

THE RISING CULTURAL HEGEMONY ON TIKTOK: THE COUNTER-FLOW OF CONTENT FROM THE MENA REGION TO THE WEST BETWEEN 2019 AND 2021

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ABSTRACT

While TikTok has been on a continuous marathon of climbing the peak of social media platforms recently, it has abundantly shaken many of the user-behavior-based archetypes and natures of engagement. It has expeditiously turned into a stoneset blueprint and an utter crux for today's generation; changing the game once and for all, while simultaneously carving the way for the emergence of a pioneering era of content digitization, under a wide umbrella of global cultural exchange. In this light, this study focuses on examining the noticeable counter-flow of cultural content from the MENA region to the West on the Chinese app between the years 2019 and 2021. This paper aims to analyze the rising cultural hegemon of Middle Eastern content on TikTok, as well as its grasp, reception, and consumption by Western creators and users. This study gives heed to factors such as cultural hegemony, globalization, and the cultural formation of communications theory across digital platforms. This study has been conducted through the reliance of a purposeful sampling method, in which 121 TikTok videos were thoroughly collected, each of them being mainly viral in the Western region's and sharing a common ground that binds them to at least one aspect of an Arabic and Middle Eastern cultural context. Findings indicate that some degree of MENA content counter-flow was present concerning Western content, which is strongly possible through the calculated percentages, which accentuate how exponential growth of interest in Middle Eastern culture has been depicted by Western audiences especially between the years 2020-2021, in which entertainment (Dance, Art) had its largest share, followed by Arabic humor, beauty and fashion, romance, and lastly, food. Henceforth, this notion comes in direct comparison to its relatively non-existent aura back in 2019 and before that.

Keywords: TikTok, Cultural Hegemony, Counter-Flow, Short Videos, MENA, Arab, West, Innovative Communications, Music, Dance, Creators, Engagement, Globalization, Digitization.

INTRODUCTION

TikTok provides a venue for artistic expression and political debate around the world, and recently more light has been shed on the MENA region. The app's quick-sharing feature, which allows everything from popular dances to government slander to spread promptly, is causing concern among those in charge (Samantha, 2021). These creators, and many others, have rapidly built up a dedicated global audience, as a result of the TikTok algorithm's advanced system of discovery. In which TikTok's "For You Page," is believed to be a portal that allows audiences from all around the globe to discover quality content, regardless of the creative minds behind it. Hence, TikTok has quickly transformed into a bustling hub and a cosmopolitan arena that nourishes what is known as the avant-garde mentality in which it is a universal medium that bridges the share of content that appeases to all, which in return results in a closely knitted community of global 'Tiktokians' who unorthodoxly, radiate a sense of unfathomable unity and cohesion, which is a direct result of how TikTok itself has further honed a mutual communal aura amongst its users in an unparalleled, organic, and, authentic fashion. This includes Arabs, who find TikTok a more prevalent starting point for exposure than any other media platform had in the past (Karim, 2020). Additionally, in terms of the Middle East's Internet environment and presence as a whole, its products are still believed to be in their early stages, while supervision is less stringent, and local supervision technology is not as developed (Min. news, 2021).

Usually, the West is regarded as the dominant entity or the source of cultural hegemony that impacts the Middle East. However, TikTok has paved the way for new cultural minority groups to make an appearance and influence the world. TikTok has created a platform that allows Arabs to amplify their voices and enter the content creation front; Middle Eastern or Arabic content could become the source of rising cultural hegemony on TikTok, influencing and impacting users on an international premise, and specifically the West, in a way where it is becoming noticeable how there is a certain degree of counterflow of Arabic content within the app. Thereon, the standards of content circulation are palpably changing the norms of the delivery and the reception of media material and information, after a long history of what is believed to be the "sole domination" dogma, that revolves around a single and one-sided flow of Western alluring content (Azran, 2009).

