the field, such as Morley's and Lull's accounts of gender and power relations in the domestic space (Lull, 1990; Morley, 1986), Moores' exploration of media use within domestic and beyond domestic spaces (Moores, 1993, 2000), and Hermes' work on meaning-making and everyday engagement with women's magazines (Hermes, 1995), among other studies within the tradition of reception studies that aim to unpack the complexity of people's everyday relationships with media (e.g., Silverstone, 1994).

In light of the nature of the research questions and in line with data collection approaches in the literature, I employed three data collection methods: a) participant observations, b) semi-structured individual interviews, and c) focus groups. These methods were chosen for their ability to provide in-depth insights into participants' subjective, individual, and collective experiences with global SVODs, which align with the ethnographic, interpretive, and context-sensitive nature of reception studies (see Livingstone & Das, 2013; Morley, 1986; Schröder et al, 2003). These methods, as employed, will be outlined in more detail in the following sections.

### ***3.4.1 Sampling***

This research employed a purposive sampling strategy, complemented by snowball and self-selection techniques to recruit participants who were active users of global SVOD platforms. Participants were approached through social media posts and personal outreach, as I asked my social network to put me in touch with potential participants. Subsequently, snowball

referrals were used to expand the sample while maintaining alignment with the study's focus. These combined strategies allowed for the recruitment of participants who met the study's inclusion criteria, namely Saudi nationals living in Riyadh, aged between 25 and 35 years, and active users of SVOD platforms.

The overall approach to recruiting participants aimed to ensure a balance of gender and to reflect diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in the city of Riyadh. While gender was the leading recruitment factor largely due to the history of gender segregation in Saudi society, other factors such as age, marital status, and the city's geographic diversity were considered to better enable the gathering of a wide spectrum of perspectives and experiences.

Of these factors, recruiting female participants was more challenging than anticipated, primarily due to gender norms and the complexities surrounding interactions with unfamiliar men. Generally, social media outreach was less effective than expected in recruiting females. To address this, I relied more heavily on snowball referrals and support from my personal networks to identify potential participants. These strategies proved more successful, likely because they helped to establish trust and a sense of safety. In other words, I found the difficulties in recruiting female participants to be largely in establishing initial contact rather than in their reluctance to participate. Once contact was made, females were generally open and willing to participate. These adjustments ensured that both female and male perspectives were represented in the final sample, despite the differing levels of accessibility.

#### *3.4.1.1 Overview of the Research Sample*

The sample for this study included separate participants for each data collection method. The overall sample consisted of five participant observation contexts, 16 individual interviewees,

and four focus groups (comprising 20 participants in total). These groupings were designed to capture a range of perspectives, from individual viewpoints to more collective social influences, taking into account the complexity of the social and cultural norms of the Saudi society.

Tables summarising all participant demographics are provided in Appendices A, B, and C.

Details of the sample for each data collection method are provided below. A total of 15 participant observation sessions took place in participants' homes, across five different contexts. These contexts included the homes of one female participant, two male participants (one physically disabled), one married couple and one unmarried couple.

Moreover, the individual interview sample consisted of 16 participants, divided equally by gender – 8 females and 8 males. Importantly, three participants from the observation sample were also part of the interview sample.

Additionally, four focus groups were conducted, with a total of 20 participants, including one all-female group, one all-male group, and two mixed-gender groups. The rationale for the gendered group distribution was based on Saudi cultural norms. The all-female and all-male groups were designed to create a comfortable space for participants to discuss sensitive topics related to global SVODs – e.g., sexual content, homosexuality, gender issues – without cultural constraints. Furthermore, I decided to recruit participants for the all-female and all-male groups based on pre-existing social relationships, involving individuals who watch TV together. The aim was not only to avoid culturally expected views but also to explore how SVODs are embedded and negotiated beyond the domestic space. The all-male group

consisted of friends who regularly meet in a social space popular among Saudi males, called “istiraha – استراحة”. The all-female group, on the other hand, consisted of cousins who meet weekly at their grandparents’ home, which, culturally, is a common practice for Saudi women and serves as the female counterpart to istirahat.

### ***3.4.2 Entering the Field: A Note on Gender Dynamics***

There is a lack of academic scholarship that engages with the practicality of conducting fieldwork and interviewing Saudis, especially in light of the ongoing cultural changes. However, it is common for researchers to employ a research assistant of the opposite gender in Saudi Arabia to help with contacting, organising, and attending one-to-one interviews. This practice mainly stems from the Islamic belief that prohibits private seclusion between two persons of opposite genders without a familial relationship. Thus, researchers tend to mention in their interview invitations that an assistant of the opposite gender would be provided to encourage participation.

Prior to my fieldwork, I was concerned about the dynamics of meeting Saudi women and how having a research assistant might impact the nature of the interview setting. To explore this, I decided to conduct pilot interviews to test my interview guide, preparation, and, more importantly, the extent to which having a research assistant would be beneficial. In August 2022, I conducted three pilot interviews, two of which were with females and attended by a research assistant. These interviews prompted me to reconsider the idea of having an assistant. The female pilot interviews did not feel natural, as they resembled interrogation-like settings where the participant was observed by a silent assistant while speaking about her life, stories, and opinions. At one point, a participant looked at the assistant after answering

my question, seemingly seeking approval or confirmation as to whether her response reflected a socially acceptable attitude. This made it apparent to me that the interview arrangements were not ideal.

After these pilot interviews, I asked both female participants whether they were comfortable with the presence of an assistant. One participant told me that she assumed I, as a male interviewer, needed an assistant due to my religious beliefs and preference not to meet her alone. This prompted me to change my strategy when inviting female participants. Instead of stating that a female assistant would be provided, I mentioned that any requirements would be accommodated, including the option of the presence of an assistant or meeting online. Consequently, no female participant requested the presence of an assistant for the interviews<sup>29</sup>, and all one-to-one interviews were conducted solely between me and the participants, either in person or online.

I suspect this development, where gender barriers among Saudis are beginning to decline, is largely due to the increase in women's participation in the mixed-gender workforce. Both men and women seem to be becoming accustomed to interacting with strangers of the opposite gender. This highlights the need to reconsider the strategies researchers use when conducting fieldwork in Saudi Arabia. My heightened concerns prior to the fieldwork in 2022 stemmed from what I had read from other researchers who brought assistants, or were accompanied by their partner, sister, or brother when conducting interviews in past decades. This suggests that future researchers should consider the rapid cultural changes Saudi youth are embracing and remain open to adopting new strategies in the field, moving beyond the rigid academic traditions of the region.

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<sup>29</sup> I had to employ a female assistant for the observation sessions.

### ***3.4.3 Procedures: Sensitising Observation Sessions***

During the planning phase of this research, I identified a noticeable lack of ethnographic accounts detailing how audiences use and engage with SVOD platforms in everyday life (Turner, 2019, 2021). Turner’s articulation of this gap motivated me to incorporate a small-scale ethnographic component aimed at sensitising myself to the everyday contexts in which SVOD consumption occurs. Specifically, I conducted brief observational sessions to better understand how participants interact with platforms and content – from the moment they turned on their device and selected a title, through to the end of their viewing session. These sessions focused not only on screen-related actions, such as skipping, pausing, and commenting, but also on the surrounding context: the physical setting, social atmosphere, and spontaneous reactions to content.

While recent ethnographic work by Johnson et al. (2024), Lobato, Scarlata, et al. (2024), and others has provided valuable insights into content selection and interface navigation, my focus was instead on the situated and contextual aspects of viewing. I was particularly interested in how younger Saudis engage with SVODs in ways that may reflect, resist, or negotiate cultural norms – for instance, through behaviours such as commenting on, skipping, or overlooking scenes perceived as culturally sensitive. At the time of designing this study, there was no documentation of such practices; however, subsequent research by Zaid et al. (2023) has since reported similar behaviour, where participants described the constant use of the skip button to bypass scenes they found culturally inappropriate – framed as part of a broader process of domestication. Their findings retrospectively affirm the relevance of these observation sessions, particularly as a way to explore how such behaviours unfold in practice, beyond what participants may report in interviews. Importantly, my aim for these

observational sessions was to serve as a sensitising tool – an ethnographic lens that deepened my engagement with participants’ use of these platforms. This aligns with the use of sensitising concepts, which offer the researcher a way to remain open to emerging patterns and interpretations without being restricted by assumptions that are predefined or imposed in advance (Blumer, 1954; also see Bowen, 2019).

The observation sessions took place between September and early October 2022. In total, I conducted 15 sessions across five participant contexts: four sessions with an individual male participant, three with an individual female participant<sup>30</sup>, three with a physically disabled male participant, and five sessions with two different couples. Sessions averaged around 80 minutes and were conducted in participants’ usual SVOD viewing environments.

However, various social, cultural, and practical barriers limited the richness of the observational data. Gender norms, in particular, created tensions – especially in the female and couple settings. In the couple sessions, the atmosphere was formal and restrained: females remained veiled, conversation was minimal, and participants selected family-friendly content – likely influenced by my presence. Only the physically disabled male participant chose to view 18+ content, but these sessions were largely silent, with no visible reactions. Across most sessions, I was able to record only basic contextual details – such as the platform, content title, viewing device, and any interruptions – while the anticipated spontaneous interactions or visible reactions were largely absent.

Initially, I felt somewhat disappointed, as I had expected to witness richer engagement – such as content switching, commentary, or multitasking. Yet, in another sense, I came to

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<sup>30</sup> A research assistant was present during these sessions.

appreciate that this quiet, socially appropriate atmosphere might reflect the actual everyday practices of these participants. At that stage, I was reminded of Morley's (1992, p. 181) insights regarding the limitations of observations and the importance of interviews. Without verbal responses, the viewing behaviours I observed remained largely unclear and difficult to interpret.

Consequently, I turned to the interviews, which were always part of my research design, but this experience highlighted just how essential they were for making sense of participants' viewing experiences. Three of the five participant settings concluded with follow-up interviews, while the remaining two settings – the couples – politely declined to be interviewed. While no participants explicitly stated that my presence had altered their behaviour, I remained aware that my role as an outsider – particularly a non-familial male observer – was likely an influential factor, given the cultural norms around gendered space and interaction in Saudi. Although the observations were less revealing than I had anticipated, the interviews that followed offered important insight into how participants reflected on and negotiated their engagement with SVOD platforms.

#### ***3.4.4 Procedures: One-to-One Interviews***

One-to-one interviews were conducted over four months, between October 2022 and January 2023. Although reception researchers recommend conducting interviews in viewing environments familiar to participants to ensure the quality of results (Morley, 1986; Schröder et al., 2003), conducting interviews at participants' houses was not always attainable in my case due to cultural reasons. Culturally speaking, it is socially uncommon and generally considered inappropriate for a female to invite a male stranger into her home for a private or

secluded interaction without an existing social relationship. Furthermore, participants who lived in apartments or houses with large numbers of family members often had no private space available for the interview, and it would be difficult to bring a stranger into their personal room while walking through a fully occupied home. Conducting interviews under such conditions would likely make participants uncomfortable. Therefore, I allowed participants to choose the location based on their preference, while signalling that I was happy to visit them if they had a suitable space. As a result, some interviews were held in participants' homes, others in local coffee shops where I rented private spaces<sup>31</sup>, one in a park, and some female participants opted for online interviews. Moreover, most interviews were conducted at night, between 7 pm and 1 am – a challenge for me, as I was accustomed to an earlier routine while living in the UK. Saudis often stay awake into the early morning hours; for instance, peak times for coffee shops, especially in the city centre, were between 10 pm and midnight. This certainly posed some challenges, yet my aim was to conduct the interviews in environments and at times where participants felt comfortable, with a preference for their homes whenever possible.

Participants received the information sheets by email and WhatsApp, and all their questions were answered prior to the day of the meeting. For myself, I had a preparation checklist that I went through before each interview, including things I needed to do and say: checking my

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<sup>31</sup> Many coffee shops in Riyadh provide private spaces for rent, which proved to be an ideal choice for many participants who could not invite me over. Coffee shops are deeply rooted in Saudi life, with each neighbourhood having multiple local cafes that function in a way similar to pubs and bars in the UK. These coffee shops serve as social spaces where people meet and socialise until early morning hours, and some open 24/7, making them an ideal location for interviews (see Douai, 2010; Fadaak & Roberts, 2019).

digital recorder, carrying spare information sheets, a timer, a notebook, a pen, and so forth. Admittedly, the research topic, the popularity of global SVODs, and the various tensions surrounding Netflix during the fieldwork<sup>32</sup> helped in breaking the ice with participants.

The average duration of the interview recordings was approximately 45 minutes. In terms of my adopted approach to the interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions about their everyday SVOD engagement and its place in their lives. Broadly, the interviews covered patterns of use and viewing contexts, content choices and preferences, meanings and negotiations around content, and views on wider debates about SVODs in Saudi Arabia – see the interview guide in Appendix D.

However, as expected, interviewees would at some point diverge to talk about issues such as LGBT themes, sexual content, and the perceived ideological nature of platforms, driven by a desire to discuss the negative aspects of SVODs. In other words, the “elephant in the room” needed to be addressed – especially in light of the ongoing boycotting campaigns, the Gulf statement, and underlying cultural tensions, as outlined in the Introduction Chapter.

This posed a challenge for me, as many participants often focused on specific concerns and perceived negative aspects of platforms while neglecting the positives and, more importantly, the mundane elements of their daily use. This was particularly problematic because the issues raised were often repetitive and sometimes expressed in nearly identical terms and phrases, such as “the promotion of homosexuality.”

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<sup>32</sup> The collective Gulf statement warning Netflix about violations of social and cultural values was issued a few weeks before the interviews (see Sullivan, 2022).

I addressed this challenge by allowing participants to freely and fully express their concerns, and then gradually redirected the conversation back to their media use – encouraging them to tell stories and talk about their everyday lives. Participants would naturally restore balance to the interview and delve into the positive aspects of platforms when speaking about what they liked to watch, how platforms filled their time, and when they recounted stories about the difficulty of accessing foreign content before the advent of SVODs, among other topics.

This balance was crucial, as I had planned to ask at the end of each interview about the future of platforms in the country, particularly in light of the Gulf statement that warned Netflix and the ongoing societal debate about how to deal with these platforms. While the overall approach described here provides a general picture of how the interviews were conducted, the discussions themselves were more fluid and varied. The semi-structured format and the open-ended questions allowed participants to shape the flow of the conversation, leading to dynamic and occasionally unpredictable topics and discussions.

### ***3.4.5 Procedures: Focus Groups***

The focus groups were conducted between October and December 2022. The four groups were held in different locations. First, the all-male group was conducted in an *istiraha*, a social space popular among Saudi men, where they gather to socialise – some on a daily basis and others weekly (see Lawrence, 2015; Trimeche et al., 2023). Securing an invitation to an *istiraha* was not a difficult task, as it is customary for Saudi men to invite others to their *istiraha* as a gesture of generosity (see Lawrence, 2015). Hence, I was invited to two *istiraha* by two of my interviewees, and I chose to conduct the focus group at the one where they had

subscriptions to SVODs. Second, the all-female group consisted of cousins who meet weekly at their grandparents' house. They invited me over, and we conducted the interview during their regular gathering. Third, the mixed-gender groups were conducted in a coffee shop and a co-working space, both in large private rooms located in the centre of Riyadh, to accommodate participants coming from different parts of the city.

The average duration of the focus group recordings was approximately 40 minutes. The dynamics of the groups varied. The setting of groups whose members knew each other was informal, with participants speaking freely, reminiscing about past memories, making jokes, and sometimes drifting into unrelated discussions or debating each other. This posed challenges in moderating the setting. Although I did my best to minimise off-topic discussions, I occasionally allowed them to continue when there was potential to reveal insights. Thus, the informality of the setting was both positive and negative, requiring careful navigation. On the other hand, mixed-gender groups were more formal, and participants were less inclined to engage in side discussions. Hence, they were notably different: more organised and slightly structured, and as expected, functioning within the boundaries of culturally expected views, despite a few exceptions, as will be shown in the findings chapters.

Although I had a prepared guide for the focus groups – see Appendix D – the discussions flowed naturally, with participants often shifting to new topics early on. This created challenges in maintaining focus and ensuring all relevant issues were addressed. At the beginning of each group, I asked how they used to access foreign content before the advent of SVODs. This question aimed to break the ice between us and create a sense of connection among participants by reflecting on the shared difficulties they had experienced. This question seemed to resonate with participants, as they began comparing the past and present,

discussing what SVODs had brought to them and to the Saudi market. However, after that point, the discussions became more fluid, with groups diverging to different topics influenced by the composition of the group. For example, in the all-male group, one participant mentioned that they would watch certain content in the *istiraha* that they could not watch at home with their wives. Such issues guided the discussions towards topics related to content, values, and the ideas accessible through these platforms. As a result, I had to be flexible, moving between topics based on the group dynamics, while ensuring that key areas of interest were covered. These included changes in access to foreign content, what SVODs have brought to Saudi society, participants' views on the values and ideas within content and their circulation in society, along with their perspectives on wider debates about these platforms in Saudi. Additionally, groups who watched content together – i.e., the all-male and all-female groups – were asked about their viewing practices as a group, what they watched, how they watched, how they chose content, and their shared experiences. Overall, the discussions were dynamic and revealing, offering valuable insights into shared viewing practices, issues surrounding content, and the ramifications of platforms in Saudi society.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

#### ***3.5.1 Transcription Process***

The data corpus consisted of both individual interviews and focus group discussions, as the observation notes did not contain enough valuable data to be included as a primary source for analysis. The interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. I transcribed all recordings manually. This was a deliberate decision as I had promised my participants that I would be the only person to handle their data, and also because the transcription process would allow me to become deeply immersed in the stories

and ideas I heard. Transcription was a difficult task, as I had to use an Arabic keyboard and write from right to left. Although the transcription took longer than expected, I embraced the phase as an early engagement with the data, through which emerging patterns and ideas, at least partly, could be seen even before formal coding began.

In line with the conversational and discursive nature of the interviews and focus groups, I included non-verbal elements such as laughter, tone of voice, pauses, and other paralinguistic features where relevant. These were particularly important for understanding how participants positioned themselves in relation to the discourses they engaged with, especially around topics such as gender dynamics, religious values, cultural concerns, and so forth, that evoked emotional or moral responses.

Transcripts were imported into MAXQDA-2022, which despite its limited language support for Arabic, offered valuable organisational and coding functionalities. This enabled me to code, annotate, and compare sections with ease. While the software's analysis features are more advanced for English, it still provided basic visual and structural support in Arabic that facilitated the manual and interpretive work required.

### ***3.5.2 Data Analysis Approach***

Data analysis was guided by an interpretive approach that acknowledges the inherent complexity of audience reception research. As has been well documented in the field of reception studies, there is no single, prescriptive method suitable for analysing such layered and situated data. Scholars such as Morley (1980, 1986), Hermes (1993, 1995), among others, reflect on the methodological tensions involved in data analysis. Morley openly stated the absence of an adequate methodology, as he employed several strategies to examine data

(1980, p. 156), while Hermes admitted to the interpretive nature of her approach, describing it as “not a prescriptive or rigorous method” (1995, p. 27; also see Hermes, 1993). Despite the varying ways scholars approach their data, attention to the semiotic and discursive aspects of the transcripts – alongside a deeper focus on the social and cultural dimensions – remains central in reception studies (see Schröder, 1994, p. 339).

Drawing on this tradition, I employed interpretive repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) as the primary analytical tool. This form of discourse analysis focuses on the “recurrently used systems of terms used for characterising and evaluating actions, events, and other phenomena” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 149). This approach has been used by other reception scholars (e.g., Hermes, 1995; Schröder & Phillips, 2007), and was particularly suited to understanding how my participants used and made sense of global SVOD platforms in their everyday lives. By examining the varying ways participants talked about their daily life and engagement with platforms, I was able to explore the ideological and cultural frameworks underpinning their narratives – how they constructed meaning using metaphors, evaluative language, and discursive tools.

### ***3.5.3 Coding Process***

Coding was conducted inductively in light of the exploratory nature of the research, which required an open engagement with the data to allow themes to emerge rather than imposing predetermined assumptions. While the method of interpretive repertoires is certainly not systematic and can therefore be time-consuming and overwhelming (see Hermes, 1993, 1995), my coding proceeded in three iterative cycles, each building upon insights from the previous one.

In the first cycle, I undertook open coding, assigning surface-level descriptive codes that captured recurrent phrases, metaphors, and linguistic expressions (e.g., “forbidden/haram”, “disgusting”, “embarrassing”, “anxious”), along with routine actions and immediate observations (e.g., “watch alone”, “watch with friends”, “skipping scenes”, “before sleep”). This stage produced a large number of raw codes – partly due to the ease and speed of coding in MAXQDA, which, while helpful also contributed to the complexity I would face later.

In the second cycle, I began to review and refine these initial codes, searching for patterns and potential groupings. At this point, practical and routine practices were relatively straightforward to organise – codes related to viewing contexts, times of day, types of devices, and other situational factors could be noted and compared. However, conceptual and cultural codes presented a greater challenge. Topics such as cultural tension, identity, and morality often overlapped, and participants spoke in layered ways about the past, the present, and anxieties about the future. One particularly difficult theme to code was participants’ engagement with LGBT content. While it was immediately apparent as a significant site of discourse, the diversity of ways in which it was discussed – through lenses of morality, family, religion, culture, and personal pleasure or discomfort – resisted easy categorisation. During this phase, I relied on a side notebook to document coding decisions, analytic memos, and reflective notes. Embracing the inherent messiness of this stage, I allowed early themes to emerge while acknowledging their provisional nature.

The third cycle focused on interpretation. Here, I worked to contextualise the themes within the broader discursive frameworks that participants used. Much like Hermes (1993, 1995), I found that reconstructing the repertoires was a highly challenging task. As she noted, the process could feel like a “considerable tour de force that would make any self-respecting

researcher slightly suspicious of the value of such a reconstruction” (1993, p. 503). Thus, recognising that the method of interpretive repertoires is not prescriptive or systematic (Hermes, 1993, 1995), I loosened the strictures around what I treated as interpretive repertoires to further consider broader thematic patterns that captured the tension, ambiguity, pleasure, discomfort, and multiplicity within participants’ narratives.

Themes such as morality, “us” and the “Western/American *Other*”, gender dynamics, gendered debates around women’s empowerment, and the perceived “promotion of homosexuality”, among others, emerged not only as codes but as interpretive frameworks through which participants negotiated the presence of SVOD platforms in their everyday lives. The repertoire lens remained central, helping to understand how discursive resources were deployed, while the presentation of findings adopted a thematic structure to fully reflect the richness of the data.

### ***3.5.4 Presentation of the Findings***

In the empirical chapters, findings are presented thematically through four themes: how participants engaged with SVOD platforms in everyday life; the sources of pleasure and satisfaction derived from this engagement; the ways in which participants discussed and negotiated cultural and social tensions associated with SVOD content; and, finally, the perceived broader complexities of global SVODs in society, where local cultural concerns intersect with the desire for global content. The decision to employ this approach emerged from the analytic process itself: while interpretive repertoires were essential for understanding the discursive and ideological layers of participants’ expressions, the data spoke more clearly when structured into broader themes. This allowed for a nuanced portrayal of both the descriptive aspects of platform engagement – how, when, why, where,

and with whom participants watched, elements often neglected in contemporary audience research – and the deeper cultural and social tensions and pleasures that underpinned participants’ narratives.

Quotations are used throughout the findings chapters to illustrate participant voices and my analytical claims. Also, I have included parenthetical notes, such as [laugh] or [angry tone], to point out nonverbal cues. Ellipses (...) are used to indicate omitted words to improve clarity. Additionally, footnotes are used to provide further explanations where a quote, concept, claim, idea may require additional context. Finally, citations for media, films, and series mentioned by participants are included in footnotes to avoid disrupting the flow of their quotes or the analysis.

Overall, by adopting this strategy, I aimed to do justice to the complexity of the data, capturing both the everyday and the ideological, the spoken and the implied. This approach acknowledges the methodological difficulty within reception research in dealing with the complexity of analysis, while foregrounding the value of careful, interpretive, and reflexive work.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained through the University of East Anglia’s Research Ethics Committee. The research also took into account the social and cultural sensitivities in Saudi society, and due to the nature of the topics involved, participants were granted confidentiality and complete anonymity. All names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. Participants were given an information sheet and a consent form – see Appendix E – that

outlined the study's topic and aims, what the study involved for them, the risks and benefits associated with their participation, the right and process to withdraw their voluntary participation, along with how their data would be collected, stored, and destroyed in detail. This information sheet was sent to participants prior to the meeting so they could read it, note any questions they might have, and make an informed choice about participation before the meeting. Participants were also briefly informed at the beginning of each interview and focus group about the study, their rights, and were asked if they had any questions or concerns. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity were prioritised, and all identifiable details were removed during the transcription process. In addition to these standard ethical procedures, reflexivity and cultural sensitivity were central throughout all participant interactions. A reflection on the practical ethical and cultural considerations encountered during fieldwork is provided in Appendix F.

### **3.7 Reflexivity, Trustworthiness, and Translation**

#### ***3.7.1 Reflexivity and Positionality***

Throughout this chapter, I have detailed how I maintained reflexivity during fieldwork, transcription, and analysis. I kept tracking notes to remain self-aware of the decisions I made and the interpretations I offered. However, it is important to acknowledge that interpretation and translation carried an unavoidable layer of subjectivity – an issue inherent in reception studies. I was not simply translating or reporting words but interpreting meaning, often shaped by my own positionality.

I approached this process mindful of my identity as a Saudi national, a middle-class, able-bodied, male, embedded within the very society I was studying and of a similar age to my

participants. These factors inevitably influenced how I perceived and interpreted participants' voices. In many ways, I felt the tension Barthes (1977) described as "the death of the author": once participants' voices left their mouths and entered my analysis, they became partially reshaped by my worldview. This awareness made me mindful and cautious of unintentionally simplifying or misrepresenting the rich and complex lived experiences and stories shared with me.

Moreover, I recognised that my role as researcher, observer, and translator placed me in a powerful position, where the possibility of misinterpretation, exaggeration, or omission could easily and unintentionally happen. Hence, I did my best to be reflexively attentive to these risks. This approach was a central part of maintaining the trustworthiness of my research.

### ***3.7.2 Trustworthiness Through Translation Decisions***

As a bilingual researcher, I carried the dual responsibility of interpreting and analysing data across Arabic and English. All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Arabic, and the initial analysis also took place in Arabic to preserve participants' intended meanings. It was only during the writing of this thesis that selected quotes and interpretations were translated into English, requiring deliberate and, as I hope, systematic and consistent decisions.

Translation was not a straightforward task. It was a cultural and ethical act involving ongoing interpretive negotiations about tone, nuance, and culturally embedded meanings. I was reflexively aware that my translation would ultimately shape how participants' voices appear in this thesis and thus may directly impact the authenticity and trustworthiness of my findings. While my fluency allowed me to navigate both Arabic and English, I recognised the

limits of my own perspective. Hence, I took several steps to minimise bias and strengthen trustworthiness during translation.

### ***3.7.3 Translation Challenges and Strategies***

This thesis process taught me how deeply intertwined language and culture are – in ways I had not previously realised. Everyday Arabic expressions are heavily embedded with religious references. For example, terms such as Haram (forbidden) and Halal (lawful) were invoked frequently during interviews. Additionally, participants often cited Quranic verses or Hadiths spontaneously to strengthen their arguments.

When translating such religious terms and references, I cross-checked against reputable English translations of Islamic texts to maintain accuracy – e.g., Oxford World’s Classics. However, the greater challenge lay in everyday expressions that blended tribal expressions, religious, and cultural elements, for which no direct English counterpart existed.

To address this, I consulted two trusted friends who were English lecturers in Saudi Arabia. They helped review and, in some cases, co-translate difficult terms. I also sought feedback from members of the Arab Students Society at the University of East Anglia (UEA), specifically targeting first-generation Arab immigrants who possessed nuanced understandings of both languages and cultures. This decision to seek their feedback stemmed from my belief that they are immersed in both cultures and thus can provide nuanced cultural views beyond the linguistic rigidity of academic consultants.

One notable challenge I faced was translating the loaded Arabic word “shame – عيب” frequently used by male participants. Although a direct translation as “shame” was initially

suggested by my consultants, I hesitated, feeling that “shame” in English conveys a more immediate and individual emotional response. In contrast, “عيب” in Arabic carries a deeper social and cultural meaning that extends beyond personal feeling to encompass ideas of honour, reputation, and social expectations, with Altuwayjiri (2018) explicitly linking the term to the shame and honour culture of Saudi society. After discussions with Arab students and careful consideration, I accepted “shame” as the closest approximation, while remaining aware of its limitations. This experience reinforced the importance of continuous consultation and cross-validation throughout the translation process.

### ***3.7.4 Translating Terms Related to Sexualities***

Another major translation challenge involved sexuality-related terminology. Since issues related to LGBT content were widely discussed by participants, I had to make analytic and translation decisions in the early stages of the analysis process. The English term “LGBT” was used by only a few highly educated and fluently English-speaking participants, whereas the vast majority relied on Arabic umbrella terms that can be translated as “homosexuality, queer / مثلية / شذوذ، مثلية.” Hence, most of the quotes in this thesis do not contain the term LGBT but instead reference “homosexuality,” as verbally mentioned by the participants. Moreover, there are several Arabic words for the term “gay,” each with varying negative connotations. My participants mentioned only “Shath – شاذ” and “Methli – مثلي”, which are used in formal Saudi and Arab contexts. Although Hudhayri (2021) noted that Arabs use the term “Methli” in abusive and negative contexts online, I inclined to agree with Whitaker’s (2006) argument about the naturalness of the term, which is used among gays in the Arab world and in academic journals. In any case, the context of speech is vital in determining the connotation of the terms (see Whitaker, 2006). My participants used both terms interchangeably and not in a

derogatory manner. Therefore, neither term added different context or meaning to participants' arguments, and hence I did not distinguish between them in my analysis, as I was cautious not to insert additional layers of meaning that were not necessarily present in the participants' narratives.

### ***3.7.5 Acknowledging the Limits of Translations***

Despite my efforts – including consultations, cross-checking with formal sources, and reflexive self-questioning – I recognise that no translation can fully capture the depth and nuance of the original language. Some meanings may be partially lost. However, by foregrounding reflexivity, seeking external advice, and remaining aware of the power inherent in translation, I aimed to ensure that participants' voices were represented as faithfully and respectfully as possible in this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have outlined the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the study, detailed the research design, and explained the methods used for data collection and analysis. This study is guided by a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, which provide the foundation for understanding how younger Saudi audiences create meaning and navigate the tensions associated with their engagement with global SVODs in everyday life. These philosophical positions underpin the qualitative methodology employed in this thesis, supporting an in-depth exploration of how younger Saudi audiences engage with and make sense of global SVOD content within the sociocultural contexts of Saudi society.

The study draws on the traditions of reception studies while incorporating the practices of everyday life as a conceptual lens, enabling a more grounded understanding of how SVOD

consumption is embedded in daily routines and ongoing negotiations. The methodological choices – from the sampling strategy to fieldwork procedures and the approach to analysis – were shaped by the interpretive aims of the research and the need to capture the complexities of platform engagement in everyday life. Reflexive accounts throughout the chapter have outlined the rationale behind key decisions and addressed challenges encountered during my fieldwork, in a context where guidance and experience of fieldwork in Saudi remain limited and constrained by a lack of research.

By situating audience engagement within everyday life and broader social and cultural dynamics, this chapter has laid the foundation for the analysis that follows. The next four chapters will explore how participants use, interpret, appropriate, and negotiate global SVODs in ways that are situated, strategic, and socially and culturally meaningful.

## Chapter 4: Viewing Practices and Contexts

This chapter explores my research participants' everyday practices and uses around global SVOD platforms both within and beyond domestic contexts. It will be a descriptive rather than a primarily analytic chapter, in which I will paint a picture of how SVODs, alongside other media, are embedded and rooted within participants' everyday life. This will be done by looking into participants' routines and habits, along with the spatial and temporal patterns that situate their SVOD engagement within their daily lives. By delving into these aspects, this chapter addresses the first research question, shedding light on how, where, when, and with whom participants engage with SVODs.

This chapter is guided by the everyday life approach to explore how viewing practices are situated and unfold within participants' daily lives. As outlined in the previous chapter, the everyday is understood – and can be approached – through an exploration of ordinary routines and habits that are embedded in social and cultural contexts, as influenced by key dynamics (such as those of gender, marital status and everyday responsibilities), as well as spatial and temporal conditions. This perspective recognises SVODs – and media more broadly – as embedded in participants' lives at overlapping physical, cultural, and social levels (see Moores, 1993), reflecting the complex nature of their everyday media engagement. This conceptual framing allows for a more nuanced understanding of the role of media in daily life (Bird, 2003), while also avoiding simplistic and decontextualised assumptions (Livingstone, 2019, p. 179).

Despite the growing interest in audiences' viewing practices of SVODs, there remains a lack of research into how such practices unfold in people's lives. As discussed in Chapter Two, existing studies on Saudi audiences rely on quantitative methods, overlooking – among many aspects – the lived and situated dimensions of viewing practices. This issue reflects a broader gap in audience studies globally, where qualitative accounts of everyday viewing practices remain underrepresented in various national contexts (see Lotz et al., 2022; Turner, 2019, 2021). Hence, this chapter provides the first qualitative, empirically grounded look into Saudi audiences' SVOD viewing practices within their daily lives, while also contributing an empirical account to wider global SVOD audience research.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section will delve into the everyday media practices of my participants within their domestic spaces. Given the notable differences in viewing practices and living arrangements, this section will first focus on single participants and their engagement with SVODs in their family homes. This will be followed by an exploration of the viewing practices of married participants, which often reflect different social and spatial dynamics within their marital homes. This division based on relationship status allows for deeper engagement with the specificities of viewing contexts and so stands to offer a better understanding of participants' use of SVODs, among other media, in their daily lives.

Following this exploration of viewing practices in domestic spaces, the second section will proceed to explore three non-domestic spaces where relationship status becomes less immediately relevant to viewing practices: istirahat, transit, and work. Each of these spaces will be examined to shed light on how SVODs are embedded in participants' daily lives beyond the domestic space, where viewing practices are shaped by context-specific routines,

social interactions, and other situational factors. Through this exploration, the chapter aims to capture key aspects of participants' everyday routines and contexts, situating their engagement with global SVODs within both domestic and beyond domestic spaces.

#### **4.1 Domestic Viewing: Single Participants and SVOD in Everyday Life**

All single participants in my research, except one male, told me that they lived with their families. This is largely due to the societal norm in Saudi culture, where moving out of the family home before marriage is not considered a viable option (see Fadaak & Roberts, 2019). Each single participant had their own private room, and a few had more than one room within their family homes. Despite limited daily interaction with other family members in shared spaces such as the kitchen and living room, the majority of single participants told me that they spent most of their time in their bedrooms. This echoes Livingstone's (2007, p. 9) discussion around "the shift from 'family television' to 'bedroom culture'", in which young people's time and use of media is centred in their bedrooms, which are well-equipped with various media options. Or, as Flichy (2006, p. 199) puts it of such family arrangements, its members "live together separately." While there is a rich literature surrounding the notion of "bedroom culture" and its underlying reasons, most published research – whether in the Saudi or Western context – focuses on children and adolescents (e.g., Livingstone & Bovill, 2013; Trimeche et al., 2023). As such, studies like this tend to explore concepts – such as identity construction and self-exploration – that may be less relevant to my participants' age group. However, two points mentioned by Livingstone (2007) that are largely relevant to my participants are the availability of technology and the need for privacy (also see Flichy, 2006). These ideas are further explored through the investigation of the everyday routines and practices of my single participants in this section.

The majority of single participants told me that they typically engaged with SVODs the moment they returned home after work. The time after work was generally described as a period of rest. Some talked about how they would lie in bed scrolling through their phones for a while, while others would sit on their sofas and enjoy their hobbies – in both cases, the TV was on in the background. “I like to focus on my hobbies after work,” said Nori. She told me that she had two private rooms in her family home: one for her hobbies, TV, and leisure, and the other for sleeping. She explained that she usually spent her time after work in her hobbies room: “I enjoy sewing; I like to create things with my hands, so I do these activities while watching TV.” She said that the TV was mostly turned to Amazon Prime, Apple TV, or Netflix. For two-thirds of the single participants, SVOD after work was a secondary activity – something in the background while they scrolled through social media, engaged with other tasks, or enjoyed hobbies. Having the TV on while scrolling on a phone served as a means of relaxation, resembling what Evans et al. (2017, p. 198) frame as “the creation of ‘easy’ media experiences” – moments where engagement is intentionally “passive” and “ephemeral”. As Mjeed put it, “I turn it [Netflix] on and play with my phone; I don’t focus on the content. As long as I turn Netflix on, that means I’m taking a break and entertaining myself.” Hence, for Mjeed, Netflix serves as an ambient, comforting presence within the after-work routine. This suggests that reports of SVOD use and viewing need to take account of the different levels of attention granted to them.

“Time after work is for resting,” said Othman. “After I come back from work, I spend an hour in this chair relaxing and watching an episode.” During my visit to Othman’s house to conduct the interview, he did not have a TV; his room consisted of multiple musical instruments, a Lazy Boy chair, and a bed. He told me that he normally lay in the Lazy Boy after work and would watch – or sometimes just listen to – content on his phone. “I thought

about buying a TV, but I found my phone meets my needs... it's big enough... especially since I rely more on listening than watching." Othman spent, on average, an hour and a half on Netflix each day, with a significant portion of this time spent listening to content rather than watching it. He might scroll through social media while listening to *Friends*<sup>33</sup> or *Seinfeld*<sup>34</sup> in the background on his phone – this was his way of relaxing after work. Not only Othman, but Norah also did not have a TV in her room and relied on her phone, appreciating the flexibility it provided. "I don't like laptops, I don't like iPads, I like phones as they are easier and faster [to access content anywhere.]" Similar to Othman, Norah appreciated listening to content, mentioning the importance of "sound quality" in movies on four different occasions during the interview. This emphasis on listening, alongside participants' ambient and background engagement with SVODs, reflects John Ellis's (1992) concept of the television "glance", particularly his argument that sound enables narrative continuity even when visual attention is intermittent. Such background engagement with SVODs is consistent with similar viewing practices found in other national contexts, where SVODs serve as a secondary activity alongside other tasks (e.g., Giglietto et al., 2019; Shao, 2024; Valiati, 2019). However, this act of listening through the phone also indicates that engagement with SVODs in daily life may occur not only away from the screen but also beyond the traditional domestic space, as will be explored in a later section.

Mealtimes, whether dinner during weekdays or other meals at weekends, were when almost all single participants spoke about watching SVODs. "It's important to watch something while I'm eating," said Nori. She said that she usually ate in her TV room while watching Amazon Prime or Netflix. Nori, Mjeed, and many other participants' engagement with the

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<sup>33</sup> *Friends* (Kauffman et al., 1994-2004).

<sup>34</sup> *Seinfeld* (David et al., 1989-1998).

screen during mealtimes was similar to when they watched after work. They described preferring to watch something that did not require a high level of concentration – or, as Mjeed put it:

“There are series that I don’t watch with food, I don’t watch *Peaky Blinders*<sup>35</sup> while I’m eating. Because I have to be mentally present and prepared to watch it, especially when there’s a new season coming out. But, for example, *Gilmore Girls*<sup>36</sup>, I don’t need to be mentally present to watch it.”

While engagement with SVOD is also a secondary activity during mealtimes, participants told me that their phones are often set aside. “I’ll be focusing on the screen while I’m eating, but once I finish, I’ll pick up my phone,” said Mjeed. Mjeed and one other participant told me that they normally did not pause the screen when they finished eating. Their focus shifts from the TV to their phones, where they return to scrolling through social media, and their engagement with the TV drops.

Whether after work or during mealtimes, none of the single interviewees mentioned watching local television or satellite channels in their daily lives. Rather, participants talked about local TV and Arab content as a seasonal activity occurring largely during Ramadan<sup>37</sup>, while breaking the fast with all family members in the living room – “It’s only on Ramadan,... it’s not Ramadan if you don’t watch Nassir and Abdullah<sup>38</sup> [laugh]” said Bader. However, on a

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<sup>35</sup> *Peaky Blinders* (Mandabach et al., 2013-2022).

<sup>36</sup> *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000-2007).

<sup>37</sup> Ramadan is the month of fasting – among many other religious rituals – for Muslims. However, it is also, historically, the primary market for Saudi and Arab media due to the significant surge in media consumption across the region.

<sup>38</sup> Nassir Al-Qasabi and Abdullah Al-Sadhan are arguably the most popular Saudi actors, known for their Ramadan work – often taking the TV prime time slot at sunset, when families gather to break their fast together.

daily basis, most single participants told me that they spent much of their time on social media, especially TikTok and Snapchat. Even when they were interested in something on TV, they might still pick up their phones – “I always play with my phone while I’m watching Netflix,” said Afnan. Like Norah, Afnan told me that she spent most of her time on TikTok, yet she believed that social media and SVODs could complement each other. Or, as Bader put it, “Some of the scenes are predictable,” so there is room to pick up his phone without limiting himself to just one entertainment option. Hence, Bader said that he uses X – previously Twitter – while watching SVODs because he does not “want to miss out on anything.” However, there is broad agreement among single participants that certain SVOD content is considered special and requires concentration, a different arrangement, and a more focused setting.

While some television scholarship has focused on the idea of distraction (Ellis, 1992) and the prevalence of multitasking in contemporary viewing practices (Bury, 2018), Caldwell (1995) argues that shifts in television production towards aesthetics and style demand sustained and attentive engagement from viewers (see also Havens, 2018). Many participants told me that once a new season of their favourite series was released, or they decided to watch content that had captured their interest, their viewing practices and settings largely changed. They described how this viewing context required certain rituals or, as Evans (2020, p. 104) puts it, “costs” in planning and preparation to facilitate concentration and eliminate everyday spatial and temporal distractions. “It’s an event... I like to have a snack, something to drink, lights off, and watch on a bigger screen,” said Othman, who talked about how his phone sufficed for everyday watching. A bigger screen for Othman was his tablet, as he showed me how he normally placed it on an adjustable tea table in front of his Lazy Boy chair. Similarly, Nori, who enjoyed sewing as a hobby after work, told me that she did not sew anything when

watching new or old Marvel movies – “With Marvel, I won’t have anything in my hand because I’m just focused on watching” said Nori. Roughly one-third of single participants put their phones away when watching their favourite content, with some putting their phones on either silent or airplane mode. Even some of those who said social media and SVODs can complement each other reported different behaviours: “I focus, I literally can’t see anything except the TV screen. Honestly, it is just me and the TV,” said Afnan about watching her favourite Korean series. Hence, when it comes to their favourite content, single participants tend to watch on a bigger screen, and their engagement with the content peaks as their phones, hobbies, and multitasking are left aside.

However, this kind of focused and immersive viewing rarely follows a consistent daily routine among single participants. Instead, the majority described it as an occasional activity – triggered by factors such as the release of new content, recommendations from friends, trending shows, or simply their mood at the time. It is, as Othman put it, an “event” – something they planned for or fell into when the conditions felt right, rather than a regular part of everyday routine.

That being said, when this “event” viewing does occur, almost one-third of participants reported watching for extended hours – although how often this happened varied significantly. For instance, Seham described this kind of viewing as mood-driven, something she turned to depending on her mood, stating, “I take a break from social life... episode after episode until I feel bored, then I return to my social life.” Such a habit was also reported by Afnan, who told me that she occasionally engaged with Korean content for extended hours – not in regular or consistent patterns, but, for instance, to watch a newly released series. On the other hand, roughly two-thirds of single participants did not report watching SVODs for

extended hours, for various reasons. For instance, Mjeed mentioned that he preferred to space out his favourite show, *Peaky Blinders*, stating, “I try to divide it as much as possible... I watch at least an episode every week so that the enjoyment lasts longer!” Others, such as Othman and Zahra, told me that they did not have time to watch for extended hours due to the nature of their work, and instead watched their favourite content whenever their circumstances allowed – mainly on weekends. Importantly, it is worth noting that there is no direct correlation between free time and watching for extended hours among single participants. For instance, Seham managed to watch for prolonged hours during this “event,” despite spending at least 10 hours a day between work and commuting. This suggests that such viewing practices are less about availability and more about participants’ priorities and preferences. Therefore, unlike the more habitual and ambient SVOD use described earlier – such as having content play in the background while multitasking – this kind of focused, extended viewing represents a distinct mode of engagement. It is more deliberate and immersive, often treated as an “event,” yet it is not situated within clear or consistent patterns or routines within everyday life.

Whether it is background viewing or an “event,” engaging with SVODs in the domestic space is primarily an individualised activity for almost all single participants, typically taking place in their bedrooms. Despite the social and cultural logics underpinning this preference – which will be discussed in Chapter 6 – shared viewing may occur occasionally, particularly among some females. For instance, Nori told me that she found it enjoyable to watch with her younger sister, occasionally inviting her into her room to watch movies together if their time and work shifts aligned. “We share the same way of thinking. It feels nice when we analyse the show and listen to each other’s perspectives!” Nori explained. Similarly, Sara talked about suggesting a movie or show to watch with her mother in the living room. “My mother

and I love mystery movies... I'll be fully focused if it's a mystery movie," Sara commented. On the other hand, single males generally described a preference to avoid watching in a shared family setting, and some had never watched SVODs with any family members. For example, Aziz described his viewing habits, stating, "I mostly watch movies alone, about 99% of the time. It's rare for me to watch any platform with anyone." However, shared viewing among males is popular outside of the domestic space, away from family members, where the boundaries of social and cultural constraints are often more relaxed.

Overall, SVOD engagement among my single participants was largely characterised by solo, ambient, and secondary viewing practices embedded in everyday routines, particularly after work and during meals. These practices often involved multitasking – such as scrolling through social media or engaging in hobbies – with content serving more as a comforting background than a central focus. However, participants occasionally shifted into a more focused and immersive mode of viewing when engaging with content they considered special, often treating it as a planned or mood-driven "event." These more intentional moments of viewing were not situated within fixed routines or specific times of day, but were instead largely flexible and context-dependent. This highlights how SVODs are integrated into single participants' daily lives in two distinct ways: as a consistent, ambient presence and as an occasional, focused or immersive experience.

#### **4.2 Domestic Viewing: Married Participants and SVOD in Everyday Life**

Familial responsibilities are a crucial aspect of everyday life. In contrast to single participants, who often have a more flexible daily routine after work, most married participants expressed frustration about how busy their evenings were. Almost all of the married participants I met complained about how busy they were and how their lives lacked

organisation. Since the majority were newly married<sup>39</sup>, the weight of new responsibilities was evident in both their tone and daily schedule. “Even though I have been married for two years, I still feel like something isn’t going well; there’s no time, and there are many responsibilities and obligations” said Faisal. However, this chaotic aspect of the new lifestyle seems to settle with time, as I found that the longer the marriage, the less the participant spoke about familial responsibilities.

In contrast to the majority of single participants who lived in houses with their families, most married participants told me that they lived in apartments. The living room holds a central role in the everyday lives of married participants; it is where they spend most of their time – whether relaxing, chatting, eating, playing with their children, or watching TV together. After finishing work, married participants typically dedicated their early evening hours to connecting with their partner and children. While each household had its own routine, most told me they preferred to socialise in the living room – often away from the TV. Even if the living room TV was on, participants generally did not engage with it after work. “The TV is on from morning until night, mostly showing children’s shows,” said Maram. Some participants described having certain rules around TV engagement in the evening, reflecting Silverstone’s (1994, p. 129) concept of “incorporation” – the process through which television is regulated and becomes embedded in the temporal routines of the home. For example, Abdullah and his wife enforced a no-TV rule after work to ensure quality family

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<sup>39</sup> Saudis largely marry through traditional and arranged means. The first few years of marriage are not merely a period of adjusting to a new home and new responsibilities, but more importantly, a period of getting to know the person one has married. Hence, although most of my participants fall between two and five years of marriage, I am using the term “newly married” in the broader Saudi sense, due to the unique and significant psychological, personal, and social shift that marriage brings to Saudi couples’ lives.

time. “You go to work in the morning and come back in the evening to sit with your family; it is wrong to sit in front of the TV. There must be communication between you and your family!” said Abdullah. Similarly, Faisal and his partner restricted TV after work and during certain meals to encourage more interaction – “We try to create a routine in which we don’t rely on the TV too much,” Faisal explained. Hence, the early evening hours for married participants are predominantly dedicated to familial responsibilities and spending quality time with their partners and children, mainly in the living room.

The first interaction between married participants and SVODs typically occurs during dinner, a short viewing session before their children go to bed. I was told that the TV is often on in the background, with little to no concentration given to the content. However, parental status plays a significant role in this setting, as children either interrupt or control this viewing session. “Sometimes she stands in front of the TV,” said Hamoud, referring to their daughter’s desire to watch YouTube on the TV. Hamoud told me that they usually attempted to persuade their child to watch on her iPad; sometimes they succeeded, other times they failed and had to stop watching their own content. Another participant, Abdullah, faced a similar issue: “If you have a child at home, you won’t be able to watch anything because the child controls the house. If you turn on the TV, they’ll want to watch their content through the TV.” However, to avoid interruptions from their children, Maram told me that she and her husband normally used their phones to watch during dinner. “The TV is on [for their twin children], and each one of us uses their phone to watch their favourite series [laugh]. This is only during meals,” said Maram. Nevertheless, Faisal, the only married participant who did not have children, told me that he enjoyed a calm viewing experience with his partner during dinner.

Generally, married participants prefer to engage with SVODs at night. As mentioned in the previous chapter, night is an important part of Saudi social and cultural life, and Saudis often stay awake until the early morning hours. Whenever I asked married participants about their daily viewing routine, the answer depended on their children's sleeping schedule. For example, Maram and her husband preferred to start watching after 11 pm when they felt "relaxed, free, and the house is quiet, and children are sleeping... we don't watch when my children are awake," she said. Another example is Hamoud and his wife, who preferred to start watching TV around 9 pm. However, he told me that their daughter might not allow them to do so: "Recently she sleeps at 10:30 or 11, and sometimes 12 midnight. So, you could say we watch the moment she sleeps until 2 [am]." Hamoud and his partner had a consistent nightly watching routine, which involved at least "a movie, or two episodes before going to bed." Hamoud described the setting: "phones are silent, lights are off, and each person sits in a corner." Among married participants, this nightly engagement is a consistent and regular part of their wind-down rituals.

When it comes to device preference, the vast majority of married participants described a preference to engage with SVODs through the TV. More than half of my married participants told me that they owned more than one TV in their homes. While I was told that they typically watched in the living room, they may occasionally use the other TV. I visited Abdullah's house, where the interview took place in his private TV room, located on the roof of the house. Abdullah told me that he preferred to watch in this space whenever he wished to watch football or a film that his wife did not favour, usually late at night or on weekends. However, even in this room, he might face interruptions, with his child potentially joining him at any time. During the interview, his child entered the room and turned the TV on to watch YouTube, illustrating the earlier point made by his father that his "child controls the

house.” Another participant, Rayan, told me that he had an additional TV located in his bedroom, which he and his wife used at night, or sometimes one of them used alone for a quieter viewing experience away from their children. “Children are noisy... I like to focus and immerse myself in the story,” said Rayan. Nevertheless, in contrast to the solo nature of single participants’ engagement, married participants tend to watch together despite having multiple TVs in their homes.

In spite of familial responsibilities and children’s disruptions, married couples reported a heavy daily viewing routine with a high level of attention. In fact, half of the married participants told me that they engaged with SVODs for a few hours daily. For instance, Hamoud spent, on average, two hours every night with his wife, and recently they had spent much more time watching *Better Call Saul*<sup>40</sup>. Likewise, Faisal reported a similar pattern: “It always starts with one episode, then the second, third, fourth, and you forget yourself,” he said. Furthermore, Maram watched one to four hours at night, either with her husband or alone – in her private drawing and hobbies room. Notably, many married participants told me that they rarely used their phones or scrolled social media during this viewing routine. One explanation for this is that some content sparks conversations in the family setting (Lull, 1990), which takes those who watch together away from their phones. Another explanation is that holding the phone and missing a scene requires asking for a recap or replay, which can be frustrating for the partner. Only one participant, Abdullah, reported heavy use of X in ways that were similar to those reported by single participants in the earlier section. Nevertheless, married couples generally engage with SVODs on a more focused and consistent daily basis than single participants, which I suspect is due to the way they plan and organise their nightly routines and viewing sessions in advance.

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<sup>40</sup> *Better Call Saul* (Gilligan et al., 2015-2022).

#### ***4.2.1 Gender dynamics: Between Shared and Solo Viewing***

Gender dynamics play an important role within married participants' everyday viewing practices. Early studies on family television and household power relations, such as those by Morley (1986) and Lull (1990), highlighted the link between the remote control and gender power dynamics, positioning it as a central tool for exercising masculine control over the viewing setting. However, Lull (1990) argued that television viewing itself is an "extension" of various social and cultural aspects of domestic power – including, but not limited to, control over the viewing environment. He explored how this "extension" is manifested in different national contexts, comparing the West with other parts of the world such as Venezuela, where, for instance, women dominate the viewing setting as part of their domestic domain and power (Lull, 1990, pp. 167-170). In the Saudi context, however, the domestic domain and power are complex and underpinned by tribal and cultural logics. David Long observed that:

“In the traditional Islamic Saudi family, men control business and public affairs while women control the home... There are few areas of the world where women are as domineering in the home as Saudi women are. On family decisions, they tend to present a solid front that men dare not ignore with impunity. There is generally a matriarch... who rules the home,” (Long & Maisel, 2010, pp. 19-20)

While Long's observation highlights a pattern of significant female domestic power, his use of strong, generalised language such as "domineering" may oversimplify or overlook the nuances of this dynamic in my sample. To be precise, no participants reported that their partner constantly imposed content choices, controlled the setting, or was always in charge of the remote. The availability of multiple devices – as recently reported by Johnson et al.

(2024, p. 1637) – and the fact that most participants were newly married likely play a role in mitigating tensions over TV and gender power dynamics. However, where earlier studies by Morley and Lull focused on constant and visible forms of control – e.g., holding the remote control – I found a more subtle exercise of power among my married participants. This power was rarely exercised overtly, but rather manifested in specific moments when certain content was perceived as inappropriate. Specifically, tensions and conflict over control emerge when content was perceived by females as immoral, immodest, or inappropriate – e.g., sexual content – where the negotiated harmony can be interrupted.

At this point, most females began to dominate the setting, to the extent of turning the TV off, ending the viewing session, and, in one case, even cancelling the SVOD subscription. For example, Wejdan told me that she covered her husband’s eyes during some scenes: “I cover his eyes if there’s a [romantic] scene” and “if there’re girls or something like that.” Similarly, Maram told me that while the remote control was mainly left on the table, she might skip what she perceived to be indecent. Such actions were also reported by husbands such as Faisal and Abdullah, illustrating how their wives managed the setting. Nevertheless, such tensions and tendencies to control were not constant but most often arose from individual texts or scenes. These tensions were shaped by social and cultural logics that will be discussed, along with how control and tensions unfold or were avoided, in Chapter 6. What is important to highlight here is that power in these settings does not always appear as direct control, but instead is embedded in everyday practices, where most females tend to manage the viewing setting as and whenever they see it appropriate – perhaps as part of an ongoing extension of their domestic responsibilities.

Although married participants prefer to watch SVOD together, they occasionally watched content in solo settings – whether on one of the previously mentioned TVs in the home, iPads, or just their phone in the living room. The primary two reasons married participants chose to watch in solo settings were when they wanted privacy or wanted to watch content that did not interest their partners. For instance, Maram told me that she had a private room where she frequently spent some solo time away from her children, enjoying hobbies or completing tasks while she watched content. “I watch things that we can’t watch together, like fashion... or other things where our tastes are just different,” said Maram. Whether it was football or a genre that did not appeal to their partner, many participants cited this reason for watching alone. Additionally, seeking privacy was another important reason for solo viewing, particularly among male participants. For instance, Abdullah told me that he frequently sought privacy to watch content due to his wife’s strict rules against sexual and immodest content in the house. While Abdullah had a private room on the rooftop where he could watch in complete privacy, sometimes his wife attempted to dictate what he watched even in his private space, causing conflict in the house, as will be illustrated in the context of discussing how control and tensions unfold in Chapter 6. Notably, those who opted for solo viewing more generally avoided using the living room TV – especially when seeking privacy. For example, Maram tended to use her private room, Rayan went to his bedroom, and Abdullah watched in his rooftop TV room. What is important to note here is that solo viewing was employed strategically to manage differences in taste, privacy needs, and household dynamics. This aligns with Morley’s (2000, p. 91) argument in *Home Territories*, which positions “the fragmentation of domestic viewing” not as a mere by-product of new technologies, but as a way “to avoid, if not resolve, what would otherwise be conflicts over viewing choices”. While device availability – including iPads and laptops (Bury, 2018; Johnson et al., 2024) – enables this occasional fragmentation, the underlying motivations for

solo viewing remain fundamentally social. As seen in both my findings and those of Bury (2018, p. 70), shared viewing remains the primary preference among young couples.

Therefore, it can be said that solo viewing is a negotiated strategy; it allows participants to balance individual autonomy with household cohesion in everyday life.

Overall, SVOD engagement among my married participants was largely characterised by shared, focused, and consistent viewing practices embedded within their domestic life and everyday routine. While early evenings were typically reserved for family interactions and responsibilities – often in the living room but away from the TV – engagement with SVODs usually began later at night. These viewing sessions were treated as a daily routine, often involving both partners and centred around the living room TV. Although occasional interruptions from children or preferences for solo viewing occurred, these were the exception rather than the norm. The TV was the preferred device for engagement, though phones and iPads were used when seeking privacy or flexibility – for instance, during mealtimes. Gender dynamics in viewing were subtle but present, with females exercising control in moments where content was perceived to be inappropriate. This highlights how SVODs are integrated into my married participants' lives as a consistent, shared, and intentional activity.

Having explored the viewing practices of single and married participants within their domestic spaces, the following part of the chapter moves to engage with participants' – regardless of their relationship status – viewing practices beyond the domestic space.

### 4.3 Beyond Domestic Spaces: The Istiraha and Gendered Experiences of Autonomy

One important Saudi social space popular among male participants is known as the “istiraha – استراحة”. Istiraha refers to a venue rented either monthly or yearly, which could range from a small villa, an apartment, or even just a room within a yard, where friends gather for weekend nights and, in some cases, during weekdays (Fadaak & Roberts, 2019, p. 61; Lawrence, 2015). According to Lawrence (2015, para. 5), “Istiraha culture is popular among the younger [Saudi] generation, perhaps partly for the sanctuary it provides from the conservatism of public Saudi life. It is a place to get away from their families, from the city, and from work.” Trimeche et al. (2023) argue that theistiraha plays a significant role in shaping Saudi youth identities, largely due to the privacy and autonomy it offers. While theistiraha provides privacy and autonomy, it is neither purely private in the domestic sense nor an open public space. Rather, it sits between the home and the kinds of public viewing sites discussed in McCarthy’s *Ambient Television* (2001), which traces television’s history as a public and ambient medium. Istirahas echo television’s historically communal mode of viewing, but with clear social, spatial, and temporal boundaries regulating who enters and how viewing unfolds. This section explores the concept and space of theistiraha and how my participants use SVODs within this social setting.

More than half of my male participants were members ofistirahas, which perhaps reflects its social importance in young Saudi males’ lives. Mjeed, one of my single participants, invited me to theiristiraha to conduct a focus group. Theistiraha I visited consisted of two en-suite rooms equipped with two TVs, a PlayStation 5, and various other entertainment options, as well as a kitchen and outdoor seating in a large green field. During my visit, both TVs were placed outside, showing two different football matches. There were 16 people present: some

chatting, some scrolling through their phones, and a few focusing on the football. Hot beverages and snacks were available, and the majority of attendees were smoking either hookah or cigarettes. Initially, I had planned for 7 to 8 participants in the focus group, but only 4 agreed to join, as the others preferred not to have their voices recorded.

Although Trimeche et al. (2023) found that visiting the *istiraha* is a daily activity for their sample, none of my participants went there on a daily basis. Even my single participants, who generally had fewer social responsibilities, preferred to go only a few days a week – a result that is likely due to the higher age of my sample compared to that of Trimeche et al. (2023). Nevertheless, visiting the *istiraha* for my participants serves as a break from work and home, and certainly as an opportunity to meet their friends.

Due to the large number of friends who gather in such places, some participants said that it could be difficult to concentrate on TV. Hence, I was told that engagement with SVODs in the *istiraha* is mainly a late-night activity. “We watch movies at night when there are just a few of us. It’s difficult to watch when it is crowded,” said Hasan. However, there was no clear pattern or frequency to watching movies in the *istiraha*, and this group I met generally did not have a regular TV engagement routine or plan to watch in advance. They normally watched if someone highly recommended certain content, or if they were motivated by a member of their *istiraha* who had a deep passion for cinema. “He’ll yell, ‘movie night, come on!’” said Ali. “It starts from him, it’s always him,” said Ahmad. “We watch Netflix, most of the time Netflix. If the movie isn’t on Netflix, we download it [from pirate websites] and watch it on the TV,” Ali added. Notably, there was only one rule in place to control the flow of the setting: “No one pauses the content. If you get a phone call, go outside!” said Hasan. Nevertheless, I was told that it was generally difficult to control the setting, as some of their

friends might talk loudly while others went in and out, which could disturb the viewing experience.

The idea of watching in the *istiraha* appears to be popular among some married participants, particularly those who preferred not to watch certain content with their wives. For instance, Ahmad told me that he tried his best to avoid “sexual and nude content” when watching with his wife – “I don’t watch any +12 movie in the living room.” The same applied to Hasan and Ali, who also preferred to avoid such content when watching with their wives. Notably, when Ali was discussing why he avoided “sexual and nude content” with his wife, I inquired about the presence of such content in the *istiraha*. Hasan promptly responded, saying, “We search for that content here [everyone laughing].” This group of friends, along with other male participants – such as Abdullah – did not report restrictions on the sort of content that could be watched in the *istiraha*. For instance, Ahmad and Hasan told me that they watched *Game of Thrones* in their *istiraha*, while Ali avoided visiting it because he did not want them to spoil the series. “He used to avoid coming to the *istiraha* when we played *Game of Thrones*,” said Hasan about Ali. What these married participants were doing aligns with the findings of Trimeche et al. (2023), who suggest that the *istiraha* provides a space for activities that might not be easily carried out at home. Trimeche et al. (2023, p. 20) argued that the *istiraha* “allows youth greater independence,” as being at home with the family “represents a psychological and social barrier to practicing what they desire.” This suggests that the *istiraha* plays a significant role in enabling some male participants to exercise a degree of freedom in their viewing practices that may not be easily carried out or enjoyed within the domestic space, especially among married participants.

However, despite the popularity of the *istiraha* among male participants, Saudi females do not have an equivalent social space that offers similar autonomy, freedom, or independence. Fadaak and Roberts (2019) explored where Saudi females aged 25 to 35 spend their free time outside the home, highlighting places such as cafés, spas, and visits to friends and relatives. While it is a common cultural practice for Saudi females to spend weekend nights at their grandparents' homes, the majority of female participants told me that watching during such nights is now a rare activity, largely due to device availability among other factors. For example, Seham used to be the provider of movies to her extended family members when they gathered at her grandparents' house each weekend: "My aunts used to give me video tapes so I could record movies for them," Seham said. Seham and many other female participants reported watching movies with relatives in their grandparents' house on a weekly basis in the past. However, this is no longer the case for the vast majority. As Rghad mentioned, "We're a bit older now [laugh], we're busy and have more responsibilities." Even when they wanted to watch during their gatherings, the female group I met explained that there was little to no privacy or autonomy for viewing content in their grandparents' house. For example, Roa told me that they liked to watch horror movies, yet the lack of privacy could sometimes prevent them: "We had to change the movie if there were younger girls with us. We can't choose something that scares them!" Hence, the concept of the *istiraha* is not just a social space where male friends meet; rather, it represents autonomy and provides a sanctuary "from the conservatism of public Saudi life" (Lawrence, 2015, para. 5). This, in turn, may reflect longstanding Saudi social and cultural realities around mobility and independence, which offer males not only social freedom but also greater autonomy in media consumption – an observation that resonates with Long's point that Saudi women's power within the household often comes at the cost of limited opportunities to engage in activities outside the home (Long & Maisel, 2010, p. 20).

#### 4.4 Beyond Domestic Spaces: Transit

Despite being the largest and most populated city in the region, Riyadh did not have a public transport system during my fieldwork trip. Saudis relied solely on their cars for transportation, as the Riyadh Metro was still under construction. Therefore, commuting to and from work took a significant time for many of my participants. For example, the journey from Amal's home to her workplace took an hour, and some spent more than an hour commuting, expressing frustration over the lost time in Riyadh's traffic. However, I find that many have developed and integrated viewing habits within this daily commute routine, enabled by the availability of reliable high-speed 4G and 5G coverage in Riyadh.

Roughly a quarter of my participants told me that they enjoyed watching or listening to SVODs while driving to or from work. All these participants relied on their phones as the primary device for engagement. For instance, Seham told me, "With this small phone [laugh]... my commute is an hour and a half, I like to watch something." When asked about safety, she said, "As you know, the traffic is very slow, so that helps... I put it [the phone] in front of me, behind the steering wheel." Seham described a preference to avoid watching anything that required concentration while driving – "*Friends*, usually *Friends*, or something similar to kill time, also I watched *Oprah Winfrey*, she has a show on Netflix called *Greenleaf*<sup>41</sup>." Another participant, Abdullah, told me, "I use my phone to watch from my house to work, or from work to my house... I connect it [the phone] to the car's speakers... I watch and drive." When asked whether he feared having a car accident, he confidently said, "No, no, my head is up. If the traffic is smooth and no one is in front of me, let's say 100 metres, I take a glance at the screen." Abdullah differed from Seham regarding

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<sup>41</sup> *Greenleaf* (Wright et al., 2016-2020).

content preferences while driving, as he watched what he had not finished the day or night before. “If I couldn’t finish it because I’m sleepy or it’s late at night or whatever reason, I watch it in the morning on my way to work... I don’t concentrate 100%, let’s say around 40%.” However, Abdullah said he sometimes skipped parts of the content so he could finish before arriving at work. I find that what Abdullah, among other participants, described aligns with the argument of Hanchard et al., who note that although phones provide convenience and flexibility, this “often leads to fragmented viewing” (Hanchard et al., 2021, p. 7).

Despite the risks associated with participants who watch SVODs while driving, some used SVODs in traffic in safer ways. For example, Amal engaged with SVODs during her commute only as a passenger, as she had her own driver. “I watch in the car while I’m waiting,” she said, referring to her journeys to work or any long destination. Additionally, not all participants watched the screen while driving; Othman only listened to the content. He selected content he already knew and had watched before, such as *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. Notably, Othman had *Friends* downloaded on his phone so he could enjoy it if there was a weak signal or internet interruption. This was especially useful when he travelled to other cities by car for business<sup>42</sup>. Othman appreciated the download feature during travel, as did Aziz, who was also a frequent traveller. “I travel a lot. I use it [Netflix] in airports, in waiting areas. I download the episodes in advance so I can watch. It’s important for me to watch in these times,” said Aziz. While downloading and watching content offline on a phone is not a new feature introduced by SVODs, Othman was the only participant who used to download content to his phone and watch it in his car before the advent of SVODs in Saudi Arabia. This

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<sup>42</sup> Despite the high-end digital infrastructure and 5G network, Saudi Arabia is a large country with vast uninhabited areas. As a result, signal interruptions frequently occur for those travelling by car between regions. This makes the download feature especially useful, enabling uninterrupted viewing despite a weak signal.

suggests that, while offline phone viewing existed before, SVODs have made such viewing practices more accessible and mainstream among my participants. Finally, it is worth noting that these practices are a matter of interest and preference, and there appears to be no direct correlation between the length of the commute and the tendency to watch SVODs.

#### **4.5 Beyond Domestic Spaces: Work**

Work takes up a significant part of most participants' weekdays. Some participants spent half of their day working, while others worked night shifts. For instance, Othman worked for "10 to 11 hours a day, whether it was on or off-site." Meanwhile, Amal had varying work shifts. During the month of the interview, she worked night shifts from 10:30 pm to 8 am, stating, "Work is quite long, and my sleep schedule is shifting." Although workplaces are not conventionally associated with SVOD viewing, a notably large number of participants reported engaging with SVODs at work. This section therefore explores participants' viewing habits and practices within their work routines.