With that being said, through the rise of social media platforms, specifically TikTok, the perception of flow has more or less transformed into a much wider scope of "elastic boundability" in which the estrangements relating to the flow process have gradually vanished, were more content has been circulating back and forth in a flow and counter flow archetype, hence resulting in what is known as an elastic relationship of a global content interchange (Iqbal, 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to analyze the unprecedented counterflow of Middle Eastern content on TikTok to the West, and specifically North America. To conduct this study,

Middle Eastern content on TikTok will be analysed from the year 2019 to 2021. The study examines the latest waves of interest in Middle Eastern content that have been surfacing on TikTok. This topic has been chosen due to the intriguing nature of this trailblazing and unconventional notion where Arabic content is being shared, created, and circulated across the world. Usually, Western content is dominant across social media platforms, however, TikTok paved the way for new minority groups to make an impact across the globe, such as Arabic content that includes music, dance routines, language, and other cultural elements that have taken the world by storm in what is believed to be the 'renaissance' of MENA content circulation.

Research Questions

Main Research Question

How Does TikTok contribute towards the spread and exposure of Middle Eastern Culture?

Sub-questions

- What were the engagement levels of Middle Eastern content on TikTok during the year 2019 - 2020?
- How much Middle Eastern content is being circulated in 2021? Is there a rise or decline in the circulation of Middle Eastern content?
- What does this tell us about the evolution of Middle Eastern content and its spread on TikTok?
- When did Arabic content begin to manifest itself in the West? Could it be the rising hegemon on the TikTok app itself?
- What is the nature of the content being circulated? Is it political, entertainment, cultural, educational, or a blend of several categories?
- Does the nature of Arabic content determine their chances of going viral?
- What qualities do all viral videos share in common?

The Significance of the Study:

TikTok is undeniably becoming the world's fastest hashtag, song, dance, and challenge-based app that should keep an eye on the progress of going viral on trends. Understanding the technicalities behind how and why TikTok trends arise and go viral provides the research with a broader understanding of the app's diverse algorithms. (The TikTok year 2020 in review, 2021). Recently, a year ago, and within the MENA region premise, Arab TikTok has been on the rise, from the song and dance remixes, lip-syncing, and even challenges that encourage users to use popular songs; Arab individuals on TikTok are expanding their audience base towards foreign regions, mainly Western countries. And as of a month ago, October 2021, TikTok users have witnessed an imminent rise of Arab TikTok on the "For You" pages in users accounts, henceforth, evoking the driving forces for one to closely observe, question, and understand the hidden factors that birth this sudden exposure of Arab and Middle Eastern content that is being established on the app ("A Guide to Trends on TikTok", 2021).

In the MENA region, several factors play a role in globalizing Arab content in terms of reachability and accessibility; such as popular hashtags and Arab communities in worldwide “pages” on TikTok. However, there are also hindering factors that withhold the process of allowing Middle Eastern Content to be circulated at a global level, such as those of cultural, and political barriers which go hand in hand with the digital divide. As a result, this study aims to analyze how these increasing numbers of engagement have changed (either fluctuate, remain consistent, or decrease) throughout 2021, to comprehend how, and on what premise, Arabs can partake in a global platform that contributes to the spread of their culture and identity. On this note, the study aims to shed light on how Middle Eastern content is gradually joining the bandwagon of the cultural content displayed on TikTok. In addition, it targets to address and suggest new information and findings regarding a contemporary notion related to the counterflow of content from the MENA region to the West, which consequently is intended to fill a gap in existing literature and research.

Limitations

During the content analysis, there were a few limitations present. One example is the lack of Arabic material present online during the year 2019, about the flow and counter-flow of content; as a result, there have been a few remixes and minimal interactions. Furthermore, since this field of study is regarded as relatively new, there were limited existing literature resources to examine. Additionally, since a purposive sampling method was conducted, the samples examined were limited and specifically chosen to cater to the research questions, rather than to suggest a broader generalization that relates to the waves of Arabic content circulation. Hence, to analyze a larger sample, social media analysis tools could be utilized. Also, the time frame examined throughout this research was restricted to the years 2019-2021. If a monthly analysis was to be conducted, perhaps the results could provide additional information as to how certain political, social, or economic events could have functioned as a catalyst or trigger for the rise of circulated Arabic TikTok content. If these limitations were taken into account for future studies, the results could reveal multiple layers of findings that could feed into this relatively novel field of study.

Theoretical Framework

In this content analysis, the theoretical framework contains the adaptation and use of multiple concepts such as cultural hegemony, globalization, and the cultural formation of communication across digital platforms. First and foremost, Arabs in the MENA region are usually regarded as passive consumers and they have become prosumers of Western dominant media content (Mellor, 2013). This renders Arab users to be regarded as generally docile consumers or content creators that are largely affected by Western cultural hegemony (Kabel, 2015). However, TikTok has paved the way for Arab content to rise and generate more engagement from Western users, which has initiated a degree of the counterflow of content from the Middle East to the West, although not totalitarian, however, it is still considered an essential milestone for the region, as well as a potential step towards a more equilibrant flow and exchange of content in the future (Radcliffe,

2021).

Moreover, the study sheds light on the impact of globalization on spreading cultural content on social and digital platforms from varying regions around the globe. It is crucial to note that recent changes on the TikTok platform have initiated a possible reverse of roles and have ignited the hegemony and power of the MENA region's cultural content flow. Hence, this study focuses on the possible counterflow of the MENA's content into these foreign applications, such as the broad musical culture the region possesses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To begin with, the study has looked into a variety of tools and resources that can act as a direct aid of the content analysis of cultural hegemony on social platforms whilst determining the official gaps that are encountered. This literature review examines the publications that have been used in this study and will be explored as the subject delves into the algorithmic flow of content to and from, on a global level, and the evolution of MENA content.

The article provides countering cultural hegemony and audience research in the Arab world gives a critical overview of the specific ways Western culture has impacted the Arab world, concentrating on the themes and distinct traditions that Arab scholars have adopted, such as positivism against culture studies. Using many examples of audience studies from the Arab world, the author Mellor, 2013 argues that the urge to chronicle and resist western cultural hegemony has influenced this sort of research. While the majority of these studies quantify media consumption in terms of time spent on various media and the types of programs watched, the underlying premise is that imported cultural programs harm Arab audiences, particularly youth. The author claims that Arab researchers are positioned as specialists who are removed from their audiences, putting them in a knowledge hierarchy above the subjects of their studies. The review reveals the implicit perspective of Arab audiences as passive information receivers and potential victims of modern technology communication innovation (Mellor, 2013).

The study conducted by Abduljaber regarding the effects of modernization and globalization on values change in the Arab world asserts that the social transformation processes that have evolved in the Arab world due to globalization have led to evident changes in Arab public opinions. In the Arab world, rising rates of industrialization and globalization have resulted in a shift away from religion, tradition, and ethnocentrism in favor of increasingly secular, liberal, and egalitarian principles over the last half-century. Ordinary Arab residents are more accepting of non-Muslims, Americans, and other Westerners than they have ever been. (Abduljaber, 2018). Arabs are more liberal politically, socially, and culturally than they were in the twentieth century (Abduljaber, 2018). This observable value change in the region is abundantly demonstrated by data from the World Values Survey and the Arab Barometer. The underlying causes of this

shift are likely attributable to macro, mezzo, and micro-level changes in people's lives as a result of growing industrialization and globalization in comparison to previous periods. This supports previous findings from Western Europe and North America that suggest societal transformation processes result in predictable changes in public values (Abduljaber, 2018).

The study titled "A Guide to Human Rights in the Contemporary World" discusses the concept of cultural hegemony, which is frequently described through words that imply the superimposition of a dominant civilization that confines beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values, and morals while suppressing other viewpoints. This article examines cultural hegemony from the perspective of the many factors that influence the human quality of life. Each of them has been transformed by a variety of social, political, and economic forces that are incompatible with the existence of a single, dominant society. A new model for social culture may emerge, one that is more fluid and malleable. Specifically, this analysis looks at the increasing spread of influence through shared electronic media, the lack of funding for the traditional government to solve problems of any magnitude, and moderated definitions of success and happiness, as implied by millennial work-life balance preferences (Vard, 2015). In other words, this study highlights the noticeable effects of the Western hegemonic entities all over the world, including the MENA region.