Roughly one third of the participants reported watching SVODs at work. It was a daily habit for some and an occasional activity for others. As the vast majority of participants watched TV during dinner at home, many preferred to watch SVODs during breakfast or lunch at work. Mjeed had a consistent daily viewing habit during his one-hour lunch break. "I don't eat without Netflix, every day. But I don't take that long." Like other participants, Mjeed used his phone to watch Netflix while eating in the office. During such times, participants typically watched content they described as simple, short, and possibly something they had seen before, due to the limited time available. Faisal told me, "I eat within half an hour or twenty minutes, I don't want to focus or think, so I want something simple like that..."

*Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and currently, I'm watching *Rick and Morty*<sup>43</sup> on Netflix.” Similarly, Sara preferred to watch short content: “I like to watch when I'm eating breakfast, something like a documentary, interior design, or fashion shows, all of which are on Netflix and Apple TV.” Importantly, such viewing sessions should not be seen as separate from participants' evening viewing routines; rather, they represent a continuation of what and how they watch during other mealtimes at home. This viewing preference – involving consistency, and the rewatching of familiar content – has also been observed in other national contexts, such as the US (Shao, 2024).

Despite those who watched during breaks, some participants also engaged with SVODs during actual work hours. Abdullah, who watched content during his commute, said he sometimes extended his viewing session into the office when he did not finish what he was watching. “Sometimes I continue watching during work if it's interesting,” Not only did Abdullah watch during work, but four other participants had similar habits. Yet, they were not necessarily driven by the excitement of a show, but rather by the nature of their jobs. I find a clear correlation between free time at work – e.g., time spent waiting for customers – and phone usage. Zahra told me that free time during work increased boredom, which pushed her to watch Netflix on her phone. “When there's no work, and there's no need for me, I feel bored, and I watch something,” said Zahra. Similar to Abdullah, if Zahra became captivated by some content, she might prioritise viewing over her work responsibilities. “If I start watching a series that's really exciting, I'll watch it even if I have work, I'll finish the episode first. Trust me! [laugh]” However, Zahra left her job a few months before the interview and told me that she no longer watched anything during her current job. “Pressure, mental and physical pressure, and there is no time for me to watch

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<sup>43</sup> *Rick and Morty* (Harmon et al., 2013-present).

anything. I'm not in the mood and I don't have the time for it. I mean, basically... there is no time to watch!" she said. Another example, both Norah and Maram told me that they had plenty of free time at work. Similar to Zahra, this free time was dedicated to their phones, where they scrolled through TikTok and Snapchat and watched content on Netflix. While Norah watched Netflix, on average, twice a week during work, Maram watched Netflix on average three days a week in the office. Such viewing sessions ranged from one to two hours, yet both prioritised social media over watching SVODs. Or, as Maram put it, she only watched Netflix "when there's nothing exciting on my phone [social media]." Nevertheless, watching two or three days a week demonstrates that SVODs are an important entertainment option beyond the domestic space for many participants, complementing other media and integrating into their daily lives.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the everyday practices and usage of SVODs among younger adult Saudi audiences, seeking to understand how SVODs are integrated into their daily lives. While the majority of single participants engaged with SVODs daily after work and during mealtimes, married participants tended to restrict their viewing of SVODs to the evenings. This preference for night-time viewing was largely influenced by familial responsibilities and the desire to avoid interruptions from children. Despite married participants expressing concerns about interruptions and time constraints due to family obligations, they dedicated specific time slots to intentionally engage with SVODs more frequently than single participants. One possible explanation is that single participants often treated SVODs as a secondary, background activity throughout the day, whereas married participants were constrained to a specific time window at night for TV engagement, prompting them to plan their viewing schedules more meticulously. Furthermore, regarding device usage, most

participants preferred watching SVODs on a TV, especially when viewing their favourite content. However, device preference was often influenced by contextual factors such as space and time. Therefore, many participants opted to use their phones to watch – and sometimes listen to – SVODs, particularly when in transit or during work hours.

This chapter has illustrated how different viewing contexts played a vital role in shaping SVOD viewing practices and the overall nature of the experience. While married participants occasionally experienced tensions with their partners, single participants enjoyed a more autonomous viewing experience in their private spaces. Hence, some married participants tended to watch SVOD content outside the home, in places such as the *istiraha*. Despite the uncomfortable and noisy viewing experience it offered, it represented a viable and autonomous option for some male participants to enjoy content – a luxury that female participants did not have. Additionally, this chapter has examined other distinct viewing spaces, such as during transit and at work. It has demonstrated how participants integrated viewing habits into their mundane activities, taking advantage of the accessibility provided by their phones. Overall, the viewing practices of SVODs were significantly influenced by overlapping cultural, social, and contextual factors, all of which shaped the nature of everyday engagement with SVODs among my participants. Having explored the viewing practices, the following chapter proceeds to delve into aspects of tastes and pleasures.

## Chapter 5: Tastes and Pleasures

Building on the everyday practices and use of SVODs, this chapter delves into questions of taste and pleasure, exploring these from my participants' differing perspectives. This will be achieved by shedding light on what SVOD platforms have brought to my participants, causing some to shift their interests from Arabic to foreign content, while others feel their taste is being "elevated". The chapter will also engage with various forms of pleasure derived from SVODs before, during, and after the viewing experience. By delving into issues of taste and pleasure, this chapter addresses the second research question, highlighting the deeper personal and cultural significance of SVODs for younger Saudi audiences. Furthermore, this chapter is an important step in setting the scene for a later discussion on how tensions emerged, were negotiated, and navigated in light of the apparent personal, social and cultural significance of global SVODs illustrated in this chapter.

As the Literature Review established, our understanding of the reasons underpinning the popularity of global platforms and the increasing consumption of foreign content around the world remains limited. Straubhaar et al. (2021), drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital, suggested that such cosmopolitan consumption may function as a way for audiences to signal cultural sophistication, giving an example of how his students spoke about, for instance, *House of Cards*. Similarly, Havens (2018, para. 8) highlighted how streaming platforms offer cultural capital to audiences seeking to signal cultural sophistication. Hence, much as Santo (2008, p. 20) argued in the past regarding HBO and quality TV that "pay cable sells cultural capital to its subscribers," arguments have been made that Netflix, among other global SVODs, has entered the quality TV market, competing with original global quality content (Jenner, 2016; Schlütz, 2016) and selling cultural capital to its subscribers (G.-Stolz, 2021; Havens, 2018; Straubhaar et al., 2021). Nevertheless, "quality TV," with the

complexity and ambiguity many scholars attach to this term (e.g., Martin, 2013; Mittell, 2015; also see Havens, 2018, para. 3), requires cultural capital to be recognised and appreciated (Schlütz, 2016, p. 103).

Despite “the stubborn locality of taste” around the world (Lobato, 2019, p. 133), global SVODs have successfully positioned themselves within various national markets. To address the challenges of appealing to local tastes, platforms employ different strategies to attract audiences. One such strategy, as Lotz argued, is utilising data on viewing behaviours to build taste clusters that go beyond national and geographic boundaries, allowing platforms to serve discerning tastes and interests (Lotz, 2018, 2021a; also see Iordache, 2022; Straubhaar et al., 2021). Despite contentions around taste clusters and recommendation systems, other scholars have engaged with how platforms negotiate relevance by offering content that embraces and engages with diverse racial, gender, and sexual themes relevant to both local and global audiences (see Asmar et al., 2023, 2024; Elkins, 2021, 2024; G.-Stolz, 2021; Higson, 2021; Jenner, 2018, 2024). Given these complexities, among many other factors, Lotz (2025) argued for the need to understand why audiences engage with content and the meanings and pleasures they derive from it. By examining these aspects, this chapter will delve into issues of taste and pleasure among younger Saudi audiences – a topic that has not been investigated in relation to SVODs in the Saudi context until now.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section will argue that SVODs have expanded the boundaries of taste for my participants. This expansion is not necessarily about creating entirely new tastes and preferences, but also about satisfying those that may have previously been latent or dormant due to limited access. That limited access stemmed not only from a lack of content before SVODs, but also from the limited quality and variety of

Saudi and Arab TV content. Building on this, the second section will investigate forms of pleasure that, while bound up with SVOD usage, lie outside of textual viewing experiences. Thus, by examining experiences of interfaces, recommendation systems, and content choice options, this section will provide a basis for understanding how participants enjoy the library and engage with content in light of the constant recommendations and personalised experience. Finally, the last section will delve into textual and experiential pleasures. Focusing on pleasures derived from SVOD content, this section will showcase the main types of content that participants enjoyed and the reasons underpinning such pleasures. By doing so, this chapter will highlight the deeper personal, social, and cultural significance of global SVODs for my participants.

### **5.1 The Expansion of Taste: Quality, Diversity, and Abundance**

Before the advent of global SVOD, in the context of limited available content and the difficulties surrounding finding foreign shows, the boundaries of Saudi viewers' tastes for TV content had been limited to whatever was on offer. Today, SVODs not only provide ease of access to content that was previously difficult or, in some instances, even impossible to obtain, but also offer new types and variety of content that were never available to Saudi audiences. Although one may never be able to watch the vast number of titles available on such platforms, this vast selection facilitates and provides a space in which viewers can satisfy existing interests while also developing new ones and gaining knowledge about various genres, series, actors, directors, and so forth.

The advent of global SVODs in Saudi Arabia is a cultural development that most participants enjoyed talking about. While watching foreign content had been a preference for some

before, it became almost a norm and part of many young Saudis' everyday lives, signalling a shift in popular culture. Salman summed up this idea, arguing that

“You’re forced to watch because it’s the talk of society, the thing everyone likes and is hyped about... everyone started doing it, so if you don’t do it, you stand out. I mean everyone is talking about it, and you’re the only one not watching it, so what would you do? You watch so you can communicate with them more, you know!”

This point raised by Salman was also mentioned in different ways by others. For instance, Abdullah, who told me that “I was frankly ignorant about technology back then,” said that he had to subscribe to Netflix partly because “everyone on the street was talking about it.” The ways Salman and Abdullah, among others, described their experiences suggest a concern with cultural capital, or as Bourdieu (1984) put it, “familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society”<sup>44</sup>, in order to maintain or enhance their social lives. For many participants, engaging with SVODs was not merely a matter of staying socially relevant by knowing “the thing everyone likes and is hyped about,” but, more importantly, about avoiding social isolation, resisting the concern of “standing out,” and, as Salman put it, being able to “communicate with them more.” In this way, SVOD platforms serve for many participants as tools to negotiate, to a certain extent, aspects of their social identity. Throughout my interviews, participants demonstrated varying degrees of knowledge and awareness about SVODs, their advent, and their role within society, with some actively attempting to showcase sophistication in this knowledge and awareness, as will be shown throughout this chapter. However, the majority agreed that global SVOD platforms had significantly expanded their tastes and preferences, especially noting what they described as a jump in quality compared to Saudi and Arab media.

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<sup>44</sup> As mentioned in the Literature Review, this quote is widely attributed to Bourdieu’s book *Distinction*. However, I was unable to find this exact wording in the English translation, and therefore no page number is provided.

### 5.1.1 “Our Direction Is Poor, and Our Series Are Really Bad”

In one of my first interviews, Bader caught my attention by saying, “These platforms were the reason for elevating our society’s taste.” Bader then took me down memory lane to his first exposure to Netflix and how impressed he had been when he first watched *The Simpsons*<sup>45</sup>, *Jackass*<sup>46</sup>, and a stand-up comedy show by Kevin Hart. “Kevin Hart [Bader smiled and shook his head], I didn’t know who Kevin Hart was at that time, but when I saw those works... I felt that we are still, you know, late with our productions, and we are still late with our tastes in general.” Bader went on to compare what he saw on Netflix at that time with widely respected local Saudi shows such as *Tash ma Tash*<sup>47</sup>, arguing that SVODs “elevated” Saudi viewers’ and content creators’ tastes by providing access to a variety of foreign content that had never been available to Saudis, at a time when even cinema screens were not legalised in the country.

Although Bader was the only participant who used the term “elevation” in the literal sense<sup>48</sup>, others mentioned issues that relate to the broader idea of elevation and quality brought by SVODs, especially in comparison to Saudi and Arab media. This tendency towards comparison is particularly common among participants who had not previously watched foreign content regularly before subscribing to SVODs. Such participants generally agreed that these platforms offer higher-quality content compared to Saudi and Arab media. In fact, some reported a shift from watching Arabic to foreign content, mainly due to the quality of

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<sup>45</sup> *The Simpsons* (Groening et al., 1989-present).

<sup>46</sup> *Jackass* (Tremaine et al., 2000-2001).

<sup>47</sup> *Tash ma Tash* (Al-Hammood et al., 1993-2023).

<sup>48</sup> In contrast to other participants, Bader’s choice of words was quite formal and sophisticated, as he said in Arabic, “elevating our society’s taste – الارتقاء بذائفة المجتمع”. However, other participants used terms that clearly convey the idea of elevation, such as “غيرت نظرتنا – حسنت – طورت”.

direction and narrative. For instance, Hamoud told me that “it’s all about the direction and the plot ... I mean, this is something new, with new direction and new stories, and it is also different, even in terms of captivation.” Hamoud engaged with various reasons as to why he had shifted from watching Saudi and Arab content, feeling that, for instance, it was predictable: “we all know how they end,” hence, he no longer felt captivated when he watched “Kuwaiti series and *Tash Ma Tash*” anymore. Similar ideas were presented by Afnan, who told me that “our direction is poor, and our series are really bad. Where can we find a Saudi action series, for example, like *Fast and Furious*<sup>49</sup>?” What Hamoud and Afnan, among others, valued was mainly the newness of visual direction and narrative rather than the complexity or innovation that many scholars associate with quality content (e.g., Martin, 2013; Mittell, 2015). Of course, those new to foreign content did not identify these issues of direction and narrative based solely on novelty or difference, yet they could not explicitly state what was unique about those elements beyond this newness. One possible explanation for why such participants valued direction and narrative is that they saw these as key weaknesses in Saudi content, which they described as being in a poor state and of which they had grown bored, particularly regarding direction, visual presentation, and storytelling. Hence, they valued the “new,” “different,” and “not typical” aspects of visual direction and narrative brought by SVODs, as they described. This, in turn, resonates with Lotz et al.’s (2022, p. 518) argument about the importance of understanding the state of local media to explain the high uptake of global platforms.

### ***5.1.2 Quality Features and Projection of Sophistication***

Participants who were regular consumers of foreign content before the advent of SVODs were less interested in speaking about Saudi media. Rather, they tended to showcase the

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<sup>49</sup> *Fast & Furious* (Moritz et al., 2001-present).

qualities they looked for, with some trying to demonstrate a degree of sophistication in their content choices by mentioning popular actors and directors and delving into the quality aspects that interested them. For instance, quality content for Faisal was content that allowed him to think about and dive into its details. He gave me what he described as an “old movie,” *Interstellar*<sup>50</sup>, as an example that captured what he meant. He said, “*Interstellar* is a movie you really dive into scientifically. You get to see why they did things the way they did and how they built the whole movie. Honestly, it was a movie that should be taught [to filmmakers/directors].” Faisal referred to Christopher Nolan as “a legend,” specifically because the movie made complicated scientific ideas enjoyable to watch. Faisal further talked about the importance of character development and the complexity of both narrative and direction, giving me examples of content that he had enjoyed, such as *Vikings*<sup>51</sup>, *Sherlock*<sup>52</sup>, and *Luther*<sup>53</sup>. Another participant was Qarar, who wanted to talk about the importance of characters, forgot the name of *Peaky Blinders*, and recalled the name of the main character, saying:

“There’s this series, I can’t recall the name, hmm, Thomas Shelby. It’s a famous series about a British gang... The idea is that he has a charismatic character, strength, someone who always drinks, smokes, and takes a violent approach, and so on.”

It is vital to note how Qarar remembered the name of the character rather than the series, which indicates that she was not speaking from the point of view of a fan. What Qarar described about Thomas Shelby was an interest in the ambiguous character, possessing both positive and negative attributes. Some scholars argue that such complexity and ambiguity of character is a feature of quality content (e.g., Schlütz, 2016). Although I noticed this feature

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<sup>50</sup> *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> *Vikings* (Hirst et al., 2013-2020).

<sup>52</sup> *Sherlock* (Gatiss et al., 2010-2017).

<sup>53</sup> *Luther* (Cross et al., 2010-2019).

being mentioned by some participants from a fandom perspective and in appreciation of certain actors, Qarar, Faisal, and Bader valued it primarily for its pleasurable aspect, regardless of who the actor was.

Quality of script and screenwriting were other features mentioned by participants, particularly by those who possessed some level of English fluency. This was, in some cases, a subtle projection of social status through their language skills, as some initiated discussions about language preference before I even asked whether they watched in Arabic or English<sup>54</sup>.

Regardless of how or where such participants had obtained the language – some through education and others from movies – those who had good English skills enjoyed certain quality features that were never mentioned by those who did not speak English. Othman told me that:

“The script is the main factor that captures my interest, not the direction, or colours, or cinematography. The evidence of this is that I still watch shows from the early ’90s, even though there’s no picture quality... So, the quality of the scenario and the quality of the scripts have a bigger effect.”

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Othman sometimes only listened to content. His level of English allowed him to enjoy dialogues in their original language. Sara, Nori, and Faisal, among others, shared similar sentiments, as they watched without Arabic dubbing or subtitles to enjoy “the creativity of the dialogues,” as Sara put it, in its original form without being lost in the translation process. Nori told me that, “Sometimes there are phrases or idioms used in English, and the translation comes out completely different from what they’re saying or the

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<sup>54</sup> While English is becoming more widespread among teens in Saudi today, fluency is still largely a privilege among my participants’ generation, especially those over 30. In this group, English fluency is mainly common among those who studied in international schools, high-ranking universities, or overseas – all of which can be, at least partly, indicative of social status.

dialogue being spoken because they're using idioms that are not translatable." Such participants' appreciation for original dialogue implicitly frames their language skill as a gateway to a level of detail and nuance that others, who relied on subtitles, could not access. They position themselves in distinction to others who merely watched and understood through translation that, as Nori noted, was "completely different" from the original dialogue. This language skill, in turn, not only enriches their viewing experience but also aligns with the broader cultural sophistication that global SVOD platforms seem to offer.

Although participants varied in what they considered to be pleasurable quality content, some distanced their taste from certain SVOD platforms. For instance, Bader, who had been impressed by and had praised Netflix for the "elevation" and what the platform had done for Saudi society, told me that he had cancelled his subscription a few years ago due to what he believed was a decrease and, at times, an absence of quality. Bader said:

"I stepped back because I felt that the essential elements that make a good film or series were missing from Netflix... for example, the selection of content, the way the scripts were written, the choice of characters, the production itself, the type of ideas I was getting from this content"

Bader went on to explain:

"Netflix, to be honest, and no one can deny this, is a powerhouse in the world of film production. If a platform can bring in Leonardo DiCaprio and have him work on one of its projects, or bring other big names to its productions, it's [shook his head, implying it's impressive], but unfortunately, you'll often find that despite this production capacity and budget, the work still lacks the essential elements that you want."

While Bader gave a detailed, linguistically sophisticated answer about why he left Netflix and its quality issues, it is important to note how he had previously been impressed by Netflix compared to his position now. It is a shift from feeling "we are still late with our tastes in

general” to “I felt that the essential elements that make a good film or series were missing from Netflix.” He was implying what seemed to be a journey of “elevation,” and how, within a few years, he had evolved and changed his opinion about Netflix from being appreciative to critically evaluating its content quality, production capacity, and budget. Through this change, Bader partly proved his point regarding the role of global SVODs in “elevating” Saudis’ taste.

Bader and other participants – especially those who were regular consumers of foreign content before the advent of SVODs, such as Sara, Faisal, and Nori – aligned their tastes with platforms such as Amazon Prime, Apple+, and, most importantly, OSN+ (HBO)<sup>55</sup>. Yet, while they aligned their tastes with such platforms, they – except Bader – still used and appreciated some of Netflix’s content. In other words, the majority of such participants were not as harsh as Bader when it came to distancing their tastes from Netflix. As Sara explained, “I find more things on OSN [HBO] than what I find on Netflix.” Faisal similarly said, “I don’t find many things on Netflix, let’s say.” Both Sara and Faisal were speaking in a qualitative manner when they said “many things.” Notably, however, while both Sara and Faisal distanced themselves from Netflix and the mainstream, they regularly spoke about Netflix when describing their daily routines, habits and viewing practices, and never mentioned opening or engaging with OSN+. This suggests that they might have been trying to distance themselves from Netflix and the mainstream at that certain point of the interview – perhaps to assert more discerning tastes. This broader distancing, as shown by Bader, Sara and Faisal, functions as a way to showcase their knowledge and signal cultural sophistication, aligning

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<sup>55</sup> OSN+ is a regional platform that exclusively streams much of HBO and other studios’ premium content across most MENA countries. Hence, some participants referred to OSN+ simply as HBO.

their tastes with OSN+ while marking them in distinction from – and in subtle opposition to – the mainstream who merely watch Netflix.

### ***5.1.3 Global SVODs as Gateways to New Genres, Cultures, and Trends***

The expansion of content offerings and the ability to access a large number of titles across different genres, topics, and interests was highly appreciated among participants. In fact, when I asked participants about which genres they liked to watch, many gave detailed answers that were more nuanced than simply naming a genre. For example, Sara told me that she liked to watch thrillers and horror that contained “mystery that comes from psychology and is based on how people think.” She went on to explain what she meant by giving examples of content such as *Mindhunter*<sup>56</sup> and *The Haunting of Hill House*<sup>57</sup>. This ability to navigate and engage with such subgenres allowed participants to expand their knowledge of their interests as well as to explore more narratives and artistic styles within and beyond their preferences. For instance, Norah was one of those interested in horror content. She told me that the available horror movies in Saudi Arabia before SVODs had only one theme, which was “a blend of action and horror. The horror back in the day wasn’t great.” However, she said that SVODs allowed her to delve deeper into the genre with many different types and options of horror: “Now it’s changed... I mean, these days you might watch something like *Smile*<sup>58</sup>. It’s not filled with dark or heavily complex themes, but it’s genuinely terrifying.” While the example of *Smile* shows that Norah, similar to the majority of participants, did not

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<sup>56</sup> *Mindhunter* (Fincher et al., 2017-2019).

<sup>57</sup> *The Haunting of Hill House* (Flanagan, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> *Smile* (Finn, 2022).

differentiate between content made by or for SVODs and content licensed to SVODs<sup>59</sup>, it is important to note how she framed her idea about the role of SVODs in expanding her knowledge of the genre canon. The same applied to Seham, who told me that she was now able to delve deeper into content based on real stories about “murder, betrayal, deception, you know, it really lets you see people’s experiences.” Other participants also spoke about different types of interests, such as Faisal and Afnan, who enjoyed watching content about animals and nature; Maram and Nada, who were interested in fashion; and others who mentioned cooking, history, competition reality shows, and so forth. This suggests that SVODs not only allowed these participants to delve deeper into genres, subgenres, and topics that interested them, but also highlights how exposure to SVODs led them, as in the case of Sara, Norah, and Seham, to explore their interests in ways that were not possible before the advent of these platforms.

This expansion of content offerings goes beyond genres and topics of interest, as another key point mentioned by many participants was the availability of productions that tell stories from many different parts of the world. After being largely limited to American content, I was told that SVODs introduced culturally diverse content. I found that my participants not only enjoyed watching such content on a regular basis, but they also formed critical opinions and developed interests around it. For example, Sara told me that, “If I want to watch something romantic or sappy, there’s nothing like Korean dramas... For peaceful and sappy content, the Koreans really know how to do it right.” Another example is Afnan, who told me that Koreans were highly creative in their stories and “their series end quickly, like in only 16

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<sup>59</sup> While this distinction may not be especially significant in the context of viewers’ experiences of engaging with SVODs, it nevertheless sheds light on broader industry studies that tend to focus primarily on platforms’ original content, often overlooking licensed titles.

episodes. You don't get worn out or have to overthink it. Plus, they have some really good comedy shows. Unlike in America, Korean shows have comedy that really makes you laugh.” Despite the popularity of Korean content among some of my participants, many also talked about and critically engaged with European, especially Spanish, content. For instance, Areeg told me, “Spanish shows mean a good story. The Spanish are known for their crime stories... their stories and direction are really nice.” Abdullah told me that the Spanish show *La Casa de Papel* was a big hit in Saudi Arabia: “It has a lot of fans and a very good reputation.” In fact, this show was the main reason why Hamoud started following Spanish content. The popularity of *La Casa de Papel* among Saudi youth was highlighted by Qutub et al., who documented its significance in Saudi pop culture (2021, p. 7). This comes in line with Lotz and Lobato's argument that *La Casa de Papel*, among other Korean and French SVOD content, “have demonstrated the potential of non-English-language originals to become global pop-culture hits” (2023, p. 4). In addition, other participants also spoke positively and negatively about French, German, Swedish, and Ukrainian content. All of this indicates how global SVODs have opened an appealing window for younger Saudi audiences to explore content beyond American shows. More importantly, it enables them to join a transnational audience community and connect with what is being watched and appreciated around the world – an aspect that resonates with Siles et al.'s findings in the Costa Rican context (2019, p. 512).

The last vital aspect in relation to taste and SVODs is the availability of modern and what some participants described as “trendy” content, after having been largely limited to “old” American shows. This can be seen clearly in the ways some participants expressed what content they watched or enjoyed watching. For instance, when Bader talked about his first exposure to Kevin Hart, he added, “I saw it at the same time it was airing in America.” He

also mentioned on other occasions, “it was trending [in the US]” and “I’m the kind of person who likes trendy content.” Watching content simultaneously with viewers in America is a luxury that Saudi viewers did not use to have. Similarly, other participants told me that they mainly preferred to watch new releases. For example, Qarar told me, “Netflix has given me the freedom to watch new releases... I’m not really into old movies; I get frustrated if I see something in an old-fashioned style and end up switching off the TV.” In fact, more than half of my participants preferred to watch modern and recently produced content. This shows how some value the transition from being limited to only watching old American content to developing an interest in exclusively watching modern-produced content. This also suggests that SVODs not only connect the Saudi audience with the world but also enable them to join a transnational audience community at a temporal level, experiencing content simultaneously with others overseas and feeling part of a global cultural moment.

Overall, the way participants talked about the advent of global SVODs indicated an important cultural development in Saudi society. Participants described how these platforms had both elevated and expanded their tastes and preferences. This “elevation” was not merely about the perceived quality and diverse content offerings of SVODs, but also about longstanding issues with Saudi and Arab media, which were described as being in a “poor” state. The way participants demonstrated their knowledge and expertise in, for example, Korean and Spanish content showcased how these platforms had facilitated this expansion of interests and preferences among young Saudi audiences. Importantly, participants described their engagement with platforms, as shown by Salman, as necessary for negotiating their social identity in order to fit in with their peers. In this way, SVODs not only enabled participants to join a transnational audience community by providing them with both new and old, quality and diverse content, but also facilitated a space in which they could negotiate their social

identity, maintain cultural capital, signal sophistication, and participate in transnational cultural conversations. That being said, while the quality and quantity of platform offerings were central to the appeal of SVODs among participants, exploring how they navigated this abundance within often oversaturated libraries sheds further light on aspects of taste and pleasure.

## **5.2 SVOD Library, Recommendation Systems, and Content Choice**

Arguments have been made that the vast number of available SVOD titles can complicate and overwhelm subscribers (e.g., Heijden, 2023; Longo, 2021). However, rather than encountering frustration when scrolling through the titles on offer, many participants told me that they found this to be a source of pleasure in itself. This is especially notable when those titles intersected with the participant's tastes and interests. As pleasure can be obtained before the textual experience begins, this section delves into the intersection of the library, recommendation systems, and taste. It explores how participants enjoy the library as a space of exploration and the extent to which the recommendation systems play a role in their content choices.

SVOD libraries were described as spaces where one could spend pleasurable time beyond watching content. Some participants found browsing titles, looking for what was new or trending, or adding content to their watchlists to be pleasurable activities. For instance, Amal told me, "The interface is packed with loads of stuff and loads of series that make you think, 'Wow, I've got so many options.'" Amal and several other participants said that they enjoyed the interface by scrolling through titles while auto-play showed previews and trailers. This was an activity that Qarar enjoyed too: "When I open Netflix, sometimes I sit for an hour, just scrolling to see what's there." This personalised scrolling experience is, in some ways,

similar to holding a phone and scrolling through TikTok or Instagram reels that show relevant content to the user. This scrolling is also about exploring popular content, as some platforms display national, regional, and international trends, enabling participants to become part of a transnational audience linked in time, as discussed in the last section. Nevertheless, I found that for some participants it was not entirely clear whether they wanted to watch content or simply browse to see what was trending, recently added to the platform, or recommended to them on their interface. For example, Qarar mentioned that she engaged in SVOD scrolling to explore new content; however, if she intended to watch content, she used a different approach. This approach, which some other participants also adopted, involved searching and filtering the results based on their interests and current mood. Qarar explained, “I select the genre that I want, for example, the drama genre,... and then I set the range from 2018 or 2019 and above.” She then further refined the results based on personal factors or interests. Hence, I found that scrolling through titles, top ten lists, and worldwide trending content to explore what is on the platform is an activity in itself, which, in turn, confirms Frey’s (2021, p. 66) argument that such lists aim to capture audiences’ attention and increase engagement.

This practice of scrolling through titles seemed to be more popular among those who believed that SVOD personalisation was quite accurate and met their tastes and interests. Hence, they enjoyed browsing what the platform was showing them and exploring new or old titles they might like. Qarar expressed this clearly, saying, “Netflix understands me.” Similarly, Nori said, “I find things that resonate with me and are close to my interests, and this really motivates me more.” Nori used a phrase to further describe her feelings once she opened the platform, though the phrase cannot be translated literally into English. However, it conveys that the titles on her interface aligned with her taste, as if she were the one who had selected and organised those titles. Therefore, she reported a feeling of “excitement” before and

during the scrolling through the titles the platform had prepared for her. In fact, Nori delved deeply into how recommendation systems worked and talked about how she tried her best to feed not only SVODs of her preferences but also IMDb. “After watching a movie, I rate it on IMDb to receive similar suggestions,” Nori said. In contrast, however, Othman did not feel that what appeared on his interface was relevant to his taste. Othman explained:

“I don’t find it particularly useful, to be honest. I mean, 80% of the recommendations on Netflix just are not suitable for me. It’s true that they are related, but they don’t suit me... They are related because I think Netflix says that as long as you watched a certain series that was about drama and thriller and had a certain actor, you will like a similar work. but, in the details, this work is completely different”

Othman believed that algorithms did not understand what he was looking for, as viewing history or feeding the algorithms with only likes and dislikes did not precisely reflect what he liked about the specific content he watched or enjoyed. As mentioned earlier, Othman’s main interest was in the quality of scripts, dialogues, and other aspects that he wanted to feed the algorithms in order to improve and personalise the recommendations. In this way, Othman’s frustration with the recommendations was in itself a display of cultural capital, as he not only demonstrated his understanding of how algorithms worked but also showed that his nuanced taste could not be captured by the platform’s broad metrics. What Othman noted has been mentioned by some scholars in the context of SVOD algorithms, as subscribers want to input their precise interests regarding why they liked specific content to improve the recommendations (e.g., Alvarado et al., 2019). Therefore, this suggests that one of the main differences between those who find scrolling through titles a pleasurable activity and those who see it as less relevant lies in how well the suggestions from SVOD recommendation systems match their tastes and interests – despite the importance and pleasure participants derive from exploring top ten lists and trending content.

### ***5.2.1 SVOD Recommendations and Content Choice***

On the surface level, the majority of my participants told me that they chose the content they watched based on SVODs' recommendations. This is what Lotz referred to as "the secret sauce," arguing that the effectiveness of recommendations is driven by data on viewing behaviours (2022, p. 87). While some scholars, such as Alexander (2016) and Pajkovic (2022), expressed concerns about the potential impact of such recommendation systems and algorithms on taste-making, Frey (2021) demonstrated through a large audience study that viewers relied mainly on traditional recommendation methods – such as word of mouth, popularity of content, and phrases of critical acclaim – to guide their content choices. Within this contentious debate around algorithms and content choice, recent work by Johnson et al. (2025, p. 6) proposed the concept of "default viewing", which they described as a habitual process that audiences follow in order to facilitate shortcuts in their everyday content choice.

Taken together, both Lotz's and Frey's work shed light on different aspects of the content choice process: Lotz emphasised the algorithmic logic behind recommendations, while Frey highlighted the continued role of traditional methods such as popularity and critical acclaim. My findings suggest that these factors operate together within the patterns of Johnson et al.'s "default viewing," where everyday habits make platform recommendations the default starting point, even when participants supplement them with other methods.

As shown in the previous chapter, most of my participants engaged with platforms on a daily basis. In fact, they often watched different types of content at various times throughout the day, whether during mealtimes, after work, or at night. Participants typically chose what to watch based on the time they had, their mood, location, and other factors. This indicates their need for regular recommendations of content that match their tastes, interests, and the overall

setting. While most participants used multiple methods to find content, many of these methods – such as recommendations from friends – were not sustainable enough to provide constant and consistent suggestions. Hence, the predominant approach for the majority was to rely on platform recommendations, as the flow of suggestions is continuous. However, they differed in how they handled such recommendations.

Participants' approaches to SVOD recommendations revealed different forms of “default viewing,” shaped by varying degrees of trust in platforms. First, roughly half of the participants told me that they chose content based on top ten lists, critical acclaim, and popularity. For these participants, titles that had garnered attention and popularity from others did not need to be rigorously double-checked, as they were likely of good quality. “You’ve got ten to choose from, pick one, and you’re sorted [smile],” Hamoud said. Importantly, even some participants who were critical of the overall relevance of SVOD recommendations still found trending lists and phrases of critical acclaim helpful, perceiving them as somewhat separate from personalised recommendations based on their viewing history. This reflects the idea of “default viewing” as a shortcut, where visible cues such as top ten lists reduce the effort of everyday decision-making by signalling that the content is already verified by others rather than the platform.

Second, roughly one-quarter of participants largely trusted platform recommendations and felt that SVOD personalisation met their tastes, such as Rayan and Nori. Here, “default viewing” resonates closely with the platforms' suggestions, with only light checks for relevance. Such participants believed that the recommendations were based on their past viewing preferences and hence would likely meet their tastes, as explained by Nori in the previous subsection. This is not to suggest that they were not discerning in their taste

preferences and watched any recommended content blindly without watching the trailer or checking the genres, actors' names, and so forth. Rather, they primarily valued the relevancy of such suggestions, which, as Nori put it, was a result of her continued ratings and viewing history.

Third, roughly one-quarter of participants were critical of platform recommendations yet still used them as guidance. Specifically, these participants told me that they relied on platform recommendations but verified the extent to which content deserved to be watched using different verification methods outside the platform, such as IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes ratings, or social media. They did not trust platform recommendations for various reasons, such as feeling that platforms promote their original content or that platform recommendations were typically irrelevant to their tastes. "It's like I'm telling them I don't trust you; I'll check if it's good from someone else. So, I look it up on IMDb. If the rating is really good and the story got me excited, I watch it." Sara said. Hence, these participants preferred to rely on independent judgment. In this way, the platform remains the habitual starting point for content choice. Even though they interrupt the process with verification steps, their content choice process still begins with the convenience of SVOD recommendations before moving to external checks.

However, it should be noted that some factors could sometimes change how participants handled SVOD recommendations. For instance, a suggestion featuring newly released content by their favourite actor or director would not usually undergo their IMDb checks or validations of critically acclaimed phrases. For example, Sara told me that she would bypass this trust issue if the content was written or directed by someone she trusted, such as Mike Flanagan: "He's starting to brag, I mean, any series now, he immediately writes in the trailer

that it's by the creator of *The Haunting of Hill House*. These things really catch my attention too." Even within such changes in handling recommendations, these patterns are consistent with Johnson et al.'s "default viewing", where the interplay of habit, convenience, and other cues leads participants to repeatedly rely on familiar shortcuts – whether those are platform suggestions or trusted actors, directors, or any sign of credibility or preference.

That being said, the way my participants handled SVOD recommendations aligns well with both Lotz's and Frey's arguments about content choice and recommendation systems. First, it clearly shows that participants still relied on what Frey referred to as the traditional methods of choosing content, such as popularity and critical acclaim. Second, the reliance on platform suggestions indicates that these are effective regardless of trust issues. If the suggestions had continued to show content unrelated to the participants' tastes and interests, they would not have relied on them as a predominant source of recommendation. The fact that the majority of participants still cared about popularity, critical acclaim, and so forth does not mean that any content fitting these criteria would meet their tastes. What Frey called the traditional methods served only as a double-check that added a sign of credibility to a suggestion already relevant to their interests and past viewing history. Therefore, while traditional methods of choosing content prove important for many, platform suggestions also inform many participants' viewing choices. When both Lotz's and Frey's arguments are considered through the lens of Johnson et al.'s "default viewing," it becomes clear that platform recommendations and traditional methods together contribute to a habitual process that facilitates shortcuts in my participants' content choices, with SVOD libraries typically serving as the default starting point.

Overall, participants' engagement with SVOD libraries and recommendation systems revealed different practices that blended pleasure, habit, and decision-making. As SVOD libraries are oversaturated with a large number of titles, platforms rely on recommendation systems believed to provide a personalised experience. For many participants, browsing the library and scrolling through trending titles, new releases, and newly added content was in itself an enjoyable activity, sometimes undertaken without the intention of watching anything. However, for content choice, recommendations with visible cues such as top ten lists, critical acclaim, and popularity served as shortcuts that reduced the effort of decision-making. Even participants who were not satisfied with SVOD personalisation still drew on these broader signals of credibility, treating them as distinct from suggestions based on their viewing history. In this way, both the enjoyment of browsing and the reliance on these cues reflect habitual and routine patterns in which SVOD libraries are the default starting point for content choice, even when decisions are later refined by more selective or traditional methods and checks. Having explored participants' engagement with SVOD libraries and their recommendation systems, the next section turns to the textual and experiential pleasures participants derived from the content itself.

### **5.3 Textual and Experiential Pleasures**

Viewers choose content they want to watch for various reasons, yet one of their ultimate goals is to immerse in a pleasurable and enjoyable experience (see Vorderer et al., 2004). Building on this idea, this section will focus on how participants spoke about different types of content they enjoyed, the kinds of pleasures they derived from such content, and their feelings of satisfaction during these moments. By doing so, this section will demonstrate how social and personal circumstances and experiences play a vital role in steering participants to find different kinds of pleasures in different content.

Participants varied in their experiences of pleasure derived from global SVOD content. It is interesting to observe the ways that different participants' social and personal circumstances and experiences incline them towards different kinds of pleasures. For example, one of the participants, Sara, talked about how content sometimes resonated with her dreams, resulting in pleasurable experiences that took her away from her social circumstances. Although she did not name a specific movie, she illustrated this type of pleasure in a general sense:

“Sometimes it [content] really resonates with me, like it reflects experiences and feelings I’ve lived through or aspire to live. Like when they depict someone leaving their current life to chase their dreams and moving to a new city and starting fresh. I really love these kinds of movies, they give me, as I’ve said before, a bit of fuel for life.”

As mentioned in the last chapter, Sara was a single female living with her mother. Due to Saudi customs, one, regardless of gender, is generally not allowed to leave their family home and live independently before marriage (see Fadaak & Roberts, 2019). The desire for autonomy and independence is evident in Sara’s expressions of “leaving their current life”, “moving to a new city”, and “starting fresh”, which as she put it, gave her “fuel for life”.

Notably, while Sara sometimes watched content with her mother, she told me that she preferred not to watch such content with her. “If I watch something like this with my mum, it will hurt her feelings. I mean, she’ll feel like she’s chaining us [Sara and her siblings].”

While Sara’s choice of the word “chaining – مرتبطنا” may imply her feelings of a lack of freedom, she did not want to pass this feeling on to her mother, preferring to enjoy her personal connection with content alone.

Another example of how personal circumstances and experiences play a vital role in finding pleasure in content is Maram, who told me:

“I watch a series called *Anne with an E*<sup>60</sup>, and there’s hardly any plot or purpose to it, it’s quite shallow. However, when I’m under stress or going through something, I love watching this series. It gives me positivity and optimism. The portrayal of life in the series is really beautiful. Whenever I see the nature scenes in the show, it soothes me, which is why I watch it.”

Maram grew up in a small town in Asir, a green and mountainous region in the southwest of Saudi Arabia<sup>61</sup>. Although Maram had worked and lived in Riyadh for many years, in our interview she told me that she still missed the green nature and calm life of the countryside. Hence, when she was “under stress,” she sought “positivity and optimism” portrayed in the context of green, beautiful countryside nature, away from big cities like the one where she currently lives. It is important to note how Maram found this content pleasurable, yet she described it as “shallow” and “there’s hardly any plot or purpose to it.” While this may indicate that this is an aesthetic-sensory mode of pleasure, it also signals how a personal connection with content can result in a pleasurable experience regardless of how the content’s quality is perceived.

Content can deeply touch personal aspects for participants, resulting in unique experiences. Seham took me down her memory lane to moments when she felt lonely during the COVID-19 lockdown: “I was so bored. I watched *Friends* from the first to the tenth season. I mean, I didn’t leave them; they were my friends. Literally, during the last episode, you wouldn’t believe it, I cried,” Seham said. It is important to note how Seham described *Friends* as her “friends” due to the feelings of loneliness during the lockdown. Another example is Ahmad,

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<sup>60</sup> *Anne with an E* (Walley-Beckett et al., 2017-2019).

<sup>61</sup> To put this in perspective, the region where Maram grew up is 2,500 meters above sea level, with summer temperatures typically in the early 20s°c. In stark contrast, the Riyadh region is a sandy desert that lacks vegetation, with summer temperatures reaching up to 50°c.

who told me that “My nephew has autism, but I didn’t really understand what autism is at that time.” He said he watched *Life, Animated*<sup>62</sup>, a documentary film about an autistic child and his family. This documentary gave Ahmad a different perspective, moved him emotionally, and, as he said, allowed him to “comprehend” what autism is and the difficulties his nephew was going through. Another example is Bader who told me that “One of the best series I’ve watched was *Suits*<sup>63</sup>. It’s all about law, court cases, and dramatic situations; some of which I’ve actually experienced myself, and things that I expect could happen in our society.” These examples illustrate how participants interpreted and valued different content through the lens of their own life circumstances, with personal connection giving the content a distinctive meaning for them, resulting in a unique viewing experience. Importantly, while social and personal circumstances and experiences steer participants to find pleasure in different content, the diverse content on SVODs plays a vital role in enabling such distinctive personal connections.

### ***5.3.1 Different Moods of Pleasures***

Participants had a variety of different interests spanning many topics. I was given many examples of how some enjoyed what SVODs offered around their own interests. For example, Maram was interested in fashion, as she told me, “*Emily in Paris*<sup>64</sup> is really beautiful for fashion and all that’s related. I think most girls have watched it... We pick up so much from them, whether it’s fashion or makeup.” While Nada shared the same interest, saying, “I’m into fashion, I mean, I pay a bit more attention to these things,” Maram explained why she enjoyed fashion content: “Everything I see, I learn from them, like how to

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<sup>62</sup> *Life, Animated* (Williams, 2016).

<sup>63</sup> *Suits* (Korsh et al., 2011-2019).

<sup>64</sup> *Emily in Paris* (Star et al., 2020-present).

dress, talk, eat, and even about lifestyle choices.” Both Maram’s and Nada’s interest in fashion sometimes went beyond content targeting fashion enthusiasts to include any content that featured women, because “every year actresses dress and wear makeup according to the trend,” Maram said. For such participants, the exposure to a vast array of content featuring women from around the world gives them wider perspectives on fashion that go beyond their national and regional trends. Moreover, other participants expressed different interests around topics such as history. Seham told me that, “I actually like stuff that has politics and history in it, like *The Crown*<sup>65</sup>, for instance, the history of Britain and Queen Elizabeth.” Similarly, Ahmad talked about his interest, saying, “Documentaries are really great for me, I find them really useful and learn a lot from them. I’m into history, and I love exploring different civilisations and all that!” Many other participants mentioned different personal interests, whether around the environment, animals, technology, design, cooking, and so forth, all of which linked to pleasurable experiences they had with SVOD content. While it is unclear how such interests were catered to before the advent of SVODs, linear TV and other legal and illegal channels – e.g., Arabic pirate websites – may not be able to match the scope of professionally translated global content available across such a variety of interests.

One interest that was common among participants is rewatching foreign content they used to watch on local and Arabic channels before the advent of SVODs. This spans from children’s anime from the 1990s to more recent works such as *Breaking Bad*<sup>66</sup>. This is not only a pleasurable form of nostalgic fandom viewing (Williams, 2015), but participants also told me that they wanted to watch content in its original form. Abdullah told me that he watched children’s anime that he had previously watched on TV in the 1990s so he could “see the

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<sup>65</sup> *The Crown* (Morgan et al., 2016-2023).

<sup>66</sup> *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan et al., 2008-2013).

differences.” He explained that Arab production companies rewrote and edited children’s content in ways that transformed the story to align with Arab and Muslim values:

“They used to carefully choose the scripts, rewrite them, change things around, even cut out scenes. Like, even religious stuff. Like if there’s a scene where the main character picks something up and his necklace with a cross shows, they’d just remove the entire scene. They’d go in, edit everything, completely change the dialogue, and replace it with Islamic values and ideas and all that.”

Hence, he enjoyed watching content he had grown up with to see its original version and explore the differences. Other participants mentioned works such as *Friends*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Prison Break*<sup>67</sup>. While the main reason mentioned by all these participants was wanting to rewatch content without censorship to explore what they had missed, some added that SVODs offered better translation. This suggests that SVODs not only connect participants with what is being watched around the globe in the present but also offer an opportunity to revisit the past to explore texts that are no longer obliged to align with Arab and Muslim values. This, in turn, showcases another example of Lotz et al.’s (2022) argument that the high uptake of global platforms may be rooted in issues within the local media environment.

#### 5.3.1.1 “I’m Not Ashamed of Saying This”

Despite pleasure arising from watching topics and interests mentioned earlier, some kinds of pleasure are rooted in, and arise from, interests around tensional areas such as nudity and sexual content. Due to the cultural sensitivity of such topics in Saudi society, it is difficult to obtain an accurate view of the extent to which participants enjoyed watching culturally taboo content. Nevertheless, in the context of discussing their tensions with SVOD content, some

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<sup>67</sup> *Prison Break* (Scheuring et al., 2005-2017).

participants were open enough to share positive views when prompted about their tensions. For instance, Othman told me, “I like nudity in movies and TV series... It attracts me, I enjoy it.” He went on to explain that he did not actively “search for it,” nor did he consider nudity and sexual scenes a reason to choose content. Yet nudity added a pleasurable component to content for him. In agreement with Othman, Abdullah not only liked sexual scenes but also went a step further to describe them as beneficial for learning new aspects of sex. He explained, “I’m not watching it to relieve desires, you know, but more for educational purposes.” Abdullah expanded on this topic and talked about how some SVOD content relied heavily on sexual scenes and how they “leaned towards sadism, and try to introduce different perspectives on sex.” While such tensions will be discussed in the next chapter, Abdullah told me that “I accept some aspects of it... I might take inspiration/ideas, but I won’t perform the same rituals.” Notably, while Abdullah said that watching such content was beneficial “for educational purposes,” he added an important factor that he kept in mind before adopting any new idea, saying, “I’d relate it back to my religion, filter it, and see what’s permissible and what’s not.”

While both Othman and Abdullah were quite open in stating that they enjoyed nudity and sexual content, other participants expressed some form of pleasure only in limited instances. For example, Bader said that nudity and sexual scenes in general were not desirable, yet he gave me an example to explain a scenario where nudity and sexual scenes were important to give a nice touch to the story. He said that, “If I’m watching a series about a man and a woman who love each other, get married, and see each other [naked/it can mean have sex], alright, that’s what’s supposed to happen between them in the first place.” Seham expressed a similar idea, saying sexual scenes were a part of the “love story.” However, although Bader was quite explicit and clear when he talked about where sexual content was desirable, he

added, "... and I'm not ashamed of saying this." While what Bader said reflects how taboo this topic is in Saudi society, it might signal some change in the taboo status among younger Saudis. This can be seen in some participants' responses. For example, Zahra said, "This is a sensitive question [laugh]. It depends [laugh]," and then preferred to change the topic.

Although I could not explore in depth the types of pleasures around this topic, it is clear that some participants enjoyed watching nudity and sexual scenes despite the social and cultural boundaries around expressing pleasure from explicit content.

However, I should note that the nudity and sexual scenes discussed in the last two paragraphs were about heterosexual relationships. While it has been shown how heterosexual scenes are a sensitive and taboo topic to discuss, I found homosexual scenes to be an even bigger taboo, leaving little space for conversation in the Saudi context. It was therefore interesting to note the ways some male participants used different terms to describe LGBT content featuring gay or lesbian characters. While the majority described male gay content as "provocative," "disgusting," "it bothers me," and "gross," some participants, such as Mjeed and Othman, did not describe lesbian content with the same sentiments. I probed Othman to explain why he had changed his language, and he said, "Homosexuality in women arouses me... It really makes the series exciting." Another example: when I probed Mjeed, he said, "There's no reason, nothing personal. Lesbianism between two women is okay; it doesn't disgust me [smile]." Although Othman was the only participant who explicitly told me that he liked lesbian content, the way Mjeed talked about it might indicate hidden pleasures that one may not feel comfortable discussing in the Saudi context. Nevertheless, due to the cultural sensitivity of this topic, I was careful to avoid causing any discomfort for participants and preferred not to probe more than once with some participants and did not probe at all with others.

Overall, this section highlighted how participants create their own meanings and pleasures from SVOD content, whether by relating it to personal experiences and emotions or by negotiating enjoyment around socially and culturally sensitive topics. While the number and range of titles offered by SVODs certainly facilitate, at least in part, such pleasures, participants also valued another feature of these platforms: the openness inherent in global SVODs. This was not only about having access to censored or culturally prohibited content such as nudity and sex, but also about the opportunity to explore the *other*. Maram, for instance, talked about getting inspiration to “dress, talk, eat, and even about lifestyle choices” from women around the world, while Seham and Ahmad explored Western narratives – which may not necessarily be similar to the Saudi narrative – of different histories and civilisations. This, in combination with how some participants openly talked about finding pleasures around taboo topics, points towards a certain openness amongst younger Saudi audiences.

### ***5.3.2 Perspectives on Inclusivity***

Participants felt that global SVOD content was inclusive when it came to race and religious identities. They emphasised how their race and religious identities as Arabs or Saudis and Muslims were being portrayed in Western content compared to the past. Mjeed told me that, “Back in the day, on DVDs ... the idea that Muslims are terrorists and the idea that this country is an enemy state and a terrorist state, these were disturbing ideas.” Norah also said, “From 2002 to 2010, there had to be terrorism and there had to be such things.” The notion that Muslims or Arabs are terrorists or backwards used to be one of the main reasons why many participants stopped watching foreign content in the past (e.g., Mjeed, Bader, Faisal). According to them, such portrayals are limited, if they exist at all, in global SVOD catalogues.

Multiple scholars have discussed the notions of diversity and inclusion in the context of global SVODs, arguing that such practices are necessary for these platforms to appeal to transnational audiences (e.g., Asmar et al., 2023; Higson, 2021; Jenner, 2018). Participants told me that SVODs not only eliminated stereotypical portrayals of Arabs and Muslims but also introduced new positive perspectives about them. While Sara believed that such changes in Western content reflected cultural shifts within the West, Faisal argued that the elimination of stereotypes was purely a business strategy to avoid clashes with Arab and Muslim audiences. Nevertheless, many participants said that they enjoyed watching their race and religious identities represented positively. For example, Qarar took me through a teenage series she had watched on Netflix, excitedly explaining how this series portrayed a teenage Muslim girl in a “positive” way to combat stereotypical ideas in her school. Qarar told me that she “loved” this new perspective of a proud Muslim girl. Another participant, Areeg, talked about how SVOD content shows things like, “It’s okay to befriend a Muslim without any issues; it was different before.” In addition, one participant from a Black background, Iman, discussed how she felt about SVOD content, saying, “Now, blacks and whites, there’s no difference,” and that platforms avoid “racism against Muslims, racism against blacks, and racism against East Asians.” Such statements align with how some Netflix screenwriters told Haddad and Dhoest that they bear in mind that content should relate simultaneously to both local and global audiences (Haddad & Dhoest, 2021, p. 271). Of course, most content in Netflix catalogues is not produced by Netflix, yet such statements may reflect the platform’s business strategy to appeal to as many markets as possible through content acquisition and related practices. Hence, such care about sensitivities is not only noted by participants but also appreciated. Overall, participants “love,” as Qarar framed it, seeing their race and religious identities portrayed positively. This allows them not only to enjoy the content they

watch but also to enjoy how they are positively represented around the world, putting them in some sense of equivalence with wider global audiences.

Moreover, an important point regarding inclusivity concerns women's representation. Female participants, in particular, perceived SVOD content as empowering for women, noting a shift in which women are no longer merely supporting actors but the stars of the shows. While some female participants talked about this topic, I found that Nori articulated what others had expressed. Nori considered herself a big fan of Marvel, which she described as "a legendary series that I don't think we'll ever see anything like again." Due to her knowledge and expertise in Marvel series, Nori used the series to explain how women's roles in movies have changed over the last decade within the series.

"If we talk about the Marvel series, for example, early on in the movies, women were usually portrayed as either an assistant to the main character or as a wife supporting her husband. Sometimes they'd depict her as a secretary, essentially making her a side character. The Marvel series started in 2008, but as we move forward through the years, we find that there are now female heroes. We see, for example, they've included countries ruled by women in the series. In 2018 [a movie] ... they had all the fighters in the forefront as women. So, they're giving her a role that's much more significant than just a supporting or side character."

Nori was very excited while giving me this detailed view of what she considered "positive" changes in her favourite series over the years. While Nori's focus was on the roles of women in movies, other participants, such as Rghad, appreciated aspects beyond just movie roles. Rghad gave examples of how some TV series advocated ideas about women: "like don't be a victim and don't be weak, you are strong." Or, as Latifa put it, "I'm with any movie that depicts a strong woman." However, some female participants did not feel that global SVODs were doing enough in this regard. For instance, Roa did not believe that SVODs were

inclusive enough regarding women's representation, saying, "even with homosexuality, we only see gay men, not women!" While some female participants were not fully satisfied with platforms in this regard, they still valued the women's representation offered compared to Saudi and Arab media. For instance, Rghad described Arab content as "women staying at home. In the kitchen! [laugh] You know, the wife, the homemaker. Honestly, Arab movies are so outdated [laugh]," while Roa said Arab content has "the Arab mentality"<sup>68</sup> to it. This, in turn, shows how the "poor" quality of Saudi and Arab media content mentioned earlier extends beyond production issues to a lack of relevance, as reflected in female participants' views on the representation of women. Overall, as a general rule, female participants enjoyed watching more women on global SVODs and advocated for such changes despite some of their reservations, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored questions of taste and pleasure in the context of global SVODs, highlighting the significance of these platforms for younger Saudi audiences. The findings showed that SVODs provided participants with a wide range of global content, allowing them to explore preferences and interests that had previously been inaccessible due to the limitations of Saudi and Arab media. These limitations spanned across various issues, from being "poor" in quality, restricting access to certain topics, to lacking relevance, which contributes to explain the increasing popularity of global platforms among young Saudis. What SVODs brought to my participants was a space of quality and quantity, catering to a

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<sup>68</sup> The phrase "the Arab mentality" is often used negatively in the Arab world and can be seen as some sort of self-reflection or self-critique. For Roa, it referred to Arabs being close-minded. Roa's full sentence: "المحتوى العربي فيه العقلية العربية، مقفلين"

variety of different tastes and interests, and enabling them to be part of a transnational audience linked in time. The examples of how participants spoke about their tastes and interests in various genres and subgenres showcased how SVODs gave them an opportunity to both find new pleasures and explore their taste beyond Saudi or the limited “old” American content they used to have. The fact that some participants reported shifting their interests from watching Saudi and Arab media to foreign content since subscribing to SVODs was a vital indicator of both the expansion of tastes and potentially deeper cultural and generational changes. Such shifts are reflected in the pleasures participants identified – from personalised experiences with the interface, consumer choice and control, access to “trendy” and new content, to participation in transnational conversations – which point away from traditional Saudi cultural values and align more closely with norms commonly associated with Western consumer capitalism.

This chapter has demonstrated how participants found SVODs pleasurable, from navigating libraries and browsing recommendations to relating to content on a personal, social, or cultural level. It showed how the different participants derived a wide range of pleasures from SVOD content, shaped by their own personal experiences, social circumstances, and interests. Beyond these, participants also experienced pleasure through representations of identity, culture, and inclusivity, particularly regarding race and religion. Female participants also valued SVOD content for its more prominent and empowering portrayals of women, enjoying content that reflected positive changes in women’s representations. In this way, participants related to and enjoyed content based on their own life, which showed how pleasure and engagement with SVODs was not uniform but multifaceted. By examining these aspects of taste and pleasure, this chapter has demonstrated the personal, social, and cultural significance of global SVODs among younger Saudi audiences. Having explored these

dimensions, the next chapter turns to how tensions emerged, were negotiated, and navigated by participants.

## Chapter 6: Negotiating Tensions

Despite the personal and cultural significance of SVODs, a series of notable tensions around SVOD content emerged during the interviews. As SVODs provide content depicting diverse ideas, values, and beliefs from around the world, young Saudis encounter various forms of content that contradict Saudi law, traditions, and religion. The aim of this chapter is to understand the nature of these tensions and consider whether and how they were negotiated and navigated by participants. This will be done by examining how participants express various forms of rejection and discomfort towards certain SVOD content, and how these tensions reflect on both aspects of their viewing experiences and the broader practices of which these form part. By exploring how participants negotiate and navigate such tensions, this chapter addresses the third research question, shedding light on the meaning-making process where Saudi cultural and religious norms both contrast with and contradict certain SVOD content.

Previous studies on how Saudi audiences perceive SVOD content that contradicts Saudi values are largely text-specific. These studies primarily engage with popular content, such as *Game of Thrones* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, to quantitatively examine attitudes toward certain values and to explore the potential cultural impact on Saudi youth and their identities (e.g., Alardawi, 2020; Alghamdi & Bajnaid, 2019). While the effects-oriented approaches of such studies have been discussed and criticised in the Literature Review Chapter, the gap in understanding how young Saudis negotiate such content, in part, motivated the present study. Moreover, although some studies in the Gulf context have explored issues surrounding global SVODs in relation to content offerings, highlighting the conservative nature of Gulf viewers who tend to reject nudity, explicit sexuality, and LGBT themes (e.g., Alkebaisi, 2017), little is known about the nuances and extent of this rejection.

As the previous chapter revealed, participants engaged with a significant amount of content that offers considerable potential for clashes with traditional Saudi cultural and religious values. Therefore, one of this thesis's key interventions is to unpack precisely what, why, and how young Saudis reject or dislike certain kinds of content, and how these negotiations reflect on their viewing practices, particularly in light of the various sources of pleasure identified in the previous chapter.

This chapter is divided into three sections, each addressing a prominent tension raised by participants. The first section will engage with issues surrounding content featuring LGBT themes. It will begin by highlighting concerns over the increase in LGBT representation on SVODs, which many participants associated with a broader "promotion of homosexuality." The section will then delve into how male and female participants negotiate and navigate such content differently, shedding light on both viewing experiences and practices. The second section will investigate tensions relating to affirmative portrayals of women within SVOD content. This will involve examining how participants from both genders discuss such depictions in relation to traditional Saudi gender roles, women's independence, and freedom. The third and final section will explore how participants talked about and navigated content featuring nudity and sexual themes. By focusing on different viewing settings, this section will illustrate how nudity and sexual content was found to be both pleasurable and discomforting. It is important to note, however, that certain parts of my findings and analysis in this chapter will be structured around gendered responses. This decision is based on distinct patterns that reveal varying degrees of difference in how my male and female participants identify, negotiate, and navigate these tensions. Together, these three sections will provide a deeper understanding of how young Saudis engage with content that may be seen as contrasting with or contradicting certain Saudi cultural and religious norms.

## 6.1 “The Promotion of Homosexuality”

The issue of homosexuality, or as many participants framed it, “the promotion of homosexuality” – as if it were a single word – was the most frequently cited issue by participants regarding global SVOD content in Saudi Arabia. While I had anticipated various forms of rejection and dislike for LGBT content, largely due to what other media scholars had reported about audiences in the Gulf (e.g., Alkebaisi, 2017), it was challenging to guide some interviews, as participants frequently wanted to expand on this topic and returned to it whenever they had the chance. This section will delve into the issue of LGBT content, highlighting what, why, and how participants expressed opinions about content they associated with LGBT themes. It will also shed light on how participants navigate such content and how that reflects on both their viewing experiences and practices.

Although SVODs have provided content featuring LGBT themes since entering the Saudi market, participants felt that the amount of LGBT content had significantly increased in the past few years. When participants talked about LGBT content, they used words such as “now,” “nowadays,” “lately,” and “currently” to frame their arguments. Generally, participants expressed frustration about a perceived increase in LGBT themes, especially on Disney+ and Netflix, regardless of whether the portrayals were affirmative or non-affirmative. For example, Abdullah told me that, “Disney is really focusing on homosexuality in their movies and series these days. They’re shoving it in, and it feels quite forced and awkward, to be honest.” Another example came from one of the focus groups:

**Rghad:** There’s so much homosexuality now.

**Maha:** Yeah, it’s really increased a lot.

**Latifa:** Even Disney wasn’t like this before, but recently it’s changed.

**Roq:** I didn't subscribe to Disney for my daughters because there's so much homosexuality now."

Participants' perceptions of this increase appear to be grounded in rational observation rather than bias, as annual reports from the queer media monitoring organisation GLAAD highlighted a remarkable increase in LGBT representation across streaming platforms between 2017 and 2022 – the year of my interviews (GLAAD, 2017, 2022)<sup>69</sup>. Nevertheless, it is important to note that participants focused on the increase in LGBT content rather than the mere existence of such content. This is not to say that the presence of minimal LGBT themes in the past was unproblematic; however, it can be said that the increase in LGBT content, especially on Disney+ and Netflix, has sparked some scepticism about the reasons behind what Abdullah, among many others, framed as “shoving it in” across their offerings.

When participants talked about content featuring LGBT themes, many tended to use the word “promotion” in conjunction with “homosexuality.” Although it is difficult to trace the root of this term in the Saudi context, it is widely and regularly used by many public and private Saudi, Gulf, and Arab media outlets in news reports, documentaries, podcasts, and articles (e.g., Alekhbariya, 2022a, 2022c). Here are a few examples illustrating how participants used this term:

“Everyone knows Netflix is really promoting homosexual stuff these days. It's pretty obvious to anyone who pays even a little attention.” (Faisal)

“Most movies and TV shows these days are promoting homosexuality” (Salman)

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<sup>69</sup> Although 2022 marked a record high in LGBT representation, subsequent GLAAD reports have documented a notable steady decline over the following years, with the organisation in 2025 expressing concern about this downward trend and the limited number of forthcoming inclusive titles (see Azoulay, 2025). See GLAAD Research, <https://glaad.org/research/>

“The trend now is that they’re really focusing on homosexuality. I mean, they’re putting a lot of it on Netflix and promoting it heavily.” (Ahmad)

This notion of the “promotion of homosexuality” was not only due to the increase in LGBT content offerings but also because participants correlated it with the way they perceived this increase to be occurring. For instance, Abdullah, a Marvel fan, talked about how Disney no longer followed their old comics in new Marvel movies, as he believed this shift was primarily to introduce LGBT themes and characters. He explained:

“I’ve been a Marvel fan and following the series for years... Previously, they stuck to written scenarios – comics that I’ve read and understood. But now they’ve changed everything in the movies... For example, imagine reading for over seven years that a character loves another specific character, right? They say, ‘Nope, what you’re reading in the comics is not the same as what’s happening in the movies now.’ That’s wrong. They’ve changed things from the comics, inserted stuff that doesn’t fit, distorted them, and put things that were not appropriate.”

Abdullah, along with another Marvel fan, Nori, perceived such developments as a driving force feeding into their scepticism. The general idea of inserting “stuff that doesn’t fit” was also mentioned by others, who told me that they believed the concept of homosexuality appeared outside the storyline and without a valid reason across Disney+ and Netflix content:

“It feels like they’re throwing it in there just because, you know? Like, showing two random gay guys in love. It doesn’t really add to the storyline of the show or movie, but they’re doing it anyway.” (Maram)

“Sometimes in stories, like in a historical setting, out of nowhere there’s a symbol or a hint, or even characters who are gay and all that. Sometimes it feels like they’re shoehorning homosexuality in just to promote the idea. It’s something I’ve noticed a lot on Netflix.”  
(Muhanad)

“There’s been this weird focus on things that have nothing to do with the movie.” (Areeg)

This perceived increase in LGBT content was continually framed in terms of “promotion” and being “forced” throughout the interviews. This framing suggests a broader belief among participants that platforms serve an ideological function, as evidenced by how they approached, interpreted, and resisted such content. For example, brief appearances of LGBT themes – e.g., a pride flag – were largely seen as hidden or manipulative messages that fed into their scepticism. As Aziz told me, “Sometimes you get a funny feeling, like it’s obviously a message. I mean, it’s a clear message!” Interpreting LGBT themes as hidden or manipulative messages to promote homosexuality is common despite the problematic and inaccurate explanations and examples that I was given. For instance, Hasan discussed what he believed to be an attempt by Netflix to redefine how gay people look, saying, “When you first think of a gay person, you imagine someone effeminate, but on Netflix, no. It could be a regular guy with a moustache and everything.” Hasan was speaking from an Arab perspective about a common stereotype regarding how Arab gays are perceived and portrayed in various cultural products (see Hadeed, 2013; Whitaker, 2006), forgetting that homosexuals around the world, including Arabs, may have different appearances and styles. Nevertheless, this problematic way of interpreting LGBT themes as hidden or manipulative messages might have been some sort of defence mechanism that participants employed. Although this way of thinking was popular, a few participants presented different arguments, such as Suliman, who talked about the diversity rules of some awards, saying, “These scenes help them win awards. If they release a series without these scenes, it won’t be successful.” Nevertheless, despite this pragmatic acceptance, the idea of promotion in relation to LGBT content kept appearing throughout the interviews, suggesting some scepticism that leans into the broader notion that SVOD content has an ideological function and, as such, needs to be navigated carefully.

Although the moral comparison of “us” versus the “Western *other*” was emphasised by some participants, the majority viewed the increase in LGBT content as a development that is rejected worldwide, including in the West. Many participants talked about how this increase in LGBT content was not just new to the Saudis but rather to the entire world. For example, Nori, who believed that LGBT content was rejected by many in the West, told me that:

“Explicit homosexuality wasn’t in our media at all, and it wasn’t in theirs for many years either. It just didn’t exist. From what I know, there were a lot of TV shows and movies made in the past [in the West], but they never got released because they had strong homosexual themes, especially in the ‘80s and ‘90s. They were just rejected. But now, it’s everywhere and very common.”

This sort of argument was presented by many to explain that the topic of LGBT content was not just a Saudi issue, but rather a globally debated issue. Sara told me that, “There are people out there who aren’t Muslim and don’t accept it either... It’s not just an East and West thing.” In fact, some participants provided examples of what they believed to be frustrations from different Western and Eastern societies regarding Netflix and Disney content, which points to how engagement with various media sources – when covering global audiences – feeds into my participants’ viewing experiences, judgements, and rationalisations of the issue. For instance, Areeg mentioned Disney’s announcement to increase LGBT representation “in their cartoons, and people in the West were like, ‘What are you doing?’” Another example was Ali, who told me, “Sometimes even they [Americans] protest against Netflix. I remember when they released that show exploiting kids, there were protests in America.” Although Ali could not recall the name of the show, I suspect it was *Cuties*<sup>70</sup>, which does not relate to the LGBT issue. Nevertheless, it is important to note how participants attempted to align

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<sup>70</sup> *Cuties* (Doucouré, 2020).

themselves with what they believed to be the attitudes of a transnational audience – one that, like them, was not satisfied with such developments. In other words, the issue is not with the people of the West per se, but rather selected, powerful individuals within the West, as Seham illustrated: “I remember that the owner of Disney is one of those who believes in/supports homosexuality and that sort of thing, so it makes sense that they’d promote those kinds of views.” What Seham mentioned falls into the broader problematic perception that platforms serve an ideological function. Similar to Seham, Aziz argued that the proclivities of owners were crucial in shaping platform content: “If someone’s giving you money, you just end up going along with their ideas, whether you want to or not. Like, if you’re a newspaper writer earning 25k and the owner is Muslim, you’re not going to criticise Muslims.” Nevertheless, this is not to say that the notion of “us” and the “Western *other*” did not appear in the context of LGBT discussions, but it was far less prevalent than might be expected.