The article titled "Arab influencers recreate viral TikTok challenges with a regional twist" which was published by Arab News, highlights the contribution of Arab creators on TikTok through the #dontrush trend that consists of them sharing before and after footage of themselves and then linking them through the use of transitions and other tools offered by the TikTok App (Arab News, 2020). Even though this trend is originally Western, Arab influences have entered the trend with a unique approach by adding their Arabian twists to the videos shared on the platform by showcasing the cultural practices of their countries and regions, hence utilizing the platform in further spreading the Arabian heritage, culture, and identity (Arab News, 2020). The challenge included Arab creators from various middle eastern countries including the Gulf and the Levant. At the end of the video, and to further hone the concept of Arabian unity, the creators all came together and concluded with a rather powerful note, singing "We stand together. We are proud of all our countries. But we know we are one team. United, as you can see." This incident depicts the initial surge of Arabic content on the TikTok platform, which paved the way for the flow of additional Middle Eastern content gradually.

The study of the influence of personality traits and user motivation on TikTok written by Bahiyah Omar and Wang Dequan (2020), examined the different personal qualities and motives behind users deciding to engage in the TikTok application. This research found that individuals resort to TikTok to express themselves freely, interact with an active community, and escape their realities. In addition, the study found that archiving was one of the most significant reasons why users choose TikTok. The study also notes that the Big Five model fails to explain the attributes behind TikTok usage. The study

utilizes the Uses & Gratification theory to comprehend the reason for individuals using TikTok as a platform for self-expression. Generally, TikTok is a platform that has slowly manifested itself in individuals' daily lives, which can lead to the dissemination and spread of cultural content freely between many different cultures, such as Arab content.

The study of practices of authorship and misattribution on TikTok published by Kaye, Rodriquez, Langton, and Wikstrom (2021) discusses the misattribution of original sound content on the platform. The purpose of this work is to investigate the recent attribution practices on the platform. The study implements a mixed-methods perspective including data scraping tools, quantitative content analysis, as well as a series of qualitative case studies to shed a light on how attribution practices are currently being reshaped through TikTok content and prevalent trends. This is important to note since many of the Arab TikTok sounds that have gone viral are generally old soundtracks that abruptly become trends; this notion occurs due to TikTok's algorithm that facilitates the spread of content and trends.

The study of choreography in the internet age written by Johnson (2021) discusses the international establishment of TikTok as the dominant choreography-sharing application. Ever since TikTok's evident success and rise in 2019, TikTok has made a potent impact in the dance field and realm. The study aims to consider the copyright problem that has manifested itself with the rise of TikTok choreography. The study integrates the utilitarian theory as well as the deontic theory to put forth two justifications for copyright. It notes that the utilitarian theory tends to be more powerful in the United States, however, in general, the study concludes that it is of utmost importance for choreographers to earn credit and the right of attribution for their work and effort.

The report "How the Middle East used Social Media in 2020" examines the most recent social media trends in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area. The study delves into the patterns and greatest events that influenced MENA's connection with social media over the last year, using a variety of business, academic, and media sources. The goal of this research is to shed light on the trends that indicate the popularity of high-quality digital material consumed on social media, as well as a desire to reach audiences on these platforms or attract current social audiences to other networks. As a result, social media will become a more essential source for talent identification as well as a vital channel for content and information consumption, according to the report. This trend is important for companies, producers, and influencers, as it is discussed towards the conclusion of this research.