### ***6.1.1 Female Participants: Religion and Viewing Practices***

There were notable differences in the ways male and female participants negotiated and navigated LGBT content. To begin with, the vast majority of female participants invoked religion during their discussion of LGBT content. While some used religious terms such as “forbidden/haram/sin,” others cited verses or stories from the Quran to discuss homosexuality. For instance, Roa referenced the story of Prophet Lot and his people, who were described as homosexuals in the Quran. Generally, when female participants invoked religion, they shifted from discussing their views on LGBT content to discussing the Islamic perspective on practising homosexuality, which suggests that they perceive these topics as intimately connected and importantly related. While invoking religion indicates its importance, the extent to which it influences their viewing practices can be complex. For example, Nori, who discussed how LGBT content “doesn’t align with our religion,” later

mentioned that religion “is not enough of a reason for me to stop watching.” Nori went on to explain that:

“I just keep watching and put it [homosexuality] aside unless the character is there just to provoke or show they’re better. In that case, I’ll stop right away. Like I said, content sometimes has things that go against my religion and includes homosexuality, but not all of it is bad.”

While Nori’s view was echoed by a few female participants, many still considered watching any form of LGBT content a sign of support for homosexuality and therefore viewed it as committing a sin. Nevertheless, such participants used other religious justifications to watch content featuring LGBT themes. One common approach was to adopt a Hadith from Prophet Muhammad, which suggests that if one cannot reject or change the course of a sin through action, they should reject it in their heart. This can be seen in the way Hind discussed her viewing practices regarding LGBT content, saying, “I still [religiously] reject it, but I’ve gotten used to seeing it. It’s not like before, when I’d just stop watching. Now, I’m used to it, but I still don’t accept it.” Hind’s use of the terms “reject it” and “don’t accept it” was framed in religious terms in Arabic that do not have direct equivalents in English, yet they indicate that she acknowledges the wrongful action in her heart and so avoids contravening Islamic scripture and thereby becoming a sinner<sup>71</sup>. In this way, participants drew on and treated religion not as a rigid boundary, but rather used it creatively to navigate moral concerns and reconcile their faith with their engagement with content. Only one female participant, Areeg, explicitly stated that her religion was the reason preventing her from watching any content that displayed LGBT themes. Areeg said, “As a Muslim,” she cannot watch *How to Get Away*

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<sup>71</sup> Hind’s full statement:

“أنا ما زلت منكراً، بس أنه تعوّدت أنني أشوفها. يعني ما عاد صار زي أول اللي لا خلاص وكذا، يعني تعوّدت أنا نشوفها بس ما زلتنا منكرين لها”

*with Murder*, which she described as “a show I’ve been dreaming of watching, but I can’t because it has this completely unnecessary concept [homosexuality] that’s just wrong.” Areeg stressed the word “dreaming,” indicating the hardship of her effort to resist what she previously described as “the promotion of homosexuality,” despite the content’s appeal. In fact, Areeg’s position on resisting content featuring LGBT themes went beyond merely avoiding watching it; she also advocated for government involvement to find a solution, as will be illustrated in the next chapter. Therefore, while female participants strongly invoked religion in discussions about LGBT content, only one female cited her religion as the reason for stopping engagement with content featuring LGBT themes.

In comparison to male participants, female acceptability of LGBT content was limited. However, many participants mentioned that their viewing practices regarding LGBT content had changed over time, particularly when the content involved only brief or minor, skippable LGBT scenes. Qarar told me that:

“Let me break it down for you. In the past, I’d just stop watching if a show had those kinds of ideas and move on to something else. But after realising that this kind of stuff is everywhere on Netflix, I started just skipping through it. If something inappropriate pops up, I fast-forward. If it’s just a weird scene or something, I skip it. It’s become kind of a routine for me now.”

What Qarar said is similar to the previously mentioned quote by Hind, where she said, “I’ve gotten used to seeing it. It’s not like before, when I’d just stop watching.” While it is clear that the extent of female participants’ rejection of LGBT content has decreased over time, many still skipped most LGBT scenes, finding them to be “disgusting,” “bothersome,” and “hurts my eyes.” In other words, they used the skip button to bypass brief LGBT scenes and continue enjoying the content. The regular use of the skip button among participants aligns

with Zaid et al.'s argument that Gulf subscribers of Netflix "adapt the technology 'in this case, the forward button' to cope with their cultural sensitivities" (2023, p. 6625).

Nevertheless, the shift reported by Hind and Qarar, among others, seemed to go beyond simply "adapting the technology" to reflect a deeper personal adaptation to content featuring such themes. The shift from entirely avoiding this content (resistance) to saying, "Now, I'm used to it," indicates that the adaptation is not merely about *how* they watch, but also *what* they watch, regardless of their perceived resistance in their "heart." This suggests that participants' engagement with LGBT content involves both practical strategies, such as skipping scenes, and deeper moral negotiations, as they creatively reconcile their religion and values with what they watch.

However, when content contains explicit same-sex sexual scenes or centres on an LGBT narrative or character, female participants reported a tendency to avoid watching it altogether. Sara summed up the idea, saying:

*"Black Mirror"*<sup>72</sup> is one of the shows I really love. Sometimes, there are episodes with LGBT characters, and that's fine. But then you get a whole episode about a character who is married and then discovers that he's LGBT [gay]. The whole story ends up being about how he accepts himself, deals with it, and tries to save his marriage. That kind of thing doesn't interest me because it's the core of the entire story."

For Sara, and many others, when LGBT themes were the core of the story, it required emotional and intellectual engagement with a concept they opposed. Therefore, they avoided such content, which Sara and Nori described as content that invited debate, discussion, sympathy, and empathy with something they did not believe in. As Sara said about such content, "I want to entertain myself; I'm not there to discuss a case." Hence, it can be said

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<sup>72</sup> *Black Mirror* (Jones et al., 2011-present).

that the majority of female participants watched content featuring limited LGBT presence, yet their acceptance drastically decreased when they believed that the core of the story involved or centred on an LGBT character or narrative.

That being said, only a few females told me that they avoided any content featuring LGBT themes. While Areeg's view on her religion was mentioned earlier, Seham and Afnan were not clear about why they avoided such content. Seham told me, "Ideas about gays/lesbians really bother me, and I can't keep watching a show if they're in it, even if it's just a side plot." While both Afnan and Seham exhibited strong resistance to LGBT content, Seham took an extra step by cancelling her subscription due to what she perceived as an increase in transgender content. She explained, "I remember I even cancelled my Netflix subscription for about three or four months because there was just too much of it; this was about a year ago when there was a lot of trans content." This subscription cancellation was a temporary boycott by Seham, which did not last long as alternative legal and illegal streaming services failed to satisfy her. Nevertheless, it is not clear to what extent such participants were accurate in their statements, given that Seham mentioned enjoying watching *Friends* during COVID, as discussed in the previous chapter, which features a lesbian couple and gay characters and references. While this lesbian couple fits the criteria Seham mentioned ("even if it's just a side plot"), Seham might have failed to accurately explain what she meant or may not have felt comfortable disclosing the truth for cultural or personal reasons. Overall, regardless of the accuracy of such statements, only a few females indicated that they did not watch any content featuring LGBT themes.

### ***6.1.2 Male Participants: Greater Endurance***

When male participants talked about LGBT content in SVODs, they mainly referred to male homosexuality. As mentioned in the last chapter, both Mjeed and Othman found content featuring lesbian characters pleasurable. As they said, “Homosexuality in women arouses me... It really makes the series exciting” (Othman) and “Lesbianism between two women is okay; it doesn’t disgust me [smile]” (Mjeed). In contrast to female participants, who generally mentioned disliking content featuring either lesbian, gay, or transgender themes, the majority of male participants directly and indirectly cited *only* male homosexuality in their expressions. Since Arabic words inherently possess gender, male participants primarily used masculine language and examples when discussing LGBT content, prompting me to probe further for clarification on their opinions regarding lesbianism, as mentioned in the previous chapter. For instance, Abdullah, who was not happy about how Disney changed the comics to include LGBT characters, used masculine language and later added, “I don’t see the point in introducing a superhero who is gay [male]!” Similarly, Bader mentioned gay men to convey his dislike, saying, “A scene between two men can be really off-putting.” While it is clear that male participants’ reservations were largely about male homosexuality, their reactions were not as intense or charged as those of female participants when discussing this topic, suggesting that males have a greater degree of tolerance or endurance towards LGBT content. Although it is difficult to know the extent to which my gender identity played a role in this context, the way participants from both genders discussed LGBT content was consistent across various interview settings (i.e., one-on-one interviews, mixed-gender focus groups, and single-gender focus groups).

In contrast to females, where religion was invoked and foregrounded in various ways, male participants invoked religion predominantly in one way. That is, roughly two-thirds of male participants used a religious phrase about homosexuality that can be translated as “it goes against human nature – يخالف الفطرة.” This phrase implies that homosexuality contradicts the natural order instilled by God. Although this phrase pertained to the practice of homosexuality, participants mentioned it even in the context of watching LGBT content. They used this phrase to explain that watching something contrary to human nature made them feel ill at ease, suggesting that watching is, to some extent, a moral behaviour. Nevertheless, the use of this phrase was not unexpected for me as a native speaker who grew up in Saudi Arabia, as it is linked to the concept of homosexuality in everyday language among men. Hence, it is almost impossible to assess the extent to which this large segment of male participants used this term in reference to its actual religious meaning. Supporting my scepticism about the use of this term is the fact that the majority of male participants did not invoke other religious terms, stories, or verses from the Quran or Hadith, as female participants did<sup>73</sup>. Therefore, it can be said that religion did not seem to hold the same significance for males as it did for female participants in the context of LGBT content. While females demonstrated seriousness and a willingness to expand upon and return to the topic of religion in different instances, male participants did not go beyond the idea that “it goes against human nature.”

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<sup>73</sup> While it can be said that I, as a Saudi male, am familiar with or accustomed to how Saudi men communicate, invoking stories from the Quran or Hadith and foregrounding religious interpretations as a way to watch or avoid such content seems to extend beyond the scope of everyday language.

Despite mentioning religion and expressing reservations, male participants still watched content that featured homosexual themes. The majority of male participants said that they mainly disliked explicit gay sexual scenes, which Bader described as “upsetting and disgusting.” However, apart from these explicit scenes, male participants indicated that they did not skip content featuring LGBT themes when they were alone. While this may suggest a certain level of openness compared to female participants, who skipped such content even in solo settings, some male participants mentioned that skipping scenes was a bit of a hassle. Hence, two participants said that their typical reaction to such content was simply swearing at the screen or actors: “I just curse at them in the moment [laugh]” (Rayan), “There might have been a bit of swearing [smile]” (Hamoud). For Abdullah, homosexual scenes were an opportunity to check his phone. He said, “I hop on Twitter at that moment... and honestly, Twitter can be worse than what’s on the screen.” The comparison Abdullah made between X/Twitter and homosexual themes should not be overlooked, as it indicates that the discomfort he experienced from homosexual themes was minimal compared to the distress he experienced from social and political issues on X/Twitter. Moreover, male participants’ reservations regarding content where LGBT themes were central to the story were far less pronounced than those of females. While most females expressed strong rejection of such content, many males did not consider the centrality of homosexuality a reason to prevent them from enjoying it. Although the viewing circumstances might play a role in this regard, as married women may have their children around, the females who emphasised the rejection of the centrality of LGBT themes were largely singles, such as Sara and Nori. Additionally, both married males and females had their own private time, spaces, and ways, as illustrated in Chapter 4, to watch such content. To further illustrate how males differed from females regarding their tolerance or endurance for the centrality of LGBT themes, Abdullah expressed frustration about Saudi cinema after a Marvel movie was banned due to its

extended homosexual scenes and the prominence of LGBT themes. He mentioned that he would wait for its release on Disney+ to watch it, despite the centrality of LGBT themes: “If a movie is banned, and I read that it became a hit and see people’s comments about it, I’ll definitely get even more excited. I’ll turn off my phone and focus entirely on it.” It should be noted that Abdullah went the extra step to discuss his engagement with the content to emphasise that the centrality of LGBT themes would not prevent him from enjoying it. Therefore, it can be said that, generally, male participants displayed a greater tolerance or endurance for LGBT content. Certainly, they reported being ill at ease and uncomfortable, but they overlooked these feelings in order to enjoy the content.

Nevertheless, one notable commonality among male participants is that their viewing practices of LGBT content changed depending on the presence of their partners. While the vast majority of females did not mention their partners in the context of watching LGBT content – since they skipped such content even when alone – male participants said that they either skipped or stopped the content altogether when viewing with partners. For example, both Hamoud and Rayan, who typically overlooked or swore at the screen when homosexual characters appeared, added an important condition where skipping or stopping was not required. They said, “If I’m alone, it’s not a problem” (Hamoud), and “If I’m on my own or something and don’t have any kids around” (Rayan). Although this was a personal preference for Hamoud and Rayan, as they did not feel comfortable watching such content with their partners, Abdullah’s wife forced him to stop any content that featured LGBT themes. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Abdullah had a private TV room in the house, where he watched football or content that his wife did not prefer. He told me that he watched Marvel and any content featuring LGBT themes either alone or with his friends, but he was unable to convince his wife to do so. Abdullah added:

“By the way, my wife had cancelled my Netflix subscription... one day I found Netflix is deleted from my TV. I asked her: Why? She said: Why do you subscribe to it? And it turned into a whole thing, a whole story/issue [an upset/tense situation]; ... I was very upset,”

According to Abdullah, his wife had cancelled his subscription, which he renewed later, because she believed that the platform “encourages/promotes homosexuality.” While this aligns with the argument in Chapter 4 that females have the upper hand in managing the living room TV, it also shows that male participants expressed a broader range of tolerance or endurance toward content featuring LGBT themes compared to female participants.

Nevertheless, tensions due to LGBT content were rare among couples compared to those arising from nudity and sexual content, with Abdullah being the only participant to report such tension.

Overall, this section delved into what many participants believed to be the most prominent issue surrounding SVOD content. The increase in LGBT representation appeared to be a concerning development for many participants, leading them to frame any LGBT content as a “promotion of homosexuality.” Throughout this section, participants’ recognition of LGBT content – whether via explicit sexual scenes, side plots, central characters, or symbolic markers such as pride flags – shaped how they responded to it, even if such cues were subtle or inconsistently referenced. This was especially the case with Netflix and Disney+ platforms, where participants felt that LGBT themes were “forced and awkward.” While some participants invoked the moral comparison of “us” and the “Western *other*,” many disagreed with this sentiment, providing examples of how they believed LGBT content is rejected even in the West. Additionally, this section showed how female and male participants negotiated and navigated LGBT content. While the majority of participants invoked religion in their rejection and dislike of such content, females were particularly

concerned and frequently referenced religious terms and phrases throughout their discussion of this issue. Nevertheless, female participants reported changes in their viewing practices regarding LGBT content, indicating some level of acceptability for minimal, skippable LGBT themes. In contrast, male participants showed a greater tolerance or endurance for watching content featuring LGBT themes without skipping. However, they expressed reservations regarding male gay content, with many indicating dislike or overlooking such content. Having explored this tension, the next section turns to the conflicting views on what were perceived as representations of women's empowerment and independence.

## **6.2 “They Really Push the Whole Idea of Women’s Independence”**

This section will investigate how participants discussed various depictions of women in SVOD content. It will shed light on portrayals perceived as driving forces for “women’s empowerment” and “independence”. While some of these depictions were mentioned in Chapter 5 as sources of pleasure, this section will focus on portrayals that appeared problematic for both genders. This is particularly regarding depictions of women’s independence, where both male and female participants criticised the ways it is portrayed from different perspectives.

Roughly one-third of male participants, both prompted and unprompted, delved into issues related to various forms of women’s depictions. They primarily disliked portrayals they believed challenged traditional Saudi gender roles and the notion of female independence. While one-third may not seem a large number, voicing such ideas in the Saudi context today may not be easy due to the ongoing cultural changes and social expectations around gender issues. In this context, most of those who expressed such views did so in individual

interviews, with only one male participant briefly touching on the topic in a focus group setting. This is an example of a conversation with Aziz:

**“Interviewer:** Are there other things that influence your decision to follow or stay away from certain content?

**Aziz:** The things that are considered, as they say, leftist ideas.

**Interviewer:** Could you elaborate on that please?

**Aziz:** Like some feminist ideas.

**Interviewer:** What sort of ideas? Can you give me some examples of those?

**Aziz:** Well, for example, I see them portraying men as the ones who cook and look after the kids, while the mum goes out to work, and the dad stays home raising the kids. To me, those roles are quite different.

**Interviewer:** How do you see them as different?

**Aziz:** I think the man should be the one going out to work, and the mum should be the one raising the children. They flip these roles around and push the idea that the dad should be the one looking after the kids and taking on all these responsibilities.”

Aziz did not stop at this point, as he continued to provide similar thoughts about women’s depictions, which he framed under what he perceived as “leftist and feminist ideas.” While it is important to note that Aziz associated such content with leftist and feminist ideologies rather than with the West<sup>74</sup>, he also mentioned that these ideas had already existed in foreign content before SVODs. However, he said that platforms emphasised and focused on such

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<sup>74</sup> While it can be said that “leftist and feminist ideologies” have their origins in the West, Aziz’s framing of these ideologies seemed to highlight his position regarding the ongoing cultural changes that encourage women’s participation in the workforce and promote women’s empowerment.

depictions far more than before. To Aziz, these portrayals were ideologically driven, as he considered them a form of “messages” intended to empower women. Hence, he explained how he engaged with such content:

“If I see a scene or two, or even three, where it keeps repeating and sending the same messages over and over, and I’m just starting with the show, it ends up irritating me. So, I’d just stop watching and switch to something else.”

While such content was irritating to Aziz, Hamoud approached it in a mocking way. He told me that he sometimes made jokes about these depictions when watching with his wife, who was a stay-at-home parent. He said, “When we [Hamoud and his wife] watch a woman working tirelessly day and night in a show or film, and then coming home completely exhausted, I look at my wife and tell her, ‘Look, you’re actually living a cherished and dignified life.’<sup>75</sup>” While he framed this as a joke to tease his wife, his comment reflects an ideological position that views a stay-at-home lifestyle as the truly honoured and respected path for women, in contrast to the perceived difficulties of a working life. Hence, he did not view such content as promoting women’s empowerment, as he believed that it was a true representation of the difficult lives that Western women lead. While one-third of my participants expressed varying degrees of dislike for such content, the majority did not specify the reasons for their rejection.

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<sup>75</sup> The phrase “living a cherished and dignified life – تعيشين حياة معززة مكرمة” is a common phrase and argument used by conservatives in the Arab world who oppose women’s participation in the workforce. It has deep religious and cultural roots, as men are expected to be the providers, while women are portrayed as “living a cherished and dignified life” at home. However, it should be noted that the phrase can also be used in different contexts, which change the entire meaning, connotation and argument, especially if the speaker is a woman.

This same segment of male participants found that SVODs emphasised and focused on depictions that did not include what they believed to be a “normal/traditional” family structure. Othman told me that depictions of women within a family structure no longer existed in modern SVOD content. He said,

**“Othman:** When you look at the content of old TV shows, you see that the woman in the show was a housewife and a mother, taking care of the family!

**Interviewer:** But also, there were other depictions like doctors and engineers and so forth!

**Othman:** Yes, and that’s very logical. But even as a doctor, you’d see her leaving work, for example, to take care of her kids and so on. But nowadays, no; they don’t show you a story about a 35- or 39-year-old woman with kids and so on and make her the star of the show.”

Othman said that SVODs tended to focus on portrayals of single, independent young women navigating life away from family. The notion of “female independence” was the key point where this segment of male participants converged, as they saw it as the platforms’ alternative choice to cover up the absence of traditional family structures. Othman argued that platforms “targeted” young female viewers with such content, which aligns with the previously mentioned argument about the broader perception of the ideological function of SVODs. Another example is Muhanad, who was the only male participant to discuss this topic in a group setting, argued:

“Sometimes, they really push the whole idea of women’s independence and criticise anyone who isn’t independent. They make it seem like it’s the right thing to do, and not just that, but they also suggest that it’s wrong not to be independent and stuff like that,”

Muhanad made this statement after a female participant, Nada, criticised what she perceived to be constant portrayal of women’s independence as being linked to defying their family, as he felt secure enough to briefly engage with the topic. Muhanad argued that such content

depicted those who disagreed with the portrayal of women's independence as "backward." He said, "They show you that if someone doesn't agree with them, then they are backward and wrong. You can feel the aggression." Similarly, depictions of women's independence were not only "irritating" for Othman, but he also described them as "one of the most dangerous ideas on these platforms." Othman told me that he believed the depiction of independence from family was accompanied by ideas that made being independent appealing, such as having a supportive male friend, which Othman referred to as "platonic friendship." For Othman, these ideas, which he found continually attached to depictions of women's independence, make such content more "dangerous" to society than any form of LGBT content. As he said,

"I don't think it's logical for someone to say, 'Well, I might try the gay experience,' ... On the other hand, a girl might say that she wants to try the male friend experience because it is normal for her."<sup>76</sup>

The idea of "the male friend experience" seems to connect to more deeply held views on what is appropriate and inappropriate in the complex dynamics of male and female relationships within Saudi society. This is particularly significant given the ongoing cultural changes and the evolving nature of friendships between genders, especially following the substantial decline of gender-segregated jobs and spaces in the country, which have traditionally limited interactions between men and women. Both Aziz and Othman expanded on the topic of "women's independence" far more than on any other tensions, emphasizing that such content was not only discomfoting but also potentially detrimental to society. While it is not clear whether this segment of male participants dislikes or rejects depictions

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<sup>76</sup> Othman's comment implies that it is normal for humans to seek relationships with the opposite gender. This aligns with the Islamic belief mentioned in the last section, which holds that such instincts are a natural part of human nature that God has instilled in them.

that challenge traditional gender roles and women's independence due to societal concerns or personal issues, it is notable that those who discussed the topic in detail were largely single. Those who were married did not raise or emphasise the issue, and when it did arise – as in the case of Hamoud – he treated it as a passing scene reflecting the difficult lives of working women in the West. In contrast, single participants such as Othman and Aziz appeared to be expressing concerns about their future relationships with women who were becoming work-oriented and independent. As Othman said, “Girls are becoming independent... It's not really natural for a girl to leave her family, travel, and live her life away from her community.” Overall, it can be said that some male participants expressed a dislike for content that portrayed women in ways seen as challenging traditional gender roles. This is particularly the case with single males, who seem to view depictions of strong and independent women as a threat to longstanding Saudi and Arab ideals of masculine authority and privileges in future relationships.

In stark contrast, portrayals of strong and independent women were a source of pleasure for the majority of female participants. In fact, the same portrayal mentioned by Othman – the independent woman who “leaves her family, travels, and lives her life away from her community” – was described by Sara as a depiction that gave her “fuel for life,” as shown in the previous chapter. While the last chapter highlighted how female participants found SVOD content empowering for women, they still had some reservations regarding the ways women were depicted. This is especially the case for portrayals of women's independence and freedom, where many females told me that they did not appreciate how these portrayals often linked independence to a narrative of oppression. Wejdan summed up this idea, saying:

“**Wejdan:** My issue is with promoting the idea that families are oppressive and portraying women as victims... I can be independent without being cast as a victim. I mean, it doesn't

make sense to gain my independence by infringing on the rights of other family members. I don't understand why these two topics are linked.

**Interviewer:** Can you please elaborate more on this? What do you mean?

**Wejdan:** I mean, whenever a woman becomes independent, it is always portrayed as if her family or partner beat her and mistreated her, and this idea is constantly pushed. I don't understand why. Why are all the stories the same? Why can't a woman be independent, have her job and career, without her family or partner being oppressive or disapproving?"

While what Wejdan articulated seems to contrast with what was mentioned in the last chapter about Rghad, who appreciated content advocating ideas such as "don't be a victim and don't be weak, you are strong," roughly half of the female participants expressed their rejection of content that portrayed women as independent in relation to oppressive parents or partners. This rejection was not only because they believed that women did not need to be oppressed to achieve what they wanted, but also because they believed that parents and partners did not deserve to be continually portrayed as oppressors. For instance, Sara was emotionally charged while giving me an example of content that depicted a teenage female accusing her father of being an oppressor due to his disapproval of her dating a man in his twenties. Sara talked about how this female was portrayed as oppressed and how she used social media to publicly humiliate her father, who was later "forced to apologise" and accepted the relationship. Sara commented, "This really, really made me angry and upset. I was so upset that I said I don't care what happens to this girl anymore. I get really annoyed by these things." Sara was annoyed because the father was portrayed as an oppressor, ignoring the motive and desire of fathers to protect their daughters at such an early age. Similar to Wejdan, Amal, and Nada, Sara went on to explain that she supported ideas around women's independence and freedom, yet argued that this should not be linked to victimhood,

especially when it involved parents. She said, “It’s not that I’m against the idea itself [women’s independence], but the way it is portrayed bothers me.”

The basis of these participants’ positions is complicated, as they seemed to both appreciate content advocating for women’s empowerment and independence, yet simultaneously held deep scepticism about the perceived ideological nature of global platforms. While Wejdan, in the previously mentioned quote, highlighted how “this idea is constantly pushed,” Sara noted, “It feels like they’re forcing these issues into shows now.” The question raised by Wejdan, “Why can’t a woman be independent, have her job and career, without her family or partner being oppressive or disapproving?” seems to sum up the position of such participants. This position indicates that they dislike portrayals of independence that operate outside the perceived harmony of traditional family structures and values. As Long noted regarding Saudi women and family structure, “There appears to be no desire, even among the most modernized Saudi women, to abandon traditional Islamic social values” (Long & Maisel, 2010, p. 20). Female participants’ position is thus one in which a woman can live her life in the way she wants, where she wants, and pursue the career she desires, without conflict with her family. Regardless of how logical their position may be, more radical or progressive forms of challenging traditional family structures and values were not seen as useful by these participants, likely because such portrayals are viewed as provocative and detrimental to their envisioned ideal life within their social and cultural context, which significantly prioritises family – both on a large and small scale – above all else. This aligns with Long’s observation regarding the significance and centrality of family in Saudi life, which he viewed as an existential reality that he cannot “visualize” Saudi Arabia without, regardless of “political or economic future” changes in the country (Long & Maisel, 2010, p. 24).

Another issue raised by some female participants was what Seham described as content that featured “too much feminism.” What Seham, among others, meant is that some content is seen as “exaggerating” certain depictions of women, specifically regarding what they are capable of and what they can achieve, all for the sake of women’s empowerment. The best way to explain this perspective is to revisit Nori’s statement mentioned in the last chapter about how Marvel had been empowering women by featuring female superheroes over the last decade. Although Nori highly appreciated such changes, she also expressed some reservations about the way Marvel was portraying women. Nori said:

**“Nori:** The latest Marvel movies, frankly, have become, let’s say, fan service. They are catering to the American people, what the American people think, and what the American people expect.

**Interviewer:** What do the American people expect?

**Nori:** The American people expect equality in everything. They expect people to be, like, without identity..., like, let’s say, a girl is the same as a boy is the same as a transgender person. These are things that have more differences than what, let’s say, a long-standing fantasy series can handle. Including all these ideas in one movie makes the topic a bit political. It won’t be a nice movie to watch.”

Although Nori told me that she appreciated Marvel’s attempts to empower women, she believed that content should not be driven by gender equality as Americans expect and anticipate. Nori mentioned an example of a depiction of women by Marvel that she disliked despite her appreciation for the effort to promote women’s empowerment in the scene, saying, “In 2018, they had a scene, and honestly, the scene felt cheap. I really didn’t like it; they had all the fighters in the forefront as women.” For Nori, having only women in the forefront felt “cheap” as an attempt to empower them – a perspective that aligns with earlier analyses around ideologies and the perception that ideas are being “forced” into content.

Nevertheless, some female participants disagreed with this view. During a discussion between Latifa and Rghad about Marvel and how they are trying to “depict women as strong,” Roa responded, “Oh, when the heroes were men, that was fine. But now that we have women heroes, oh dear!” However, later in the interview, Roa criticised a recent Egyptian movie she had watched, which she described as “exaggerating” in portraying how women can overcome any difficulties, saying, “I swear, [laugh] they bring in a woman who’s had a really tough life, works hard, and suddenly she’s the best in the world [laugh].” It is important to consider whether Roa’s advocacy for female superheroes contrasts with her framing of a woman who “worked hard” to be “the best in the world” as an “exaggerated” depiction. Other female participants expressed similar ambivalence, showing both appreciation and dislike. This may suggest a tension between admiration for these portrayals and a recognition that they may have seemed unrealistic or difficult to attain. Consequently, no female participant was able to clearly define what constituted “too much feminism,” “exaggerated” depictions, or “cheap” and “forced” attempts to promote women’s empowerment. For example, Seham could not recall an example of content that contained “too much feminism.” On the other hand, Nori liked female superheroes yet disliked having only female fighters in the forefront. Nevertheless, such participants emphasised the importance of increased representation of women and the promotion of women’s empowerment, recognising these as positive developments, even amidst some problematic portrayals.

Overall, tensions surrounding depictions that were believed to empower women were discussed by both genders in different ways, with a common root. Male participants expressed dislike for content that portrayed women as independent and in ways that challenged traditional Saudi gender roles. This sentiment was especially strong among single male participants, who seemed to feel threatened by depictions of single, strong, independent

women leading free lives. While such depictions were a source of pleasure for female participants, as mentioned in Chapter 5, they also expressed reservations about how women's independence was typically portrayed. Female participants strongly rejected the association between being independent and successful with being oppressed. They particularly disliked the depiction of parents and partners as oppressors and as the motive for women to become independent or successful. While these viewpoints from both genders may appear contradictory, they are rooted in the same underlying concerns about traditional family structures and gender roles. Both perspectives arise from anxieties about how the family should look and function in a rapidly changing cultural context. Having explored this tension, the next section moves into issues around nudity and sexual content.

### **6.3 “It’s Just So Shameless... Porn, Basically Porn!”**

“Nudity” and “sexual” content as sources of tension are notably different from the other tensions discussed so far. In this context, “nudity – عري” was used by participants to refer to a range of situations, from exposing intimate body parts to complete nudity, while “sexual – جنسي / اباحي” was used to encompass everything from subtle suggestions of sexual activity to explicit scenes, with some participants framing it using the English word “porn.” Participants expressed conflicted and contradictory views on content featuring nudity and sexual themes. While many had reservations, these were generally mild compared with other tensions, as participants still seemed to enjoy such content. Nevertheless, participants reported a strong rejection of nudity and sexual themes when it came to shared viewing practices with family members. In other words, nudity and sexual content prevented participants from enjoying global SVOD platforms with their families and partners. This section will delve into how participants discussed nudity and sexual themes in SVODs, shedding light on how they negotiated this tension within the context of Saudi conservative cultural norms.

As shown in Chapter 5, nudity and sexual content were described by some as sources of pleasure and, by others such as Seham, as important elements in, for example, a “love story.” However, there seems to be a fine line between pleasure and discomfort, as the same participants who found sexual content pleasurable also criticised both platforms and individual texts for featuring what they believed to be excessive nudity and sexual depictions. Generally, and similar to the issue of LGBT content, participants reported an increased reliance on nudity and explicit sexual scenes on SVODs. In contrast to the issue of homosexuality, which participants primarily associated with Netflix and Disney+ content, the issue of overreliance appears to correlate with all global SVODs, despite subtle differences in promotional practices, such as featuring less explicit posters than other platforms. Nori summed up the differences between platforms, saying:

“These kinds of things [sexual scenes] are on all platforms, but they don’t use them to promote their movies. For example, when I open Netflix, I see posters for some series and movies that seem to highlight explicit content. It’s almost like they’re trying to attract viewers with this kind of material. But when I look at Apple and Amazon, I don’t see them using these kinds of posters.”

The increase in content featuring extended sexual scenes was reported by many participants. For instance, Qarar told me, “Lately it’s too much; what’s even the difference between Netflix and pornographic movies? Some of the scenes are so disturbing, it’s like you’re actually watching a porn film.” The word “porn – سكس” was used by many to explain that their reservation was not primarily about the existence of nudity or sexual scenes but rather about what they believed to be an overreliance on explicit and extended sexual scenes, as if the content were meant to be pornographic. For instance, Ahmad said, “Now, there are

movies on Netflix that are porn, like really porn. Movies like *Fifty Shades of Grey*<sup>77</sup> are just porn.” Nevertheless, many participants reported that they still watched such content despite their reservations, offering contradictory views regarding it. For example, Abdullah negatively spoke about how some SVODs not only rely on sex but also show a variety of sexual practices and depictions, and how they “lean towards sadism and try to introduce different perspectives on sex.” However, he also positively mentioned how he enjoyed learning many aspects of sex from such content, saying, “I accept some aspects of it... I might take inspiration/ideas, but I won’t perform the same rituals.” Therefore, it can be said that despite participants’ reservations about the increase in such content, there are many pleasurable aspects that should not be overlooked. This suggests that the issue with sexual content is largely case-specific, in the sense that there are no clear boundaries or limitations on what is considered acceptable or rejected, pleasurable or discomforting.

The most frequently mentioned example in the context of discussing content that features nudity and sexual depictions was *Game of Thrones*, which many participants cited to explain some ideas surrounding this tension. To illustrate how *Game of Thrones* displays heavy sexual scenes, Hasan talked about one of his friends who told him that “he didn’t even know about different types of boobs until he watched *Game of Thrones* [laugh].” This statement exemplifies the previously highlighted complication that Abdullah described – both pleasurable and educational, yet to some extent, discomforting moments. Another instance that illustrates the complexity of the issue with sexual content is Seham, who had previously stated that sex is an important part of the “love story.” Seham talked differently about *Game of Thrones*, saying:

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<sup>77</sup> *Fifty Shades of Grey* (De Luca et al., 2015-2018).

**“Seham:** There’s this series I don’t know how people can watch it. It’s full of stuff like that, unfortunately. I mean, I don’t know how people say they watch it and talk about it. I can’t even pronounce its name. Honestly, I’m really surprised how it’s so common, and everyone talks about it.

**Interviewer:** Do you mean *Game of Thrones*?

**Seham:** Yeah [laugh], how did you know [laugh]? I don’t know how people, hmmm, honestly, I tried to watch it, I was telling myself just watch season one and two, I couldn’t do it. I tried starting season two, but I couldn’t get through it.”

Seham’s reservations were not only about the number and extent of sexual scenes but also about incestuous sexual relationships, which was the main reason why some other participants stopped watching *Game of Thrones*. Maram told me, “I didn’t finish it because the explicit [incest] scenes were really disgusting. Every time I watched someone with his sister, it grossed me out. You get what I mean?” Similar to other participants, Maram found only incestuous sexual relationships to be “disgusting,” indicating a specific depiction that is rejected when it comes to sexual content among participants. Nevertheless, she told me that she was planning to return and watch it again:

“Because of all the hype. So many people say I’m lucky I haven’t watched it yet, so I thought I’d give it another shot. They told me that in the later seasons, those scenes are less frequent. You get what I mean, those kinds of [incest] scenes.”

The idea of popularity and peer pressure mentioned by both Maram and Seham, in relation to returning to watch the series, indicates that there is some level of acceptability among young Saudis regarding such content. Only one participant, Ali, stopped watching *Game of Thrones* without mentioning incestuous sexual relationships; after the fourth season, he could not continue due to the explicit and extended sexual scenes. He said, “Everyone’s talking about *Game of Thrones*, and it has such a high rating, but when you actually watch it, it’s just so

shameless... porn, basically porn!” This perspective resonates with studies in porn scholarship that explore how explicit content is often viewed as taboo and the complexities of its consumption in the region (see Gesser-Edelsburg & Abed Elhadi Arabia, 2018). However, many other participants did not report reservations regarding *Game of Thrones*’ nudity and sexual depictions, preferring to describe the show with terms such as “Outstanding” (Sara) and “legendary” (Faisal). Overall, it can be said that *Game of Thrones* exemplifies the collision between pleasure and discomfort caused by various forms of nudity and sexual depictions. While it illustrates how participants reject incestuous sexual relationships and how some dislike explicit, extended sexual scenes, others found the variety of nudity and sexual scenes pleasurable. The popularity of this content among Saudi youth not only indicates a degree of acceptability of nudity and sexual depictions but also aligns with the idea previously mentioned in Chapter 5 that there is a shift in the status of sexual taboos among the younger Saudi generation.

### ***6.3.1 “Nudity” and “Sexual” Content in Family Contexts***

Nudity and sexual depictions were discussed differently in the context of family viewing settings, where even body exposure, such as females wearing bikinis, as mentioned by Norah, could be problematic. Although everyday viewing practices for married participants were generally described as harmonious, tensions could still arise around nudity and sexual content. While some wives did not want their husbands to watch naked women, some husbands reported feeling ashamed to watch such content in front of their wives. This subsection will examine how tensions over nudity and sexual content emerge or are avoided, and how social and cultural logics shape these moments within the broader context of married and single participants’ viewing practices.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, married participants tended to watch content with their partners; however, tensions could emerge due to differing approaches towards what they deemed indecent. In contrast to the issue of LGBT themes, where couples reported a preference to skip scenes without facing disagreement, dealing with content that featured nudity and sexual content was where the subtle exercise of power appeared. Generally, married participants told me that they had some form of understanding and agreement on how to handle such content, yet these agreements did not always succeed. For example, Faisal and his wife had what he called an “unofficial agreement” for dealing with such content. He explained:

“Let me be straight with you. If a scene doesn’t really impact the plot or story of the movie, we just skip it. But if it’s important for the story and there’s a key conversation happening, we usually end up looking at each other until the scene is over. That’s pretty much how it goes.”

Nevertheless, Faisal’s wife appeared to hold the power to decide what constituted an important scene and whether Faisal was allowed to watch. This was where tensions typically arose between them, as he mentioned that she sometimes “just covered my eyes” to prevent him from watching naked women. The same applied to Abdullah’s wife, who might go beyond covering his eyes: “whether it’s a naked man or woman, she’d feel anxious.”

Sometimes she asked Abdullah to “not look at the screen,” and other times she would “stop the movie and pray against the director.” Despite Abdullah’s wife being uncomfortable even with male nudity, Faisal’s wife and other married female participants, such as Wejdan and Maram, were generally concerned with female nudity. Maram told me that, “If the movie is full of girls dressed in really revealing outfits, like practically naked, I just don’t see the point [for him] in watching it,” and therefore she would skip either certain scenes or the entire content. Wejdan, who also reported covering her husband’s eyes, described a similar approach, explaining that:

“**Interviewer:** Okay, then how do you deal with sexual content or scenes, for example?”

**Wejdan:** No, I'd just skip that part. I only cover his eyes if there're girls or something like that. It's not right [religiously – ما يجوز] for him to see that.

**Interviewer:** And you're allowed to watch it?

**Wejdan:** Yeah, I'm a woman, so it's fine [religiously]. There's no sex or anything [that is haram/forbidden].

**Interviewer:** So you don't have disagreements about this?

**Wejdan:** No, he knows it's haram [forbidden], and wrong, so it's fine<sup>78</sup>.”

In this way, Wejdan was similar to Maram and to what Abdullah and Faisal reported about their partners, holding the power to constitute what was permissible and to act accordingly, as she said, “I'd just skip that part.” What is important about these examples is that females' subtle exercise of power and control over TV is generally grounded and reinforced through creative use of religious norms. By invoking religion, as in the cases of Wejdan, Maram, and Abdullah's wife, they legitimised their control over what was watched and how, making their interventions more difficult to contest or challenge. Practices such as covering husbands' eyes to prevent them from looking at sinful scenes that involved female nudity illustrate how religion becomes a tool for negotiating morality and control over TV in the household. Hence, while Faisal showed some understanding of his wife's reactions and subtle control, Abdullah experienced tensions – such as when his wife cancelled his Netflix subscription –

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<sup>78</sup> To put this in context, what Wejdan referred to is that Muslim women are religiously permitted to see other women in revealing outfits – particularly any exposed body parts apart from the area between the navel and the knees. In contrast, Muslim men must “lower their gaze – غض البصر” and not look at women, regardless of whether their bodies are exposed or covered. This, at least partly, explains the popularity of covering the eyes, where wives act to prevent their husbands from committing sin, a practice that can be justified in light of the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad mentioned in the first section of this chapter, regardless of their personal motives which may play a role.

which, though not constant, reveal that conflicts can still arise among married participants, despite their descriptions of harmonious viewing practices.

However, some married male participants told me that they preferred not to watch any content featuring nudity and explicit sexual content with their partners. Some of these men found watching such content with their partners to be a shameful act. Here is a conversation with Hamoud, who reported a preference for avoiding any explicit content with his wife:

**“Interviewer:** May I know why?

**Hamoud:** I don’t know, I just feel like it’s wrong, it’s kind of shameful [shame – Ayb – عيب].

**Interviewer:** How is it shameful [shame – Ayb – عيب]?

**Hamoud:** I just think it’s wrong.”

Hamoud, among others, was not comfortable explaining his feelings as to why he did not watch such content with his wife. One possible explanation is that I, as a Saudi male researcher, was expected to already understand this traditionalist view of relationships that some Saudi couples lead. Nevertheless, it is important to note that those husbands were not criticising platforms for providing such content, but rather reported that they avoided it with their partners while watching it with male friends or in solo settings. Hamoud’s use of the loaded word “shame – عيب,” which connotes honour, reputation, and social expectations about right and wrong, aligns with Altuwayjiri’s (2018) observation that the term is embedded in the shame-honour culture of Saudi society, which shapes expectations for both men and women. In this sense, Hamoud’s explanation reflects how cultural norms shape viewing practices – such as avoiding sexual content with his wife while feeling comfortable watching it alone or with friends – and how these decisions vary depending on the social context.

The majority of husbands who preferred to avoid explicit content with their partners could not provide a clear answer as to what was considered sexual content and where the boundaries lay. While Ahmad told me that he had a clear standard, avoiding “any +12 movie” with his wife, Hamoud, Salman, and Ali told me that they did not have clear metrics or rules. For Hamoud, if he perceived the content as inappropriate, he “probably would not continue watching it,” opting to leave the living room and “maybe” watch it later alone. The fact that Hamoud mentioned leaving the room without interfering with his wife’s content choices aligns with the overall argument that Saudi wives have the upper hand and control in the living room. Notably, couples who did not watch explicit content together were often unaware of whether their partners watched content featuring nudity and explicit sexual themes when alone. I was told that there was no discussion about such content, as they avoided speaking about it with their partners, reflecting a sense of modesty or “shame” around these topics. For example, despite their extensive daily shared viewing of SVODs, Hamoud told me that he did not know if his wife watched content he did not watch with her, such as *Game of Thrones* and *Spartacus*<sup>79</sup>, saying, “I don’t know, it’s up to her.” Salman shared the same sentiment, saying, “Maybe, I don’t know.” Therefore, it can be said that there appears to be a mutual unspoken agreement that each person has the right to watch whatever they want as long as they do not do it together. This, in turn, illustrates that married participants’ viewing practices and gender dynamics are underpinned not only by religious norms but also by wider social and cultural logics around morality, modesty, and social expectations, influencing what, when, where, and how content is considered acceptable to watch.

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<sup>79</sup> *Spartacus* (DeKnight et al., 2010-2013).

On the other hand, tensions around nudity and sexual content in the context of family viewing were generally not relevant to single participants, as the vast majority reported a preference to avoid watching SVODs with their family. Despite reasons mentioned in Chapter 4, such as tech availability and time alignment, the preference to avoid family settings was primarily associated with what some described as an “anxious” viewing experience. Waled told me that he would feel “anxious” if he watched Netflix in the living room because unexpected nude or sexual scenes might appear at any moment. Norah, Qarar, and many others avoided watching in this setting due to what they considered to be “indecent” scenes in the living room, let alone nudity or sexual content. In fact, some described avoiding watching with any family members for reasons beyond indecency, including any scene that contradicted Saudi traditional values. For instance, Bader said, “I avoid watching with my family to avoid sexual scenes, inappropriate scenes, or any scene that contradicts our principles or values in general.” Similarly, Aziz used the loaded term, which was also mentioned by other males, “shame – عيب,” implying that his preference was not merely a personal choice, but rather a matter of cultural and social boundaries that must be respected between family members. While no female participants used the exact term “shame – عيب,” they used alternative expressions that conveyed similar concerns around modesty, social expectations, and boundaries<sup>80</sup>. This is not to say that all single participants avoided watching TV with their families. However, those who did had strict standards when it came to selecting content in the living room, making the issue of nudity and sexual content almost non-existent. Hence, it can be said that the preference for private, individualised viewing stems less from tech availability and time alignment and more from a desire to avoid the social and moral

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<sup>80</sup> I suspect that female participants did not mention the term “shame – عيب – Ayb” because it tends to be associated more with masculine social control around various issues in the Arab world (see Afshar, 1993; Altuwayjiri, 2018).

“anxiety” associated with family viewing. This, in turn, highlights how cultural norms around shame, modesty, and social boundaries shape SVOD viewing practices among young Saudis.

Overall, this section delved into the issue of nudity and sexual content in SVODs. The issue of content featuring sexual themes and narratives is complex, as participants reported conflicted and contradictory views; these components could be both pleasurable and discomforting at the same time. This ambivalence was evident in discussions about shows such as *Game of Thrones*, where nudity was mentioned in both positive and negative ways. Nevertheless, nudity and sexual content were reported to be leading causes of tension among married couples. While some wives exerted control over what their partners were allowed to watch, other husbands expressed a rejection of and dislike for the idea of watching sexual content with their partners.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how participants navigate and negotiate three key sources of tension that emerged strongly across the data collection. These tensions were primarily linked to perceptions of “the promotion of homosexuality,” depictions of women, gender roles, family structures, and “explicit sexual” or “pornographic” content. While some of these issues were framed as sources of pleasure in Chapter 5, this chapter focused on their more contentious aspects. It has demonstrated a widespread belief among participants that SVODs serve an ideological function, leading many to engage with the content cautiously. This was especially evident in how participants expressed doubt, questioned, and sometimes problematically interpreted depictions of LGBT themes and women’s empowerment as hidden or manipulative messages. Debates around the portrayal of women seemed to reflect concerns about the evolving nature of Saudi society amid ongoing cultural changes. These

concerns extended beyond traditional gender roles to include male-female friendships, family structures, and independence of women. For instance, Othman referred to depictions of “women’s independence” as “one of the most dangerous ideas on these platforms,” particularly since they promote “the male friend experience.” While the next chapter will explore broader concerns regarding the ramifications of SVODs, participants’ perception of these platforms as ideologically driven seems to some extent to shape both their viewing practices and their interpretation of various issues.

This chapter has also illustrated that participants’ engagement with content they disliked on SVODs is complex and context-dependent. This was evident in how they discussed, dealt with, and watched content that touched on the mentioned tensions. While many had previously stopped watching content featuring LGBT themes, they have since developed a certain level of tolerance, or at least endurance, for it. In some cases, this tolerance was even rationalised creatively through religion, as evidenced in how Hind justified her enjoyment of such content by acknowledging her perceived sinful actions in her “heart.” Moreover, participants’ engagement with such content also involved practical strategies, where skipping scenes, for instance, functioned as a tool to deal with cultural sensitivities. However, the social context of viewing played a significant role in this regard, as participants – whether married or single – had their own roles, strategies, and ways of dealing with such cultural sensitivities. By delving into these issues, this chapter has provided a look into the nature of different tensions and how they were negotiated and navigated by participants in light of the complex Saudi social and cultural context. Having explored the ways participants talked about these tensions, the next chapter widens the lens to engage with the broader perceived ramifications of these platforms on Saudi society.

## **Chapter 7: Ramifications of SVOD for Saudi Society: Navigating Cultural Concerns and the Desire for Global Content**

One notable commonality among participants was the complex and often ambivalent views they held toward global SVODs and their broader social and cultural ramifications. In some cases, this ambivalence was as stark as advocating for blocking these “corrupt” and “dangerous” platforms while simultaneously expressing attachment to and appreciation for such services. This chapter delves into the ramifications of SVODs from the participants’ perspectives, shedding light on how they negotiated the role and place of these platforms in a rapidly changing society. This will be explored through three dimensions: participants’ reflections on public discourse surrounding platforms during my fieldwork, their concerns about children’s engagement with these platforms, and their perceptions of the broader societal ramifications of platforms amid ongoing cultural changes in Saudi Arabia. This focus on these three dimensions collectively aims to capture the perceived complexities surrounding global SVODs’ place in Saudi, revealing how these deeply embedded platforms are seen as both a cultural threat and a valued cultural window onto the wider world, requiring a nuanced approach that embraces their perceived positive aspects while mitigating their perceived cultural drawbacks. While previous chapters addressed participants’ direct engagement with SVOD content – highlighting both the pleasures and the tensions involved – this chapter further contributes to the second and third research questions by shifting the focus to how participants perceive the wider ramifications of these issues for Saudi society, reflecting a negotiation between local laws, traditions, religion, and global SVOD content.

Global SVODs operate in the region within an intense media environment that has long been constrained by social, cultural, and political challenges. While the Introduction Chapter has detailed this intensity, along with aspects related to the enduring influence of the Sahwa

period and the ongoing Saudi cultural changes, I revisit here the 2022 Gulf statement as a critical moment for understanding some of the tensions discussed in this chapter. In 2022, the Gulf states, followed later by other Arab countries such as Egypt, issued a statement demanding that Netflix remove content that contradicted Islamic and local values, which came after several boycotting campaigns throughout the region (Sullivan, 2022). This statement was largely in reference to children's content, where an official Saudi TV news channel displayed clips from Netflix cartoons showing homosexual children (Alekhbariya, 2022b; also see Alekhbariya, 2022a, 2022c). It was amplified by recurring boycott campaigns such as #كلنا\_ضد\_ترويج\_الشذوذ\_الجنسي, which translates as "We Are All Against Promoting Homosexuality". This pushback and the audience anxieties over Netflix were reflected in various Arab audience studies, whether in the Gulf (Zaid et al., 2023) or across multiple Arab countries, including Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan (Ben Moussa et al., 2024). For Ben Moussa et al., this backlash, driven by cultural concerns, is a defining feature of how global media platforms are establishing themselves in the region, situating this within Khalil's Arab media power dynamics of "business push and audience pull" (Khalil, 2016, p. 3632; also see Zaid et al., 2023).

That being said, the recurring pressure on platforms from Saudi audiences, or perhaps the "audience pull," can also be seen in the study of Mansour and Al-Dhobaiban (2022), where it manifested in an ambivalent way. Mansour and Al-Dhobaiban (2022) found that Saudi university students perceived Netflix to have potential negative impact on themselves and society in various social and cultural respects. However, they showed limited support for boycotting Netflix. The authors therefore frame this ambivalence between cultural tensions and continued use as a result of either an unresolved "addiction" or the negative consequences of "binge-watching" (p. 39). Despite my reservations about the way the study

was designed – as illustrated in the Literature Review – the finding suggests a persistent negotiation between cultural concerns and the desire for global content. This, in turn, highlights the need to understand the nuances of young Saudis’ perspectives regarding the role of global SVODs and their ramifications in society. Exploring my participants’ wider views on SVOD in Saudi Arabia helps us better understand the ambivalences that characterised their responses.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section will shed light on how my participants reflected on the broader discourse surrounding SVODs in Saudi Arabia that emerged before and during my fieldwork in Riyadh, examining their positions within the complex debate about the future of these platforms in the country. It will also highlight how participants perceived the regulatory role that local authorities appeared to be undertaking, which seemed to contribute to wider anxieties over these platforms. The second section will delve into participants’ concerns regarding children’s engagement with global SVODs, particularly in relation to LGBT themes. It will highlight the ambivalence participants expressed, navigating the tension between protecting children from perceived negative influences and expressing a desire for them to benefit from exposure to global content. Following this, the chapter will shift to the perceived ramifications for wider society, where participants discussed their own experiences and those of other young Saudis, exploring concerns over the role of platforms in their rapidly changing cultural context. Together, this chapter will reveal a complex dynamic of cultural negotiation and adaptation, showing how participants embrace aspects that align with perceived evolving societal needs and norms while affirming and reaffirming cultural values in opposition to those deemed detrimental to cultural identity.

## 7.1 “I Hate Netflix, but I Really Love It”

Since the interviews and focus groups took place a few weeks after the aforementioned 2022 Gulf states’ statement and multiple boycotting campaigns against Netflix and Disney+ across the Arab world, I seized the opportunity to probe my participants about the wider discourses circulating in Saudi Arabia and on social media regarding SVODs and their future. This section will first explore how my participants positioned themselves within these discourses, particularly in light of the ambiguity surrounding the regulatory status of these platforms and the increasing tension between Gulf states and Netflix. It will highlight the debate within society between those who advocated for blocking the platforms and those who believed it was a reality to which society must adapt. By doing so, this section will shed light on participants’ anxieties in relation to the regulator’s unclear role in enforcement, as well as the lack of transparency in the enforcement of regulatory frameworks for global SVODs in Saudi.

While tracing the reasons underpinning the wider discourse regarding global SVODs during my fieldwork is challenging, two incidents appeared central to fuelling these debates. At the beginning of 2022, a boycotting campaign against YouTube emerged due to what was perceived as the sudden and widespread appearance of adult advertisements in the region – e.g., explicit advertisements for pornographic websites. In response, Saudi authorities issued a warning to YouTube, stating that legal action would be taken against the platform. This prompted YouTube to announce the removal of these advertisements and the associated accounts, stating that they violated the platform’s policies regarding adult content (Issa, 2022). This incident, along with YouTube’s response, was perceived by some of my participants as a public victory, as a global company was seen to comply with local laws and authorities. A few months later, the collective Gulf statement that warned Netflix was issued.

This statement appeared to raise hope for solutions among my participants, as the previous pressure on YouTube was perceived to have resulted in a resolution. This interpretation of the situation seemed to stem from the fact that participants did not understand that the YouTube incident was fundamentally different from the Netflix case. Specifically, adult advertisements violated YouTube’s policy – an issue that YouTube, according to the platform’s statement, actively works to address on a global scale (Issa, 2022). Whereas in the case of Netflix, the issue did not involve a breach of platform policies, but rather concerned content that aligns with the platform’s inclusive strategy (see Asmar et al., 2023), and hence Netflix had no obligation to take action.

Nevertheless, the Netflix case was unique, representing a collective stance by Gulf states along with Egypt, which carried a stronger position and further fuelled optimism after multiple boycotting campaigns throughout 2022. The media atmosphere and news framing at the time heavily targeted Netflix, with the Saudi official news channel presenting the statement under the headline: “Khaleejis [Gulf Nationals] to ‘NETFLIX’: Remove Content Violating Values and Human Nature.”<sup>81</sup> (Alekhbariya, 2022b). Abdullah Alsabe, a Saudi influencer and tech journalist, posted a poll to his 1.5 million followers on X, asking if they supported blocking Netflix if the platform did not comply with local regulations, with 79.8% voting yes (Alsabe, 2022). Nevertheless, there were also voices within the country who strongly opposed blocking Netflix during the boycotting campaigns throughout 2022. For instance, Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, a prominent public figure, columnist, and Chairman of Al Arabiya’s Editorial Board<sup>82</sup>, expressed his views in an article titled “The Crisis of the People

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<sup>81</sup> The Arabic headline as it is in the channel website:

الخليجيون لـ “NETFLIX”: أزيلوا المحتوى المخالف للقيم والفضيلة البشرية.

<sup>82</sup> Al Arabiya is a major news network in Saudi and the Arab world, known for its strong opposition to Islamist groups and ideologies.

of the Past”. In it, he wrote: “Those who call for banning #Netflix, prohibiting manga magazines, and halting shows on MBC are remnants of a not-so-distant past, unable to adapt to the idea that the world has room for everyone...”<sup>83</sup> (Al-Rashed, 2022). That atmosphere significantly influenced the wider discourse within the country at the time, sparking debates over how to address those platforms, what content should be filtered, and how such measures might be implemented, especially in light of the platforms’ refusal to comply with local regulations.

For my research participants, the discourses circulating within wider society regarding global SVODs appeared to be perceived in an all-or-nothing, black-and-white manner, likely influenced by the charged media atmosphere surrounding the aforementioned Gulf statement. Participants were divided between those advocating for greater government involvement to pressure platforms to filter content and those opposing filtration, fearing the loss of access to certain titles or even entire platforms. While people’s positions on the issue ranged across a spectrum, most participants positioned themselves at or near the extremes, aligning either with advocates of filtration or with opponents, despite acknowledging its complexity. Nonetheless, it may be noted that almost half of my participants leaned towards the side of the spectrum that advocated for pressing platforms to filter their content or provide solutions

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<sup>83</sup> The phrase “remnants of a not-so-distant past” refers to the enduring influence of Sahwa. This type of framing – or even “cancelling” perceived conservative opinions under the umbrella of Sahwa – is common in Saudi Arabia, regardless of the accuracy of the association. While it is expected that ultra-conservatives and the “remnants” of Sahwa would oppose Netflix, Al-Rashed’s association was extremely broad, as he implicitly labelled anyone who opposed Netflix as being ultra-conservative, which is misleading.

for Saudi subscribers. Although my findings showed no clear correlation between age or gender, participants in focus group discussions tended to slightly advocate for filtration.

The idea of pressing platforms was expressed in various forms, as Roa said, “Look, we need to voice our rejection because when we rejected, they [YouTube] responded... if we say no, they [SVODs] will respect our values.”<sup>84</sup> Roa’s statement exemplifies the wider misunderstanding of the YouTube incident, which was perceived to have been addressed through pressure, as mentioned earlier. This line of thought was popular, pushing the idea that more government involvement was needed. Notably, some of these participants were not only talking about the Saudi government but were also looking for collective pressure from Arab and Muslim countries, akin to the Gulf statement that warned Netflix. For example, Seham mentioned, “I believe that collective opinions can have an impact”; Rghad mentioned “officials in Arab countries”; and Faisal invoked “the Islamic world.” The reason for highlighting the importance of collective pressure stemmed from how Faisal framed it: “A single market, even if large, may not be enough for pressure.” I suspect, however, that the idea of collective pressure emerged due to the popularity of pan-Arab boycotting campaigns, often announced on social media and directed at platforms. This may have fostered a sense of unity, as participants saw others in the Arab world calling for similar measures. Nevertheless, those participants who expressed the need for pressure and more government involvement disagreed on the best approach to this pressure and on the nature of the results they aimed for. One popular approach among this segment of participants was advocating for pressing to the

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<sup>84</sup> It is important to note how Roa used “we” and “they” in her speech, aligning herself, the Saudis, and the government as a unified front against global platforms. This way of framing was popular among my participants, likely as a reaction to the Gulf statement, which was highly appreciated.

point of temporarily blocking platforms until they, as Bader argued, “consider the audience’s perspective.”

“I think this ban or restriction will push some platforms to consider the audience’s perspective. Okay, it’s great that they’re investing heavily in film production and content in general [globally], but they’re not respectful of certain issues that matter to us... I see it as a reasonable approach.”

Similarly, Seham expressed a desire to temporarily block Netflix in order to enforce filtering their platform, saying:

“I can stop using Netflix for three or five months until they make changes. We should impose that they clean up the content and return it to how it used to be. For example, back in 2014, Netflix had cleaner content than it does now; it wasn’t like this.”<sup>85</sup>

The temporary nature of the ban expressed by participants reflected what seemed to be a sacrifice. Seham, for example, had previously been unsuccessful in her effort to boycott Netflix, since alternative, illegal means of accessing content did not satisfy her needs – as mentioned in the previous chapter. Therefore, she was only willing to sacrifice a few months, believing that the ban would lead to a resolution. While this sacrifice may reflect concerns over cultural values, it also suggests that participants perceived the regulator as inadequate in negotiating with platforms, prompting them to offer voluntary sacrifices to help find resolutions, as will be further discussed later.

Although the idea of temporarily banning platforms was popular among participants, they strongly disagreed on precisely *what* should be filtered or “cleaned up,” despite the existing regulatory framework. This suggests that participants recognise the full implementation of

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<sup>85</sup> “Cleaner content” refers to the broader perception of the increase in LGBT themes and sexual content.

local media laws may not be feasible and, in some cases, undesirable, as it could lead to the loss of many titles. In fact, there was disagreement even on how to deal with LGBT content, which was at the centre of the debates. Some suggested removing only LGBT scenes (Waled), others focused on extended LGBT scenes (Hind), and finally, there were those who wanted to remove any title featuring LGBT themes (Roa). Similar patterns of discussions and suggestions, ranging from partial edits to complete removal, emerged regarding nudity, sex, and atheism. Thus, while each participant had their own nuanced ideas about which content should be removed, censored, or retained, the group dynamic fostered by the focus group setting may have contributed to certain options being cherry-picked, as well as some participants seeing it as an opportunity to uphold their cultural values against the perceived “corrupting” influence of Western media. This does not mean that such participants did not want access to global SVODs, but rather their stance was mainly to capture the perceived positive aspects of the platforms and eliminate what was seen as detrimental to society. Hence, some, such as Faisal, found taking a stance within this negotiation to be difficult; yet he had to prioritise one side, saying:

“I’m against Netflix, but at the same time, I kind of lean towards it – so I’m torn between both sides. I really hope that a stand is taken on this issue and that some changes are made. I mean, I wouldn’t even mind if it got banned because I really feel it has a big impact on society.”

Therefore, it can be said that participants who advocated for pressure and filtration struggled to reconcile their desire to protect cultural values with their fear of losing content perceived to contrast with those very values. This resulted in a complex position that ultimately leans toward sacrificing their enjoyment of unrestricted access to global content, even if temporarily, in order to prioritise their cultural values.

On the other hand, there were also numerous participants who were against pushing platforms to filter their content, expressing what seemed to be frustration with the way society deals

with and thinks about the issue. Qarar told me that, “Unfortunately, some people criticise and cause a fuss, but in the end, they’re the first to subscribe. If you don’t like it, just cancel the subscription – why act this way?” The idea of causing “a fuss” and complaining on social media was not seen as useful for various reasons, one of which was the concern about losing access to many titles or even an entire platform. Despite her rejection of LGBT themes and raising many issues with SVOD content, Zahra expressed annoyance at those who complained, especially on X/Twitter:

“When they see anything that’s popular or successful, they feel the need to oppose it. Okay, maybe it’s successful for the wrong reasons, but it is what it is. For those who like it – great! And for those who don’t – no one’s forcing them to watch. I mean, it’s basically just ‘Faselhd,’ [popular Arabic illegal streaming service] the same content, the same movies that Netflix offers are available on all platforms [illegally]... Sure, maybe in lower quality, but they’re still there.”

Zahra’s position was echoed by many, stating that filtration or blocking platforms would result in people shifting to illegal ways to watch content, and therefore any measure against platforms would be, as Suliman believed, “useless”<sup>86</sup>. Suliman argued that “countries spend millions to block websites, and a free [VPN] app can bypass them. That’s just a waste of money.” Similarly, Mjeed mentioned, “At the end of the day, consumers will consume. The situation will be messy with torrent and things like that... Complaining and saying we should block it just feels pointless.” Notably, the positions and arguments of the majority of such participants in refusing filtration or banning platforms was not based on their sovereignty as

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<sup>86</sup> IPTVs and other illegal methods of accessing content were popular among participants, as mentioned in Chapters 4 and 5, where they used it as a complementary means to access content to which they did not have a subscription, or during their boycott of platforms. Although illegal streaming services and websites are frequently blocked by the government, they remain difficult to control, as they regularly change their URLs and operate from Arab countries with weak or non-existent copyright laws, often due to lower public income.

individual consumers. Rather, there was a shared perception that the issue was no longer the mere existence of platforms, but the popularity of their content – content that people would likely continue watching through other means if platforms were filtered or blocked, thus failing to address the underlying issue. Hence, Mjeed argued that “With awareness and education, you build an informed consumer who knows how to choose what to watch.” A similar point was presented by Qarar, who told me that “media literacy should be integrated into schools and made available to high school students.” Accordingly, it can be said that participants who opposed filtration and banning platforms shared underlying cultural concerns but diverged from those advocating for such measures in their proposed solutions. They emphasised the importance of the role of family, education, and awareness since platforms, as Salman argued, are “ingrained in society.” The way such participants discussed the need to address SVODs as a reality to which society must adapt was reflected in Abdullah’s expression of his feelings:

“Look, as a person – and I know many others feel the same – I can express my criticism and say I completely reject this. But what does that really change? I said I didn’t want it, yet here I am still subscribed to the platform, hoping for another show. I’m telling you, I hate Netflix, but I really love it.”

The resignation expressed by Abdullah, along with the broader disagreement on how to address platforms, reflects the internal struggle that my participants face in navigating the complexities of this reality. Nevertheless, it also highlights what seems to be a gap between participants and the regulator, due to the lack of clarifications and the regulatory status of platforms, which, I suspect, further deepens participants’ anxieties.

Participants offered a wide range of interpretations regarding the issue of platforms, yet none understood why the regulator did not enforce local regulations or provide an explanation for the regulatory status of platforms. For instance, Abdullah told me, “The government doesn’t

want to stop it or take it away from people because everyone's so used to it now." However, the language participants used to express their position aligned Saudis – both individuals and authorities – on one front against the perceived “corrupt” platforms, suggesting a view that the regulator was seen as inadequate, and in some instances, helpless. For instance, Nori argued: “when we ask for homosexual [LGBT] scenes to be removed, we get attacked as if we're the ones in the wrong... I feel like it's turned into cultural warfare”<sup>87</sup>. The word “attack” referred to Disney's refusal to censor 12 seconds of an LGBT scene from *Doctor Strange 2*<sup>88</sup> in Saudi cinemas (Cain & Agencies, 2022), and then providing the movie on the Disney+ platform. Notably, the local authorities' demand concerning *Doctor Strange 2* was in regard to cinemas, which have different regulations than SVODs, and was aimed at Disney, not Disney+ (see Cain & Agencies, 2022). Yet, Nori's misunderstanding exemplifies how and why many participants frame platforms simply as “disrespecting” and “challenging” local regulations and public demands. Another example is that participants who suggested the temporary ban were expressing some sort of sacrifice to help the regulator force platforms to comply with regulations, as shown earlier with Seham. When some of these participants asked what would happen if platforms refused to comply even after the temporary ban, Afnan, for instance, said, “The complaint then is only to God [laugh].” This showcases how participants viewed the regulator as inadequate due to the vagueness of the situation. The position of the regulator is, of course, complicated within the dynamics of the power structure, torn between media operating outside the country's jurisdiction, which pushes for

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<sup>87</sup> Nori literally said, “electric war,” which can also be translated as “online war.” However, the meaning can be understood as “media or cultural warfare through the internet.”

Nori's original statement in Arabic is:

"الآن لما نجي نطلب نقصّ النقاط المثالية قاعد بصير هجوم علينا كأننا الغلطانيين... أنا أشوف أن الموضوع صاير حرب إلكترونية يعني سالفه  
دكتور سترينج فلم ديزني"

<sup>88</sup> *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Raimi, 2022).

local investments, and audiences who, on one hand, want access to platforms but, on the other hand, push back against cultural sensitivities (See Khalil & Zayani, 2021; Khalil, 2024). Despite this, the gap persisted due to the lack of clarifications surrounding the issue. Participants had no understanding of the jurisdictional limitations of the regulator, nor did they comprehend the situation beyond the collective Gulf statement. Therefore, they resorted to various interpretations, which only contributed to feelings of lack of representation, anxiety, and, as Nori felt, “cultural warfare.”

Overall, the wider discourses circulating in Saudi Arabia regarding SVODs reflected a complex negotiation between cultural preservation and the desire for access to global content. Although the positions of participants may seem polarised, the underlying concern was similar: a focus on cultural values. For some, the need to protect cultural and religious values justified stricter measures against perceived Western influences, while others viewed the issue as an unavoidable reality and an everyday activity that society must adapt to, invoking other measures to protect society. Ultimately, the complexity of these positions reflects what seemed to be an absence of regulatory clarity, with participants struggling to comprehend, interpret, and navigate the issue, leaving them feeling underrepresented, anxious, and caught in a sense of cultural conflict. Having addressed this first dimension of the chapter, the next section turns to participants’ concerns over children.

## **7.2 Reflections on Children**

Concerns over children were invoked by the majority of participants, regardless of their parental status. At the heart of these concerns was the presence of LGBT themes in children’s catalogues, which many feared would not merely introduce the concept of homosexuality to children but encourage its adoption. Since the previous chapter delved into the participants’

religious, cultural, and personal views regarding LGBT content and the wider perception of the ideological nature of SVODs, this section will delve into participants' concerns about the potential wider influence of LGBT content within Saudi, much of which was filtered through the register of talk concerning the potential influence on future generations or simply "children". By doing so, this section's focus on children serves as a particularly useful way of highlighting the wider concerns and ambivalence surrounding SVODs' place in Saudi society – feared for their perceived cultural impact yet also desired for the global content they provide.

Of course, parental and societal concerns over children and media are a recurring phenomenon that has been well documented in various national contexts, particularly regarding controversies surrounding content suitability, age appropriateness, and child development (see Drotner & Livingstone, 2008; Messenger Davies, 2010; Page Jeffery, 2017; Robinson, 2008). However, many of such studies tend to conceptualise, examine, and understand public debates about children through the lens of moral panic, where a subject or object is defined and disproportionately perceived by society as a threat to cultural and societal values, norms, and interests (Cohen, 2011; see also Buckingham & Strandgaard Jensen, 2012; Robinson, 2008). Buckingham and Strandgaard Jensen (2012) highlight issues with the application of the concept of moral panic, noting that it can be misapplied or overextended, reducing complex debates to simplistic narratives that may dismiss critical perspectives. This is particularly significant since the framework of moral panic neglects to consider the duality and positive aspects present in the complex issues surrounding children and media (2012, p. 423). While my participants invoked concerns over SVOD children's content, their concerns coexisted with a desire for children to engage with global platforms, driven by the perception of various benefits for children. This tension between concerns and

perceived benefits highlights the complex negotiation in my participants' relationship with SVODs, reflecting and reinforcing broader societal debates about cultural preservation and the desire for global engagement.

Participants voiced various concerns regarding children and their relationship with global SVODs. At the centre of these issues was what appeared to be a fear that children might not only be influenced to accept homosexuality but also that some parents were specifically concerned about their children becoming homosexual. To highlight how this anxiety was expressed, here is an example of Abdullah speaking about his child:

“One day, he might come and say he wants to marry Mishaal [a male name]. What do you mean you want to marry Mishaal?! How can you even consider marrying Mishaal? And what if my daughter [not born yet] comes to me and says she wants to marry Susan [a female name]? Do they [Netflix] want to cut off the lineage? Should we just stop it!! [angry voice]”

Abdullah's statement exemplifies the concerns of participants who had children – a concern that, as Hamoud said, “kids pick up on everything” and, therefore, could lead to adopting homosexuality or even becoming homosexuals. Notably, the discourse around such concerns was largely accompanied by a manifestation of deeply rooted cultural values, one of which was evident in Abdullah's use of the term “lineage,”<sup>89</sup> highlighting the sensitivity of the topic given the tribal nature of Saudi society. This contrasts with parental attitudes and perceptions of children's exposure to LGBT content in some Western contexts, where parents express more nuanced perspectives and highlight both positive and negative aspects. For instance, research conducted in Flanders has indicated how Flemish parents perceive LGBT content as

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<sup>89</sup> Lineage is central to Saudi social life, with children taught about their tribe and family tree from a young age. Abdullah's concerns about homosexuality stem from his fear that if his child does not have children, it would disrupt the continuity of the tribe, break the link between past and future, and ultimately end Abdullah's existence in the future of the tribal tree.

potentially beneficial for improving children’s knowledge and socialisation skills, while simultaneously expressing concerns about age-appropriateness, particularly regarding trans and non-binary themes, which they feel might exceed children’s cognitive understanding (Van Wichelen et al., 2025; Van Wichelen & Verhoeven, 2024).

Such nuanced discussions about LGBT content for children – even when shaped by or masking heteronormative attitudes in some Western contexts, such as the US and Australia (McAndrew & Bonus, 2022; Robinson, 2012) – were absent among my participants, as there was no room for negotiation. However, concerns over children’s exposure to LGBT content, both in Western contexts and among my participants, stem from similar ideas about age appropriateness and cognitive development. The views, however, diverge significantly: while Western parents often perceive such content as potentially confusing or harmful due to children’s cognitive developmental stages, my participants primarily viewed it as a threat to cultural and religious values. Moreover, my participants’ focus on homosexuality rather than trans or non-binary themes stemmed from their lack of familiarity with the terminology and frameworks of gender and sexual diversity – despite them being aged 25 to 35 years old and representing a younger demographic of parents. The concept of transgenderism was only mentioned twice throughout my interviews, while non-binary identities neither exist as a concept in Saudi dialects nor in public life. For instance, when Hind criticised LGBT representations in children’s content on *Nickelodeon*, she struggled to explain the idea of same-sex parents, pausing for almost 10 seconds to think about how to articulate this relationship before finally stating, “I don’t know what they call it, like two dads or two moms.” While this highlights a cultural gap between participants and global SVOD content, it may also suggest a potential difference between my participants and their children in terms of understanding gender and sexual diversity – a pattern observed in other national

conservative contexts (e.g., Zulmi & Alamiyah, 2024). This is especially relevant because my participants reported skipping, overlooking, and avoiding content featuring LGBT themes, while their children, as Abdullah said, “sneak” to watch content independently, despite his measures to prevent it, as will be discussed later. Overall, participants’ concerns about global SVOD children’s content centred on LGBT themes, with fears that exposure to such content could lead their children not only to adopt homosexuality but also to become homosexuals, ultimately conflicting with their cultural and religious realities.

Numerous participants who did not have children expressed similar concerns. Notably, many of them were unaware of what children’s catalogues offered. Here are two examples:

“I mean, imagine a child being exposed to [LGBT] ideas like that. Especially since, to be honest, I’m not fully aware of what’s going on in kids’ content. I don’t know much about it or what they’re showing. So, I have no idea if things like homosexuality or atheism are being promoted in these shows.” (Faisal)

“This generation needs serious protection. We all know the dangers in Netflix for adults, but we don’t know or watch what’s happening in kids’ content. I’m sure if we really analysed some of these shows, we’d find behaviours or ideas that can seriously influence kids – whether it’s things that challenge their beliefs or affect their behaviour... It’s honestly pretty worrying.” (Qarar)

While the concerns of such participants were similarly rooted in notions of age appropriateness and cognitive development, the fact that they expressed these concerns without information about the catalogues highlights the wider perception of the complexity of the platforms’ place in society, particularly in light of the regulator’s stance. The implicit link to the regulator can be seen in Faisal’s statement: “Imagine a child being exposed to [LGBT] ideas like that.” Since these interviews took place after the official Gulf statement warning Netflix, the statement itself may have amplified participants’ concerns. This is especially

evident as both Arab and Saudi media, both private and public, delved into the issue of LGBT content in children's programming in response to the statement. One example of this coverage is from the local Saudi news channel Alekhbariya, which invited experts from various fields to discuss the perceived dangers of Netflix children's content in a news episode titled "Netflix Platform: Decadence and Promotion of Homosexuality for Children."<sup>90</sup> (Alekhbariya, 2022a). In addition, as mentioned in the previous chapter, various media sources feed into my participants' rationalisations and judgments regarding SVODs. News from the West highlighting complaints or protests over children and LGBT topics – whether related to media, education curriculums, or other areas – receives considerable attention in the region, especially on social media. Areeg's note in the last chapter about Disney's plans for increased LGBT inclusion "in their cartoons, and people in the West were like, 'What are you doing?'" serves as an excellent example of how news from the West was popular among participants. Ali also invoked a similar news example, saying, "Sometimes even they [Americans] protest against Netflix...", highlighting how platforms face resistance even in the West. Such news coming from the West, reflecting concerns over children's welfare, seemed to contribute to the wider scepticism toward global SVODs, as participants perceived the struggle to exist even in places where homosexuality is legal. Nevertheless, this media atmosphere, along with the Gulf statement, seemed to amplify participants' concerns, particularly given the perceived ambiguity surrounding the regulator's role in dealing with platforms. This created a set of accumulating factors that fuelled and contributed to anxieties regarding global SVOD children's content, even as participants also recognise potential benefits in their children's engagement with these platforms.

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<sup>90</sup> The episode title in Arabic:

"منصة نتفليكس.. إسفاف وترويج الشذوذ للأطفال"

### ***7.2.1 Beyond Concerns: Children's Learning and Values through Global SVODs***

Despite these concerns and anxieties, participants, particularly parents, expressed a desire for their children to have access to and engage with global SVOD platforms. This desire stemmed from the perceived positive benefits these platforms could offer, especially in terms of learning English. The acquisition of English, particularly in Riyadh, has become a priority for parents due to recent developments in the country, with English fluency increasingly seen as important for accessing better job opportunities<sup>91</sup>. As a result, Saudi parents actively encourage their children to start learning English as early as four years old (Al-Jarf, 2023). For my participants, global SVOD platforms were seen as an effective tool for accessing the English language. Maram, for instance, spoke about how she used Netflix to prepare her twin children for school: "I'm planning to enrol them in an international school [private English-speaking schools], so I'm making sure they get used to hearing and familiarising themselves with the language." Similarly, Hamoud encouraged his daughter to watch Netflix without Arabic subtitles or dubbing to enhance her English skills: "She's even started to know colours and things, and can talk to you about them." Notably, Hamoud mentioned that he could not afford the high fees of private and international schools, and since public schools only teach English for two hours a week, he encouraged his daughter to watch specific shows on Netflix and YouTube to improve her language skills. These practices illustrate how parents viewed global SVODs not only as entertainment platforms but also as practical tools to support their

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<sup>91</sup> Several factors contribute to this development, including local universities transitioning science, technology, and business degrees to English to keep pace with scientific advancements and attract investment, along with the influx of international company headquarters, multinational expats working in Saudi companies, and the growth of the tourism sector. This has created an environment where acquiring English is essential for securing a better future in the job market.

children's learning, with households of varying financial circumstances using the platforms to enhance language education.

Another positive aspect regarding children's engagement with platforms was the perception of the benefits of exposure to positive values. For instance, Latifa said,

“To be honest, the educational shows are good. I swear to God some of them are really, really useful and have values... They teach things like apologising, asking for permission, basic manners – like how to behave when going to the bathroom”

Similarly, Faisal told me that “The concept of argument/debate doesn't really exist here [in Saudi culture],” which he considered important for children to learn in order to develop reasoning and communication skills. Faisal's note about the notion of debate is revealing, since it shows participants' desire for children to be exposed to and learn new skills and positive values beyond their cultural boundaries. This desire for the perceived “positive” and “useful” values in global content, along with the willingness for children to engage with and be open to outside influences, reflects a generational shift in attitudes toward foreign children's media content in Saudi, as observed among my participants. Many of my participants told me that they had limited or no access to foreign children's content during their childhood, which also reflects my own experience growing up in a conservative household. Even though children's content available on local and Arab channels was censored to align with Arab and Islamic values, it was often controversial and subject to family restrictions. Access was even more limited for families without a TV, particularly due to the Sahwa influence and broader concerns about the perceived dangers of satellite and media, as discussed in the Introduction Chapter. This generational shift is evident in the fact that no participant mentioned completely forbidding their children from accessing foreign content. While some, such as Roa, banned an entire platform due to concerns over LGBT themes – “I didn't subscribe to Disney for my daughters because there's so much

homosexuality now” – she still provided them access to Netflix and other platforms.

Therefore, participants seemed to view global SVODs as a valued cultural window for children, despite concerns over LGBT themes, which were perceived to require parental guidance and involvement.

#### *7.2.1.1 Between Fear and Opportunity: Parental Mediation of Children’s SVOD Engagement*

Although parental involvement and mediation regarding children’s SVOD engagement were considered vital by participants, some were struggling, and others were confused, unsure of how to deal with their children. Since participants were concerned about LGBT content, they tended to push their children to watch TV in the living room so they could be observed, even if only passively from a distance. For example, Latifa told me, “When I turn on Netflix for my daughters, I have to sit with them.” Hence, watching content with children, or observing them from a distance, was the predominant strategy employed by parents. Nevertheless, Abdullah expressed concerns as his child sometimes “sneaks” to a private room to watch TV, seeking autonomy and independence in his viewing practices. While his child might be imitating his father – as Abdullah reported watching content privately in his TV room – Abdullah expressed concerns and confusion, unsure of how to deal with his young preschool-aged child. Similarly, Maram shared a similar concern about the difficulty of opening a dialogue with her twin preschool-aged children, highlighting that once they got older, she would begin to explain to them “what’s wrong” in foreign TV content. It should be noted, however, that parents, in the context of their involvement with their children, did not mention employing active strategies beyond watching with them and restricting access to platforms or specific content. Rather, parents were largely confused, concerned, and therefore had to rely on policing their children’s engagement with media. An example mentioned by Maram in this regard revealed some parental struggle in managing their children’s media engagement.

Maram proudly talked about how she was involved with her two children: “I remember a scene came on, and I stayed quiet, watching their reaction. A guy kissed a girl on the lips, and my kids yelled, ‘that’s wrong, wrong! It’s inappropriate, it’s haram [forbidden].’” While Maram invoked this example proudly to showcase how her children were, for lack of a better term, well-raised, it also indirectly demonstrates her approach of using SVOD content as a cultural test to police their responses and check their adherence to social and religious norms. This parental lack of awareness and struggle in dealing with media resonates with the findings of Qurban (2022), who found that Saudi parents were in need of support and help in mediating strategies for children’s media content. Ultimately, this discussion around parental mediation reflects the tension between fear and opportunity, illustrating how participants’ ambivalence toward global SVODs is lived and enacted in everyday family practices.

Overall, this section has explored participants’ complex attitudes toward children’s engagement with global SVODs, using this focus as a lens to highlight the broader ambivalence toward these platforms in Saudi society. Central to this complexity were concerns about LGBT themes in children’s content, which participants feared might not only encourage the adoption of homosexuality but also alter their children’s sexual orientation. However, these anxieties coexisted with a strong desire for children to access global content, valued for precisely those qualities that marked them as non-Saudi: English language learning, exposure to broader cultural perspectives, new skills, and positive values. In this way, the same Western/global cultural flows that are welcomed as enriching in some respects are simultaneously resisted as threatening in others. The fact that no participant reported completely forbidding their children from using these platforms reflects a generational shift toward openness, even as parents struggled to reconcile this openness with cultural and religious boundaries. By focusing on children, this section has shown how this ambivalence

is articulated and managed in relation to global SVODs, revealing the ways participants both embrace and resist these platforms within the Saudi context. Having this second dimension addressed, the next section moves into participants' concerns about society in light of the rapid societal and cultural changes.

### **7.3 Reflections on Self and Society**

While concerns around children primarily centred on LGBT themes, discussions related to society extended to broader social and cultural values. This section will explore how participants perceived the wider ramifications of global SVODs on themselves and Saudi society. It will shed light on concerns over the perceived role these platforms may play within the rapid societal and cultural changes in Saudi, which participants observed as becoming more open and fostering an environment conducive to new cultural values. This will showcase how participants actively engaged in what seemed to be a process of evaluating various values they perceived as detrimental to their society, underscoring what it seems to be an effort to protect their fast-changing cultural context from perceived external influences. However, this process came with a realisation that, as one participant noted, "You can't lock yourself away in a room just to avoid being influenced," highlighting that excessive caution toward foreign content could be counterproductive. By examining these dynamics, this section underscores the tension between participants' concerns about foreign influences and their desire to stay connected to the world, marking a shift from older generations as they seek a balance between cultural preservation and openness.

Since Saudi Arabia is experiencing rapid legal and cultural changes, the role that platforms may play within this dynamic was a matter of concern among participants. Admittedly, I was expecting to hear concerns as well as appreciation for the way society is changing. These

views, from both genders, went beyond gender relations to encompass a wider set of values, all of which pointed towards the idea that society was opening up: “people now are open-minded” (Amal). Therefore, the perception that Saudi culture was fast-changing, opening up, and fostering an environment conducive to new ideas and values in light of increased social freedoms was common. This, in turn, was where concerns over global SVODs emerged, as these platforms were perceived to have the potential to play a role in influencing values and behaviours within this rapidly changing cultural environment.

Within this context of rapid cultural changes, participants expressed concerns that the “danger” of platforms lay in Western values that could be accommodated and adopted within the boundaries of the social freedom provided by law and evolving cultural norms. A predominant example in this regard was the perception that young adults in the West led an individualistic, free lifestyle without social and familial responsibilities, which could be adopted by Saudis, especially teenagers and young adults. Notably, participants’ perceptions of Western lifestyles that they watched on global SVODs were not seen as being promoted by platforms, as in the case of LGBT content, but rather as true reflections of the West. Salman said:

“There are things they don’t try to promote, like cross-gender friendship, interactions between them, or flirting... Like, when a comedy movie shows you the lifestyle of a girl ... her interactions with her parents to her job, how she gets around, her clothing, her interactions with children and adults,”

It is important to note that this quote refers to everyday Western lifestyles rather than LGBT content, which Salman compared as being actively promoted<sup>92</sup>. What Salman was pointing out is that Western lifestyles lack the cultural stigma and negative ideological perceptions associated with LGBT issues. For Salman, this makes Western lifestyles particularly appealing to teens and young adults who might start imitating them without understanding the consequences for their lives and society in general. The idea that Western lifestyles, encompassing cultural values such as individualism, was not only seen as unhelpful by such participants but also as a threat to the Saudi social fabric, which is built on the family and driven by its underpinning collective social and tribal nature (see Long & Maisel, 2010). For instance, Othman argued that the more Saudis – regardless of gender – become independent and seek autonomy, the more society will become detached, resembling Western families who only meet “during Christmas or maybe just once a year. That’s very different from what it should be!”<sup>93</sup>. Another moral comparison was made by Faisal, who argued:

“Khalid, do you think that Western societies, in general, are socially stable? I’ll answer since this is a one-sided interview. I’d say no. There’s a significant separation. For example, in

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<sup>92</sup> When participants asked why such ideas and portrayals were not seen as being promoted in contrast to their perception of LGBT content, the answers ranged from the sudden increase in LGBT representation to various other reasons. However, no participant provided a nuanced response. This quote by Salman is similar to Hamoud’s statement in the previous chapter, in which he discussed the difficult lives of Western women, which he believed to be a true reflection of reality. I suspect this perception of Western life as reality persists because it is not new to them; they had heard about it and even watched it before the advent of global SVODs. In contrast, positive portrayals of homosexuality were virtually non-existent before these platforms.

<sup>93</sup> Saudis often gather with their extended family members – i.e., uncles, aunts, cousins, and so forth – on a weekly, fortnightly, or monthly basis at their grandparents’ houses, including both maternal and paternal grandparents.

America, there're nursing homes for the elderly everywhere. You can find a nursing home in every small city and every state,"<sup>94</sup>

While Faisal stressed this issue, Othman was emotionally charged, which I suspect was due to his deeply held traditionalist views regarding women and family hierarchy, as shown in the last chapter. Nevertheless, these perspectives highlight a nuanced concern among participants: while global SVODs in this regard were not perceived as promoting Western lifestyles, their perceived authentic portrayal of individualistic Western values was seen as a subtle yet potent threat to the Saudi social fabric. This suggests that participants engaged in a constant process of evaluation, weighing perceived cultural threats against potential benefits and reaffirming their own values in response to ideas they perceived as detrimental.

Notably, whether explicitly or implicitly, many of the concerns invoked regarding global SVODs among my participants aligned with Philip Davison's concept of the "third-person effect," where platforms were perceived to have a greater influence, impact, and threat on others – i.e. uneducated people, teens, young adults – or society as a whole than on themselves (Davison, 1983). For instance, Ali argued that global SVODs are:

“a form of soft power that influences people over time, and the danger isn't really on us; it's on the ordinary people... The threat isn't to those who are educated and can see what's going on...; it targets everyday people – the ones we encounter all around us – who might not be able to distinguish things and are easily drawn in.”

Another example is Aziz, who told me that SVODs had elevated him intellectually with the wide range of available documentaries, yet they had a negative influence on young Saudis:

**“Interviewer:** So, you feel it elevated you personally?

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<sup>94</sup> Elderly care is considered one of the core responsibilities of younger family members in Saudi; hence, there is little demand for social care homes, as the country has only 12 social care homes for the elderly as of 2024 (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2024).

**Aziz:** Yeah, but I see it differently with teenagers and young people. A lot of them have been really heavily influenced, I swear to God.

**Interviewer:** In what way?

**Aziz:** Appearance. The first thing is appearance. You can see it on the streets – you’ll see people and know they’re imitating a certain actor.”

Aziz went on to explain how he had observed young Saudis imitating actors’ clothing and using certain music on TikTok and Snapchat trends, showcasing a problematic perception of “influence” that mixed the popularity of content with the perception of cultural and behavioural influences. The use of third-person effect framing was especially common regarding the issue of LGBT exposure, with participants expressing concern that it would eventually lead society to perceive homosexuality as, in Norah’s words, “normal.” For instance, Maram invoked a comparison between alcohol and homosexuality, arguing that societal exposure to alcohol in media content led Saudis to perceive it as “a normal personal freedom.”:

“**Maram:** The more they [young adults] hear and see about homosexuality, the more it’ll become for them like alcohol is for us now – just a normal personal freedom. Do you get what I mean?”

**Interviewer:** Do you think this could happen to you over time? Like, in ten years, could your views change?

**Maram:** No, absolutely not. Impossible.

**Interviewer:** Why not?

**Maram:** No, they’re still young. I’m 34, and every day I’m becoming more and more convinced 100% that this is unnatural.”

Although Maram’s note that alcohol is currently seen as “a normal personal freedom” in Saudi might not have reflect either its legal or social status, the presence of alcohol in Arab and Gulf media used to be a highly controversial topic in the past, whereas it is now arguably

a less sensitive issue. Hence, Maram might have mistakenly perceived public resignation regarding alcohol as approval or positive acknowledgment, employing a false analogy in this comparison, which perhaps reflects her underlying anxiety about the issue. Similarly, other participants expressed various concerns about LGBT exposure, indirectly framing the *other* by reflecting on their own behaviour and noting how they no longer skipped LGBT content compared to the past. Such participants perceived their act of not skipping – despite the fact that they overlooked it, swore at the screen, or religiously rejected it in their hearts – as evidence that society, and especially young adults, would eventually come to view homosexuality as “normal” both on screen and in real life.

Notably, studies conducted in various national contexts have identified a correlation between the third-person effect and support for regulations, censorship, and content moderation (e.g., Gunther, 1995; Ho et al., 2012; Rojas et al., 1996; Wu & Koo, 2001). This disparity in the me/them and self/others framing of perceived “threats” may, at least in part, help explain the anxieties expressed by participants regarding calls for banning, filtering, or raising awareness about platforms, as discussed in the first section of this chapter. Nevertheless, examining the participants’ views through the lens of the third-person effect highlights how their discussions and concerns about potential societal ramifications reflect an active process of evaluation, affirmation, and reaffirmation of their cultural values. This underscores what seems to be a broader pattern of effort among participants to safeguard cultural identity against perceived external influences amid a rapidly changing cultural context.

Nevertheless, although participants’ concerns encompassed a wide range of issues, there was a perception that Saudi society was overly cautious regarding the influence of platforms. In fact, some voiced concerns about societal over-cautiousness, arguing that it could be

detrimental to society. For instance, Maram implicitly made a link to the past, when foreign media was often prohibited within families due to concerns about its influence:

“You can’t just shut yourself off from everything. This is the real world; you can’t lock yourself away in a room just to avoid being influenced. I can’t miss out on the enjoyment of seeing new things or exploring the world and understanding how life has changed, just because I might be ruined by it or because it could mess with my ideas or beliefs. You get what I mean?”

Similarly, Rayan argued that the concerns over the impact of platforms could sometimes be exaggerated, saying, “Our society is quite aware... I swear to God, it’s a well-informed society.” These sorts of arguments, which stressed the positive sides of platforms and warned against over-cautiousness, were particularly voiced by those who had a difficult and over-controlled upbringing. Seham shared stories about the challenges she faced as a teenager in accessing TV and movies, emphasising her desire for today’s younger adults to avoid similar familial restrictions. Seham mentioned, “The idea of watching something from a society other than our own was not acceptable in my family... it was very forbidden to watch them.”

Seham used to actively challenge those familial restrictions, finding them to be problematic: “I’m not going to impose that now, you know? I won’t apply that in this day and age.”

Similarly, Abdullah talked about how he used to hide VHS and DVD tapes from his father and how he faced trouble after being caught multiple times. These mentioned restrictions were not in regard to sexual or specific content that contradicted religious and cultural values, but rather merely the idea of foreign content, or as Seham put it, “a society other than our own.” These accounts echoed the generational shift in attitudes mentioned in the last section: much foreign content, which was once prohibited, hidden, and caused issues within many families, is now embraced by young Saudis, who no longer intend to impose such restrictions on future generations. Of course, participants had reservations regarding LGBT content and actively imposed restrictions on their children to prevent them from accessing such content,

yet the gap remains considerable between restricting certain content or even a platform and restricting all foreign content altogether. What Maram mentioned, “You can’t just shut yourself off from everything,” seemed to underscore the position of many of my participants: They reject the older generation’s rigid and strict approach to dealing with and perceiving the outside world, while carefully navigating and selectively embracing, as Maram put it, “exploring the world.”

Overall, this section has highlighted the complex attitudes of participants toward global SVODs and their perceived ramifications for both themselves and wider society. While concerns about these platforms were closely tied to ongoing cultural changes and increasing social freedoms, participants actively sought to protect their cultural values from influences they deemed detrimental. This applied not only to values they believed were promoted by SVODs but also to perceived authentic foreign values that, despite lacking cultural stigma in Saudi society, were still subject to questions – demonstrating their engagement in a critical evaluation process. Participants’ perspectives were characterised by resistance, adaptation, and resignation, striving to balance openness and caution. This was particularly evident in their call to avoid excessive apprehension, marking a shift from how their parents – and perhaps society in general – dealt with, thought about, and engaged with foreign media, especially during the Sahwa era.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has investigated how participants discussed the role of global SVODs in Saudi Arabia, focusing on their perceived ramifications within a rapidly changing cultural context. It has showcased three key dimensions that revealed the complexity surrounding the perception of platforms in society. These dimensions underscored the dynamic of cultural

negotiation and adaptation, illustrating how platforms were seen as both a positive cultural window and, at the same time, a potent cultural threat. However, within this dynamic, the role of the Saudi regulator in managing, or perhaps its absence from the scene, seemed to play a vital role in increasing anxieties regarding platforms. Participants had no understanding of the regulatory status of platforms, reflecting what seemed to be a gap between the audience and the regulator. This, along with other deep-rooted values, amplified many concerns regarding children, teens, young adults, and society, leading participants to face a complex battle, perceiving the ramifications through the lens of the third-person effect, and in some cases, invoking their willingness to temporarily sacrifice accessing platforms.

Nevertheless, despite evident concerns and resistance to certain issues, participants' positive reflections on the effects of global SVODs and foreign media on children suggest an important generational shift in attitudes. Participants' accounts of children being exposed to and learning new, useful, and positive values, along with the warnings to avoid over-cautiousness, showcased how they sought to strike a balance – embracing global engagement while remaining cautious and intentional about preserving their cultural identity. This evolving perspective on foreign media, even if seemingly minor from an outsider's viewpoint, marks a significant milestone. It suggests a broader social trend among young Saudis toward a more modern identity – one that not only reflects the direction they are heading but also how they are paving the way for future generations. Of course, this shift is not without its anxieties, a tension perhaps best captured by Abdullah's remark: "I *hate* Netflix, but I really *love* it." This phrase encapsulates the complex negotiation surrounding global SVOD platforms in Saudi, highlighting the delicate balance between cultural preservation and global engagement. At this point, the findings chapters come to an end, and

the next chapter turns to the overall conclusion, which synthesises the main findings and highlights the study's contributions and broader implications.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

This thesis has explored how younger Saudi audiences engaged with, navigated, and negotiated global SVOD platforms within a society undergoing cultural transformation. It has engaged with the lived and complex experiences of everyday viewing practices and the meaning-making processes that arose where global media intersected with local culture. Grounded in an interpretivist approach and drawing on the traditions of reception studies and scholarship on everyday life, this thesis situates audiences' viewing practices and meaning-making as socially and culturally embedded, highlighting how participants actively engaged with and made sense of global platforms in relation to their own values, norms, and lived realities.

This final chapter brings the thesis to a close by presenting the key insights of the research and reflecting on their broader significance. It will begin by synthesising the main findings within three sections: firstly, addressing how participants used SVOD platforms in everyday life; secondly, considering the complexity of the meaning-making process; and thirdly, discussing the intersection of global platforms and the shifting cultural landscape. The chapter then will outline the main contributions and implications of this thesis for both Arab and global media scholarship. This will be followed by a discussion of the study's limitations and suggestions for future research. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a personal reflection on my research journey.

### **8.1 Viewing Practices and the Embeddedness of SVODs in Everyday Life**

The use of SVOD platforms by younger Saudi audiences emerged as something that was deeply embedded in their everyday lives, influenced by a complex interplay of overlapping

cultural, social, and contextual factors. It was not simply a choice made in isolated moments, but a deeply embedded, habitual part of everyday life, intertwining with spatial and temporal dynamics, social demands, and device availability. More importantly, everyday viewing practices amongst my participants were closely tied to social and cultural norms, expectations, and sensitivities – especially around gender, morality, and the complex nature of Saudi family dynamics. This section presents the main findings around how younger Saudis engage with SVODs in everyday life.

As illustrated in Chapter 4, everyday viewing practices among my participants tended to follow regular temporal patterns, occurring consistently at specific, almost ritualised moments such as mealtimes at home or work, while doing daily tasks or hobbies, during commutes, or just before sleep. However, these patterns were not uniform, as they intersected with factors such as marital status and social responsibilities, which significantly shaped how and when engagement with SVOD platforms occurred. For single participants, engagement with SVODs was more dispersed across the day and often served as a background activity to other tasks – less as focused entertainment and more as a familiar, comforting presence within everyday routines. In contrast, married participants, with their heavier social demands, had more pre-planned, dedicated time slots for engagement with platforms, often occurring for extended hours at night when they had greater freedom in terms of time and space away from their children.

When it came to spatial patterns, device choice was a key factor mediating these everyday practices. At home, the TV remained the preferred device for immersive or shared viewing experiences, particularly among married participants. However, phones occupied a crucial, constant presence in watching – and notably, listening to – SVOD content while multitasking.

Outside the home, phones facilitated other modes of engagement with SVODs, where content was watched or listened to during daily commutes, work breaks, and dull moments. The portability of phones, along with the platforms' option to download content, allowed participants to integrate SVODs into fragmented and transitional moments throughout the day, enabling viewing practices to extend beyond the domestic space.

While these temporal and spatial routines shaped how my participants engaged with SVODs, beneath these broad patterns lay complex social and cultural logics that influenced the choice of the viewing setting. For single participants, SVOD viewing was a predominantly individualised activity. This was not simply a matter of technological availability but was also deeply rooted in social and cultural constraints around the idea of watching with other family members. This was particularly evident among male participants, who cited the loaded term “shame”, where the underpinning shame-honour tribal Saudi cultural identity came to the surface, resulting in the avoidance of watching any SVOD content with family members.

Married participants, on the other hand, engaged with platforms mainly as a shared activity, finding it pleasurable – particularly as many of them were newly married. Notably, everyday viewing practices among couples were shaped by a form of moral self-regulation and boundaries. As shown in Chapter 6, these boundaries were not always voiced, but were often enacted through everyday practices to avoid, for example, feelings of shame or potential conflict. For instance, scenes featuring LGBT or heavy sexual themes, among others, were skipped, and sometimes the whole content was avoided or left unwatched. In some cases, participants did not even know whether their partner had watched such titles, including popular shows such as *Game of Thrones*. This negotiated silence and harmony, however, could be broken by wives, who seemed to have the upper hand in managing the viewing

setting and determining what was permissible – by, for instance, covering their husband’s eyes during certain scenes. While no participants reported constant control over content or the remote, isolated interventions and conflicts could occur even within generally described harmonious viewing practices. This, in turn, revealed how cultural and social logics remain intact in practice and are actively performed in everyday engagement among married participants.

Taken together, while everyday SVOD engagement was intertwined with routines, social demands, and device accessibility, these patterns could not be separated from the broader cultural and social contexts in which they occurred. What may have seemed to be ordinary viewing practices was largely underpinned by deeper social and cultural logics – rarely voiced, and often habitually or silently maintained. This cultural complexity and interplay are a distinctive characteristic of my participants SVOD engagement in everyday life.

## **8.2 Meaning-Making and the Entangled Nature of Pleasure and Tension**

The analysis of participants’ engagement with SVODs revealed a highly ambivalent process of meaning-making, in which pleasures and tensions were intertwined, constantly negotiated, and deeply entangled. Far from being passive audiences, participants actively engaged with global SVODs to navigate personal, cultural, and social dimensions of their lives. This engagement was marked by ongoing tensions that arose when global content intersected with deeply rooted religious, social, and cultural values. Hence, the process of meaning-making was not a simple division of pleasure versus tension, but rather a deeply complicated process in which pleasures were often inseparable from the very tensions they generated.

At one level, global SVODs provide participants with unprecedented access to content that offers textual, emotional, and personal pleasures. For my participants, SVODs function not simply as entertainment but as a window to a broader world of global narratives, most of which were previously inaccessible. The idea of being able to watch American or global content simultaneously with its international release was a privilege that Saudi audiences never had. Hence, global SVODs allowed them to feel part of a transnational audience community, sharing simultaneous experiences with viewers around the world, and creating a sense of connectedness and cultural relevance on a global stage.

However, even as participants positioned themselves within this global flow and transnational audience community, they simultaneously spoke about “us” and the “Western *Other*,” along with voicing deep concerns about social, cultural, and religious values. The ambivalence was sharply expressed in the way many felt SVODs serve an ideological function, filled with hidden and manipulative messages that contradict their values and norms. This dual positioning – feeling part of a global cultural moment while perceiving aspects of that same culture as threatening or manipulative – highlights the complexity of their meaning-making process. In this way, participants both embrace and resist global content, simultaneously inhabiting transnational and national identities.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 engaged with this duality and the ambivalent nature of meaning-making from different perspectives and in regard to various issues. For instance, the case of female participants and their desire for female-centred narratives exemplifies this duality of positions and the constant process of complicated meaning-making. While platforms satisfied their desire with narratives around, for instance, independence and empowerment, such narratives emerged as a complex site of discourse. Female participants wanted depictions of

independence and empowerment but also ones that did not clash with certain Saudi traditions and norms (especially around relations with parents), positioning platforms as ideologically driven when they did clash. Thus, even as female participants crave narratives that reflect progressive realities, they remain attuned to their deeply held cultural values, as such content becomes a site of negotiation where pleasure and discomfort are entangled and intertwined.

Participants engaged in an active, ongoing process of meaning-making, negotiating between personal desires and deeply held cultural norms. Among the tools they employed in this negotiation, religion played a particularly vital role. Some participants invoked religious reasons to distance themselves from content they perceived as sinful or morally inappropriate, while at other times they used alternative religious justifications to permit their continued engagement with the very same perceived problematic themes – effectively shifting responsibility onto God or invoking other spiritual rationales. In this sense, religion functioned not as a rigid boundary but as a resource for flexible or creative negotiation, allowing participants to manage moral constraints in their everyday viewing practices. This negotiation enabled them to enjoy global content while managing their cultural and moral commitments.

What emerges, then, is not a simple meaning-making process of pleasure versus tension, but a dynamic, ambivalent process of negotiation. This ambivalence is not a struggle of adaptation to global content but rather a defining feature of my participants' relationship with global platforms, where meaning-making becomes a site of constant negotiation between global content and Saudi cultural and religious frameworks.

### **8.3 Between Tradition and Modernity: SVODs and the Shifting Cultural Landscape**

While previous sections engaged with participants' everyday use of SVOD platforms, and the complex meaning-making processes and tensions that characterised their engagements, these processes did not occur in isolation. Rather, they unfolded within a broader cultural context as global platforms were increasingly integrated into young Saudis' everyday lives. The findings demonstrated how global SVODs functioned as important sources of cultural capital, social distinction, and a window to the world, while also exposing anxieties related to shifting cultural norms, evolving taboos, and wider negotiations between "us" and the "Western *Other*." The complexity of these dynamics highlighted how participants simultaneously reaffirmed certain cultural values, or sometimes boundaries, while embracing global engagement as a necessity for broader social and cultural progress.

Findings in Chapters 5 showed how participants emphasised the idea that engagement with global SVODs enabled them not only to remain culturally connected with the world but, more importantly, to be relevant and sometimes distinct (Bourdieu, 1984) within their social contexts. These platforms were not merely an entertainment option but rather a way in which many participants negotiated, to a certain extent, aspects of their social identity and engaged in cultural conversations. They served as tools to maintain social connections and stay involved in everyday conversations among their friends. This was further shaped by participants' dissatisfaction with Saudi and Arab media, which they described as "poor" in quality, diversity, and ironically – as in the case of female representation – relevance.

Engaging with global content thus became not only a means of social inclusion but also a way to position oneself as a more sophisticated and discerning cultural consumer, aiming to distinguish themselves within their social context, especially among those who had shifted away from watching Saudi or Arab content altogether.

This cultural and social embeddedness of global SVODs in Saudi society intersects with evolving cultural attitudes toward previously rigid taboos, revealing a complex landscape of negotiation and change. The discussion around sexual themes, for example, as discussed in Chapter 6, revealed how what was once a taboo topic has become part of broader social conversations and recommendations among young Saudis. This was especially clear in the discussions around *Game of Thrones*, its popularity in society, and how some participants were surprised that people watch and speak about it freely. Certainly, some married couples may not have spoken about or watched such content together – an issue related to the complicated Saudi gender dynamics – yet participants’ accounts demonstrated a change in the taboo status of such themes on both personal and societal levels, at least outside of the house. Inside the house, however, Chapter 7 illustrated participants’ reflections on their childhood and teenage experiences, when foreign content was largely prohibited. It showed how they now approach such content with their own children, showing how engagement with global SVODs intersects with evolving cultural norms. What was once forbidden by their parents is now permitted by participants for their children and, more broadly, for society as a whole. Of course, this change is not without persistent tensions and concerns, especially in light of, for instance, participants’ perception of the regulator’s weak and inadequate handling of platforms. Nevertheless, calls for nuanced and balanced engagement are simultaneously perceived as essential for the overall development and progress of the society. In this way, the negotiation reflects not a straightforward shift or change, but an ongoing, complicated process where desires for social and cultural progress, along with global participation, coexist with continued cultural concerns and, perhaps, perceived cultural vulnerability

Taken together, these findings reveal an increasingly embedded role of global SVOD platforms within young Saudis' lives, marked by deeply rooted and complicated dynamics of cultural negotiation. Participants' complex stances regarding the role and place of these platforms within Saudi society highlight a move away from the rigid cultural protectionism that characterised many of my participants' childhoods, adolescence, and the wider Saudi society's relationship with foreign content. In this context, as suggested in Chapter 7, an emerging globalised Saudi identity might be taking shape – one that reflects a selective openness to global cultures, while simultaneously affirming core cultural values. These dynamics underscore how global SVODs operate within – and perhaps subtly reflect – the broader ongoing sociocultural changes among young Saudis.

#### **8.4 Contributions**

This thesis is the first qualitative exploration of how Saudi audiences use, negotiate, and navigate global SVODs in everyday life. It contributes to Saudi and wider Arab media literature by adopting a conceptual framework grounded in cultural studies – an approach that remains historically rare in the region. In doing so, it directly responds to longstanding calls for qualitative, audience-centred, and cultural studies-oriented approaches to understanding Arab audiences (see Hafez, 2008; Mellor, 2013; Richter & Badr, 2018; Sabry, 2012). Moreover, this study also responds to international calls for audience-centred research that situates media engagement within people's sociocultural contexts and lived realities (e.g., Gray, 2017; Livingstone, 2019; Lotz et al., 2022; Schröder, 2019; Turner, 2019, 2021). While there is a growing literature on SVOD viewing practices, this study contributes by offering a culturally and socially grounded and situated analysis that emphasises the embeddedness of viewing practices within household dynamics, gender complexities, and broader sociocultural contexts – a lens often neglected in existing studies (e.g., Shao, 2024; Siles et al., 2019; Tay,

2022; Valiati, 2019; Zaid et al., 2023). By integrating both viewing practices and meaning-making processes, this thesis demonstrated that even practices such as solo viewing – often attributed to technological affordances and device availability in other national contexts, such as Brazil (e.g., Garcia-Da-Rocha, 2022, p. 237) – are, in the Saudi context, underpinned by complex sociocultural norms related to gender, modesty, and other sociocultural factors. In this way, the study builds on Johnson et al.'s (2024) observations regarding the role of household and gender dynamics in content choice within the UK context and extends this perspective by demonstrating how, in the Saudi context, household power relations, gendered norms, and sociocultural factors also play a central role in broader everyday viewing practices and platform engagement beyond content choice.

In addition, this thesis also contributes to the emerging debates on cultural imperialism and cultural proximity theory by offering insights from two important dimensions. First, it provides a nuanced understanding of the meaning-making processes through which Saudi audiences actively negotiate, evaluate, and interpret content in light of their personal, social, and cultural beliefs, values, and contexts. Rather than passively absorbing global content, participants engaged with platforms in ways that reflected their own interests, pleasures, and tensions, while constantly negotiating their sociocultural realities. This analysis responds to ongoing cultural concerns over Western hegemony in the Saudi literature (e.g., Alardawi, 2020; Alghamdi & Bajnaid, 2019; Mansour & Al-Dhobaiban, 2022) and contributes an audience reception study to the broader emerging literature on platforms and cultural imperialism (e.g., Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2024; Davis, 2023; Elkins, 2019; Kwet, 2019; Maatouk, 2021; Park et al., 2023; Salsabila, 2021). Second, this study contributes to the growing debate on why local audiences subscribe to and engage with global SVOD platforms despite the limited availability of local content, thus challenging some of the assumptions of

cultural proximity theory (see Iordache, 2022; Lotz et al., 2022; Straubhaar et al., 2021). While the desire to engage with perceived sophisticated global narratives and a negotiated openness to other cultures certainly plays a role – echoing Straubhaar et al.’s (2021) assumptions around cosmopolitanism – my findings suggest that issues in Saudi and Arab media ecologies are equally significant in driving audience engagement with global platforms. That is, my participants expressed dissatisfaction with Saudi and Arab media in terms of quality, genre diversity, female representation, among other factors, prompting many to shift to global content. In this way, my findings build on and extend Lotz et al.’s (2022) view that the high uptake of global platforms can be shaped by the dynamics, issues, and realities of local media ecologies, while cultural proximity theory may still need further refinement to better account for the ongoing and growing preference for foreign content.

Lastly, this thesis contributes to the limited but growing body of literature on the sociocultural transformations taking place in Saudi Arabia. It offers a rare account of how younger Saudis engage with and talk about various social and cultural issues, including gender and sexuality. It also documents some aspects of social and gender dynamics in domestic and beyond domestic spaces, offering insights that go beyond media engagement to touch on broader cultural beliefs and sensitivities. It captures the tension between negotiating tradition and change – in ways that can be subtle in some instances and, in others, more pronounced (as one participant put it: “women are becoming independent”). Importantly, these sociocultural insights are not only reflected in what participants said but also in the research process itself. As discussed in the Methodology Chapter, I was able to interview female participants without the need for a research assistant – something that would have been far more challenging in the past. This, in turn, is not merely a methodological

contribution to research practice in Saudi Arabia, but, more importantly, falls within the wider literature on the ongoing sociocultural transformations in the country.

## **8.5 Implications**

This study offers several important implications for audience research on SVOD platforms and wider media research on Arab and Saudi audiences. These implications span theoretical, methodological, and contextual aspects, contributing both to global media studies and to more specific understandings of Arab media landscapes.

### ***8.5.1 Implications for Global Audience Research on SVODs***

One of the core implications of this research concerns the scholarly attention to SVOD viewing practices, particularly the methodological and theoretical challenges facing the field. This thesis emphasises that viewing practices of global SVODs should not be examined in isolation from the broader social and cultural contexts in which they occur. Viewing practices may certainly be studied in regard to routines and habits (e.g., Shao, 2024; Tay, 2022; Valiati, 2019), or even through patterned behaviours (e.g., Ghazal & Eman, 2024; Sigre-Leirós et al., 2023), yet this should not be done in isolation from the complex social and cultural dynamics and situated contexts of people's everyday lives and their viewing practices. I understand that my findings relate to a highly conservative social and cultural context – something which may have resulted in my attention to the significance of social and cultural factors in viewing practices – yet in no societies or cultures do people engage with and make sense of media in a vacuum (see Lull, 1990, p. 172). Hence, this study supports and extends calls by Lotz et al. (2022), Turner (2019, 2021), Livingstone (2019), and Gray (2017) for revisiting earlier foundational work on television that takes such sociocultural factors into consideration (e.g.,

Lull, 1990; Morley, 1986). While there is certainly a need for developing new approaches and frameworks to account for the evolving nature of use and access (see Schröder, 2019), this should not come at the expense of attention to the social and cultural aspects of people's everyday lived experiences. The recently proposed framework by Johnson et al. (2025) represents a promising step in integrating technological, platform-based complexities with social and behavioural aspects. However, their framework – developed based on UK and Australian audiences – still leaves cultural aspects underexplored<sup>95</sup>. This is especially important since global platforms operate across cultures beyond the West. Therefore, future work on viewing practices must aim to better incorporate cultural and contextual aspects in order to reflect the diverse ways in which audiences engage with global SVODs in everyday life.

### ***8.5.2 Meaning-Making and Cultural Relevance***

Another important implication for SVOD audience research concerns the importance of meaning-making inquiries. What is arguably most relevant from the cultural imperialism arguments – at least when it comes to questions of audience reception and agency – is understanding the reasons underpinning the popularity of these platforms across national contexts, despite the lack or absence of cultural relevance. In this respect, while my empirical findings resonate with some of Straubhaar et al.'s (2021) assumptions about cosmopolitanism, I incline to align more closely with Lotz et al.'s (2022) reservations regarding interpretations of audience preferences through the lens of cosmopolitanism and, as

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<sup>95</sup> Johnson et al.'s framework includes social and behavioural aspects, such as gender power dynamics. However, it overlooks how underlying cultural norms such as values and beliefs shape practices in specific contexts (e.g., religious ideas and norms played an important role in SVOD viewing practices among my participants).

they suggest, call for further investigation into people's engagement with streaming platform content. Specifically, framing the popularity of foreign content and global platforms through the lens of cosmopolitanism may be an oversimplification of a broader trend, as many other emerging factors – such as storytelling conventions (Lotz et al., 2022; Lotz, 2025) – may also play a significant role. My findings, which highlight the personal pleasure and emotional resonance participants find in SVOD content alongside broader issues within Arab media, call for more research that emphasises the meaning-making process and how people connect with content. This shift is essential for understanding why global SVOD platforms appeal across diverse cultural contexts, even when cultural proximity is limited. This aligns with Lotz's (2025) recent book *After Mass Media* – which, as she notes, may provoke controversy – in which she questions the continued applicability of older models of media consumption that focus on cultural relevance or identity. Instead, she calls for research that explores how audiences construct personal meaning and derive pleasure from narratives – an area that, as Lotz indicates, will be a key focus of her future research. This direction, which echoes some of my own approach and findings, highlights the need for more scholarly attention to the meaning-making process beyond media effects and cultural tensions, which my work has also been limited by. In this way, and as Lotz argues, the field will be better able to theorise and understand broader issues regarding the space and place of media within our cultures.

### ***8.5.3 Implications for Saudi and Arab Media Scholarship***

This thesis also offers three important implications for Saudi and Arab media scholars. First, the findings of this research show the value of a cultural studies-oriented approach in revealing issues surrounding social, political, and cultural realities. While existing theoretical frameworks often emerge from Western sociocultural contexts, the process and findings of this research underscore the urgency of what has been described as “the Arab media and

cultural studies project” (see Kraidy, 2012; Sabry, 2012, 2023)<sup>96</sup>. In other words, Arab media and cultural studies requires developing approaches that are rooted in the Arab region’s own social, cultural, and political realities, and that can produce “indigenous” concepts and methods more relevant to its complex context (see Kraidy, 2012; Zayani, 2012). This would be beneficial in examining the ongoing Arab world’s digital turn and its sociocultural and political implications (see Ayish, 2021; Zayani & Khalil, 2025), particularly if the field is to move beyond the deterministic paradigms that were, and arguably still are, dominant in much of the Arab literature (see Richter & Badr, 2018).

Second, this study raises methodological considerations for conducting fieldwork in Saudi Arabia and wider conservative societies in the Arab world, particularly with regard to the pace of sociocultural changes and gender relations. The assumption that participants – and especially women – will be more comfortable in the presence of a third person during one-to-one interviews is not, in my experience with young Saudi women, accurate. As detailed in the Methodology Chapter, this assumption led to misunderstandings wherein both the interviewee and I believed the other preferred and required the third-party presence. This highlights the importance of carefully considering cultural and social dynamics beyond the rigid academic traditions in the region when designing research methods, in order to potentially obtain better results.

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<sup>96</sup> The need for the Arab media and cultural studies project was discussed by various Arab scholars, including Kraidy and Zayani, from different perspectives in Sabry (2012). However, little notable progress has been made since that edited volume. I suspect that the region’s tense political struggles between 2012 (following the Arab uprisings) and 2025 have posed a major barrier not only to this project, but also to broader academic progress, publications, and collaborations across a range of issues.

Third, this thesis has implications for research on understanding the shifting media power dynamics in the Arab world. The weak state of Arab media, as noted by participants, and the limited role of regulatory bodies underscore the need for scholarly attention to evolving audience preferences and wider media power dynamics in the region. In one way, this thesis confirms and extends the findings of Ben Moussa et al. (2024) and Zaid et al. (2023) about audience anxieties over cultural sensitivities, which perhaps signal the possibility of reconfiguration of media power dynamics in the region. However, the field is in need of more empirical studies, along with attention to wider aspects – from regulatory limitations to broader economic, political, and cultural factors – if we are to contextualise and understand the possible reconfiguration of such power dynamics. I believe that the work of Khalil (2016) can certainly serve as a template in this regard, especially since it delves into issues of audience preference and cultural relevance – some aspects of which are reflected in my findings in Chapter 5, such as the importance of female representation. Nevertheless, future research on such aspects and reconfigurations must shift from a general pan-Arab nationalist focus to more nuanced, nation-specific analyses, especially in light of the ongoing, but uneven, political and cultural transformations in the Gulf region.

Taken together, the implications of this thesis collectively underscore the importance of contextual, cultural, and methodological sensitivity in both global and Arab media research. Having outlined the key contributions and implications, the next section reflects on the study's limitations and suggests directions for future research.

## **8.6 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This section outlines some of the key limitations encountered during my fieldwork and the research process, while also offering suggestions for future scholarly inquiry. It reflects on the scope of the study along with the contextual and methodological challenges faced. In doing so, it highlights potential directions for future research in both global and Saudi context.

First, this study focused exclusively on young Saudis who actively engage with SVODs in their everyday lives. It therefore does not capture the perspectives of young Saudis who, for various economic, social, cultural, or religious reasons, do not use these platforms. Such voices may hold different views about global SVODs that are not captured here, which has implications for the scope of the claims and findings of this thesis. Future research on global SVODs in Saudi Arabia could therefore explore these perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the space and place of these platforms within Saudi society.

Second, this research included a small-scale ethnographic component, aimed at sensitising and understanding aspects of how participants interacted with SVOD platforms in their everyday settings. While these participant observations offered some insights, they were more limited in depth and richness than I initially hoped. Social and cultural sensitivities around privacy, gender dynamics, and domestic space significantly restricted the natural flow of observation – a challenge discussed in detail in the Methodology Chapter. Here, however, I want to restate the issue of the lack of established cultural studies and media ethnographic traditions in the region, and to restate my call for scholarly attention to the project of Arab media and cultural studies. That being said, if the research were to be conducted again, I would adopt more interactive ethnographic approaches such as “show and tell” or

“walkthrough” as employed by Lobato, Scarlata et al. (2024) and Johnson et al. (2024). The interactivity and interview-like ethnographic approaches may potentially reduce the social awkwardness and unproductive silence that shaped many parts of the observation experience – a recommendation that I urge researchers in the Saudi context to consider.

Third, the sample for this study was purposive and, as with any qualitative study, limited in size. While this allowed for an in-depth exploration of a specific segment of Saudi audiences, the sample is by no means representative of all younger Saudi adults, Riyadh youth, or the socio-economic backgrounds within Saudi society. The findings are not intended to be generalisable but should be seen as providing insights into a particular segment of Saudi society. Hence, future research on Saudi audiences could build on this study by expanding both the geographic and demographic scopes. This, in turn, would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how global SVOD platforms are situated within varied experiences of everyday social and cultural life in Saudi Arabia.

Fourth, this thesis placed more emphasis on moments of tension and the meaning-making aspects arising from areas of conflict and contention where global media intersected with local culture. Certainly, this emphasis revealed notable cultural and social insights, not only regarding gender dynamics but also wider social and cultural issues. However, in retrospect, this focus on tensions may have partly overshadowed other meaningful aspects of pleasure and personal enjoyment. Of course, Chapter 5 centrally focused on moments of pleasure and how social and personal aspects steered participants towards certain content. However, the emphasis on the intensity and complexity of cultural tensions might not have been as useful as if this study had focused more centrally on pleasures. Here, and in line with Lotz’s (2025) previously mentioned call, future studies in Saudi Arabia could more explicitly investigate

how viewers derive pleasure, comfort, and emotional and personal connection from global SVOD platforms and their content. This, in turn, will be valuable not merely in understanding the place of platforms in Saudis' everyday life, but also in revealing wider cultural and social issues in society.

Building on the previous points, there is considerable potential for future research to explore how pleasure, taste, and content preference intersect with broader questions of social class, tribal identity, and gender norms in Saudi. Such intertwined social and cultural factors are likely to play a significant role in people's engagement with platforms and content. While I am aware that such a direction is new to the Saudi's media studies literature, it could be valuably revealing of wider social and cultural aspects of the space and place of media in Saudi society. I believe that this direction would represent a significant step forward in the development of a richer, more locally grounded body of cultural studies-oriented research in Saudi and the region.

Overall, while this study has provided valuable insights into global SVOD in the everyday lives of younger Saudis, its limitations also point to opportunities for future research. By adopting more interactive, flexible methods that are sensitive to Saudi social life, and exploring themes of pleasure, identity, and social class, future studies can deepen our understanding of SVOD, and indeed wider media engagement in the region. Having discussed the limitations and suggestions for future research, the final section of this thesis presents a reflection on my research journey.

## 8.7 Caught Between Cultures

This research began with a desire to understand how younger Saudi audiences engage with, navigate, and negotiate global SVOD platforms in a rapidly changing society. What emerged was not a single narrative, but rather a multiplicity of complex perspectives that offered insights into how global media is situated and negotiated within a conservative and rapidly changing social and cultural context.

Much like my participants who were negotiating the pleasures and tensions between the global and the local in their meaning-making and viewing practices, I too found myself negotiating my positionality – as a Saudi researcher studying in the UK, analysing stories that resonated with my own life, yet filtered through an academic lens. Throughout this research, I often felt caught between two cultural worlds: the UK and Saudi Arabia. What one of these cultures considers misogynistic, another may frame as honour; what one values as freedom, another sees as shame. Navigating these contradictions was not just an intellectual exercise, but a deeply difficult personal and emotional experience. At times, I had to pause and reflect on the vast cultural differences – not just why they exist, but also how they shape perception, judgement, and ways of life. This research journey has therefore helped me see aspects of Saudi society in new ways, including perspectives I had never imagined, despite being Saudi myself. Certainly, some aspects of this thesis and the way gender and sexualities were discussed can be overwhelming, yet that very tension is perhaps part of what it means to engage with cross-cultural qualitative research into people's meaning-making. It forces us to embrace discomfort, and to recognise that there might be no easy or comfortable answers when studying the intersection of global media and culture.

Finally, as the Saudi society continues to evolve, so too will the meanings people assign to the content they engage with or avoid. For Abdullah, who was mentioned in this thesis preamble, what was once forbidden and hidden under his mattress is now approached with care and moderation, as he allows his child more freedom to engage with foreign media – a tension that is perhaps best captured in his words: “I *hate* Netflix, but I really *love* it.”

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Observation Participant Overview:

Participants are listed alphabetically.

Setting	Name	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Riyadh	Note
1	Abdullah	Male	35	Married	West	
2	Abadi	Male	28	Married	North	
	Mariam	Female	25			
3	Bader	Male	X	Single	X	Disable participant
4	Mohamad	Male	29	Unmarried Couple	North	
	Nouf	Female	31			
5	Nori	Female	32	Single	North	

## Appendix B – Interview Participant Overview:

Participants are listed alphabetically.

Name	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Riyadh	Note
Abdullah	Male	35	Married	West	
Afnan	Female	25	Single	South	
Aziz	Male	29	Single	North	
Bader	Male	X	Single	X	Disable participant
Faisal	Male	30	Married	North	
Hamoud	Male	32	Married	East	
Maram	Female	34	Married	East	
Mjeed	Male	30	Single	North	
Norah	Female	26	Single	South	
Nori	Female	32	Single	North	
Othman	Male	31	Single	West	

Qarar	Female	27	Single	East	
Rayan	Male	27	Married	South	
Sara	Female	28	Single	North	
Seham	Female	29	Single	East	
Wejdan	Female	32	Married	West	

**Appendix C – Focus Group Participant Overview:**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Riyadh</b>
All-female	Latifa	Female	33	Married	East
	Maha	Female	28	Single	West
	Miral	Female	27	Single	West
	Roa	Female	30	Married	East
	Rghad	Female	31	Single	East
All-male	Ahmad	Male	30	Married	West
	Ali	Male	29	Married	South
	Hasan	Male	31	Married	North
	Mjeed	Male	30	Single	North
	Areeg	Female	35	Single	South

Mixed gender	Abdol	Male	28	Single	East
	Hind	Female	25	Married	East
	Iman	Female	25	Single	North
	Suliman	Male	31	Single	North
Mixed gender	Amal	Female	26	Married	West
	Muhanad	Male	25	Single	North
	Nada	Female	33	Single	East
	Salman	Male	26	Married	South
	Waled	Male	25	Single	North
	Zahra	Female	33	Married	South

## **Appendix D – Interview and Focus Group Guides**

As mentioned in the Methodology Chapter, the interviews and focus groups were designed to be semi-structured, yet discussions sometimes flowed differently and, in some cases, unexpectedly. Hence, the guides below outline my plan and the key areas I intended to cover during the interviews and focus groups, which should be seen only as indicative of their structure and content.

### **– One-to-One Interview Guide**

#### *Icebreaker / Warm-up*

- When did you first start using SVODs?
- Why did you first start using SVODs?

#### **1. Practices and Routines**

- What SVOD platforms do you currently subscribe to?
- Walkthrough of everyday engagement: let the interviewee talk first with a question like: “Could you tell me about how you use SVODs?”, then make sure they cover the everyday aspects of engagement, habits, and routines outlined throughout this guide.
  - When do you watch?
  - How do you watch?
  - How long do you watch?

#### **2. Contexts of Viewing**

- Who do you generally watch with (alone, family, friends, partner)?
- Spaces of viewing (bedroom, living room, etc.).
- Availability and preferences of device(s).
- Social dynamics: e.g., husband-wife, watching with siblings, watching with parents.
  - Let them talk about how the shared space and shared viewing operates.

- How are shared viewing decisions made, negotiated, or restricted?
- Setting management and power dynamics (tensions, conflicts, restrictions).
- How is it different from solo viewing? Which is preferable?
- Level of focus and engagement with the screen depending on social context.

### ***3. Content Preferences and Choices***

- How do you choose what to watch?
  - This should open up discussions around friends, recommendations, algorithms, etc.
- What do you enjoy watching?
  - Genres.
  - Country or origin of content they are drawn to.

### ***4. Meanings, Tensions, and Negotiations***

- Aspects of content they like, and what they tend to look for in content.
  - Examples of such content and reasons for enjoyment.
- Aspects of content they dislike, and what they tend to avoid.
  - Examples of such content and reasons for dislike.
  - Strategies for dealing with disliked content/scenes (e.g., watch without issue, avoid entirely, skip, watch secretly, justify).
- Types of content/ideas they find particularly interesting and why.
- Thoughts and feelings when encountering such content.

### ***5. Public Debate***

- How familiar are you with debates or controversies surrounding SVOD content in society?
- What are your views on these debates or controversies?

- Ask for a closing reflection: hopes, concerns, or expectations about the future of SVOD in Saudi.

## – Focus Group Guide

### *1. Past Access to Content (Icebreaker)*

- How did they use to access foreign content before SVODs?
  - Expected discussions and themes include shared challenges and solutions (e.g., DVDs, black market, friends sharing, torrent, VPNs).
- How do those experiences compare with current SVOD access?
  - Expected discussions and themes to probe: censorship, personalisation, ease of access, mobility, amount and variety of content.

### *2. Viewing Practices (especially relevant in all-male and all-female groups)*

- Walkthrough of their SVOD engagement as a group: let them talk about it first with a question like “Could you tell me about how you use SVODs in istirahat?”, then make sure they cover the following points:
  - When do they watch?
  - How do they watch?
  - How do they choose content?
  - What do they enjoy watching?
  - What do they enjoy about the group setting (e.g., atmosphere, shared experiences)?
  - What do they dislike about the group setting?
  - Probe social dynamics: restrictions, constraints, or tensions in viewing.

### *3. SVOD Content (for all groups)*

- The types of content they engage with (genres, country of origin, examples).

- How do they feel and think about SVOD content they have seen?
  - What do they like about it?
  - After their discussion, probe how they think about SVOD content:
    - Compared with the past (DVDs, satellite, MBC).
    - Compared with Saudi and Arab content.

#### ***4. Values, Ideas, and Tensions***

- What do they think about values and ideas accessible via SVOD content?
- For negative aspects: Where do they draw boundaries?
  - What do they do when they encounter content or scenes involving such ideas or values (e.g., continue watching, avoid, skip, justify)?
- For positive aspects: why are such ideas and values considered positive?
- What do they think about the circulation of such perspectives and ideas in Saudi via SVODs?

#### ***5. Public Debate and Societal Discussions***

- Mention the recent Gulf statement; probe what participants know about debates, discussions, or boycotting campaigns around SVODs in society.
  - Probe their views on these debates and discussions.
  - Probe their views on the future of platforms in Saudi.
    - Who should decide what's acceptable? The state? The market?  
Individual choice?
- Ask for a closing reflection from everyone: hopes, concerns, or expectations about the future of SVOD in Saudi.

## Appendix E – Information Sheet and Consent Form

Mr Khalid Alhumaidhi  
Postgraduate researcher  
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0599508080

Faculty of Arts and Humanities  
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20 June 2022

### **Subscription Video-on-Demand in Everyday Life: A Qualitative Exploration of Saudi Audiences' Interpretive Repertoires**

#### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

##### **(1) What is this study about?**

You are invited to take part in a research study about how Saudi audiences use subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms in everyday life and how meanings are created and negotiated from such practices. You have been invited to participate in this study because you meet the following criteria:

1. Saudi nationals;
2. Living in Riyadh;
3. Age between 25 to 35 years old;
4. Active users of SVOD platforms.

This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

##### **(2) Who is running the study?**

The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Mr Khalid Alhumaidhi. This will take place under the supervision of Dr Mark Rimmer [M.Rimmer@uea.ac.uk], [Tel: 01603 592155].

**(3) What will the study involve for me?**

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be invited to take part in an individual interview. The interview will take place face-to-face at a time and place that suits you. If this is not viable, the interview will take place over a video call (via your preferred video conferencing software). Notes will be taken during the interview and, with your consent, the conversation will be audio-recorded. The interview will be transcribed, and the recordings will then be destroyed. During the interview, you will be asked to talk about your everyday habits, daily media consumption routines, and involvement with SVOD platforms.

**(4) How much of my time will the study take?**

You will be asked to participate in an interview lasting up to 60 minutes.

**(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?**

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised. You can do this by informing Mr Khalid Alhumaidhi [K.Alhumaidhi@uea.ac.uk], [0599508080].

**(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?**

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results.

**(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?**

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

**(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?**

Although there will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study, the researcher may learn more about Saudi audiences of SVODs. Your participation in this research will help us to explore the ways in which Saudi audiences use and generate meaning from SVOD content in their everyday lives. Also, it will help us to understand how meanings are negotiated in light of the apparent tensions between Saudi laws, traditions, and religion and SVOD content. Such ethnographic media study can profoundly help in understanding audiences. Therefore, the findings of this study will be of interest to Arab scholars, educators, and policy-makers.

**(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?**

Only the researcher will have access to handle, process, store and destroy the research data. The voice recording of the interview will be downloaded from the portable recorder onto a secure computer server, and then it will be stored in password-protected OneDrive cloud storage. Once the researcher transcribed the interview, the recording will be destroyed, along with any personally identifiable information.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's [Research Data Management Policy](#).

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your name or any identifiable information about you.

**(10) What if I would like further information about the study?**

When you have read this information, Mr Khalid Alhumaidhi (K.Alhumaidhi@uea.ac.uk, 0599508080) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

**(11) Will I be told the results of the study?**

You are not able to receive feedback about the overall results.

**(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?**

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Mr Khalid Alhumaidhi  
School of Art, Media and American Studies  
University of East Anglia  
NORWICH NR4 7TJ  
K.Alhumaidhi@uea.ac.uk  
0599508080

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Art, Media and American Studies Dr Malcolm McLaughlin [M.mclaughlin@uea.ac.uk].

**(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?**

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the HUM S-REC (Faculty of Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Subcommittee).

**(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?**

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for

you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at [dataprotection@uea.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@uea.ac.uk)
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at [dataprotection@uea.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@uea.ac.uk) in the first instance.

**(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?**

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and send it to Mr Khalid Alhumaidhi (K.Alhumaidhi@uea.ac.uk, 0599508080). Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

**(16) Further information**

This information was last updated on 20 June 2022. If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email.

**This information sheet is for you to keep**

## PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, ..... [PRINT NAME], am willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study, and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published but that any publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to.
- I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Audio-recording

YES  NO

.....  
**Signature**

.....  
**PRINT name**

.....  
**Date**

## **Appendix F – Ethical Reflexivity and Cultural Sensitivity in Participant Interactions**

As noted in the Methodology Chapter, there is limited guidance on conducting fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, particularly regarding practical and ethical considerations. This appendix reflects on the challenges I encountered in communication and participant interactions, and the strategies I employed to navigate them. While these insights go beyond formal ethical procedures, they may be valuable for future researchers working in Saudi Arabia or similarly conservative contexts.

One of the primary challenges I faced involved managing interactions with female participants in the context of ongoing cultural shifts. These challenges ranged from minor behavioural decisions to broader ethical considerations. For instance, I found myself thinking a lot about how to arrange the setting of the mixed-gender groups. Specifically, where participants would sit, given that conservative participants might expect some degree of gender segregation, while others might find enforced separation inappropriate.

Similarly, nonverbal communication raised concerns: maintaining or avoiding direct eye contact had different cultural meanings. A conservative female participant might perceive direct eye contact as intrusive and inappropriate, while a more liberal participant might interpret the lack of eye contact as disrespectful or dismissive. The difficulty was that I could not easily tell who held which views – wearing a veil, for instance, was not a reliable sign, since some Saudi women wore it for social, familial, or tribal reasons rather than religious ones.

To manage these challenges, among others, I decided to prioritise flexibility and allow participants to guide the social norms of the interaction. During mixed-gender focus groups, I

offered seating arrangements that were neutral, without enforced mixing or separation due to the large number of available seats, giving participants the choice of where to sit. This allowed individuals to position themselves according to their own comfort without drawing attention to it.

In one-on-one interviews with females, I took a cautious approach to body language, maintaining polite eye contact but minimising anything that could be perceived as too intense or too distant. I relied on the participant's own cues – if someone appeared uncomfortable, I adjusted my behaviour accordingly. I also paid attention to the general tone of the conversation: if the participant spoke in a formal, reserved manner, I mirrored that formality; if they were more relaxed and informal, I allowed myself to respond in kind within respectful boundaries.

Throughout, my aim was to respect individual preferences without making assumptions based on external appearances – especially with females. Reflexivity and sensitivity to each participant's signals were my strategies that helped to navigate these uncertainties in the field. These challenges made me very aware of how sensitive even small actions can be in the field, and how important it was to stay flexible, cautious, and respectful during all interactions.

Finally, going through these challenges made me realise the lack of practical guidance for doing fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, particularly when it comes to everyday ethical or practical decisions such as seating arrangements or communication styles. More research is needed to explore these issues and to offer better advice for researchers working in Saudi and similar conservative Arab contexts.