The study that inspects TikTok and WeChat and their abilities to curate and control global information flows, explains how censorship on TikTok is a significant issue that many minorities confront when using large applications. In the People's Republic of China (PRC), most major foreign social media networks are still prohibited from the Chinese market, but Chinese social media businesses are expanding internationally and creating enormous worldwide audiences. Some of these networks, like WeChat and

TikTok, offer issues to governments throughout the world, including freedom of speech, which they are attempting to address. TikTok participates in censorship on a variety of political and social subjects, as well as demoting and suppressing information, according to this research. In this research, case studies highlight how censorship, information curation, and control affect debates about LGBTQ+ concerns, Xinjiang, and current demonstrations in the United States. This study is worthy of note due to the similar censorship issues that prosumers encounter in the Arab world; Arab culture generally encourages self-censorship, however, TikTok could be an application that opens up prosumers' limits and boundaries.

The article titled "Tik Tok recognizes Arab American Heritage Month", by David Cohen tends to shed light on one of TikTok's umpteen efforts to ensure inclusivity, diversity, and equality in terms of cultural representation, which is arguably considered to be the cornerstone of the app's popularity and hence longevity. That said, Cohen discusses TikTok's initiative of organizing the Arab American Heritage Month in April 2021, in which the attribute strives to mirror aspects of the rich Arabian culture, including dance, history, music, recipes, and stories from its Arab American community through the hashtag "ArabTikTok" (Cohen, 2021). This further vindicates not only how TikTok is a culturally driven social application, but it also vindicates the unleashed presence and engagement of Arabic content on TikTok to the extent in which the billion-user app felt the need to dedicate an entire month to solely embrace its culture and sense of unity. For instance, the #TikTokArab hashtag has garnered more than 25 billion views up to the date of this article's publication, while #Arab and #ArabTikTok accumulated 26 and 4 billion each (Cohen, 2021). Additionally, Cohen also suggests how this initiative not only aims to celebrate Arabian heritage and authenticity, but also to act as an impactful catalyst for change, a voice for the voiceless, and a pedestal to narrate the untold stories and perspectives of Arab communities.

"Sheikh Mohammed launches official TikTok account, shares motivational video", by the Khaleej Times, sheds light on how the ruler of Dubai, has entered the world of TikTok, in which he made his debut with a motivational video narrated by him. The video involved short clips of his 50-year journey in public service, which aims to inspire Gen Z and the youth today, through tackling subjects like management and leadership (Khaleej Times, 2020). On such a note, it becomes clear the degree of impact and exposure the Chinese app has in terms of building solid and well-connected communities, an element that is evidently attracting world leaders such as HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid who join the bandwagon of digital platforms like TikTok. Additionally, the platform was also referred to as the "New Platform to spread hope", be it through storytelling and spreading positivity through the region (Khaleej Times, 2020). The ruler's input on TikTok could mark a milestone in Arab leadership participation on social platforms. This participation could perhaps further ignite Arab cultural impact and hegemony on the social platform.

METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the sampling method and data collection process that was involved to conduct this research as well as the method of analysis.

Sampling Method and Data Collection:

Purposive sampling is used in this study to gather TikTok content. This sampling technique gathers specific content that serves the aim of this research. Utilizing purposive sampling increases the accuracy, credibility, and diligence of the results and findings related to the study (Campbell et al., 2020). The time frame analysed is from 2019 until 2021. The process of compiling the videos included finding popular Arabic sounds that were used by non-Arabs. In addition, hashtags such as #Arabtok #ArabTikTok were used to facilitate the process of finding global content that featured Arabic sounds and content. Moreover, the most popular sounds by renowned Arab singers were analysed to find related content.

Table (1): Categories of Analysed TikTok Videos

Category of TikTok Videos	Entertainment (Dance & Song)	Beauty & Fashion	Humour	Romance	Food
Number of Videos Analysed	98	7	11	3	2
Max Time in Videos	3 minutes				
Videos in 2019	1				
Videos in 2020	22				
Videos in 2021	98				
Total	121 videos				

Method of Analysis:

The study uses quantitative content analysis that focuses on a set of thematic codes for frames derived from the literature on cultural hegemony, as shown in Table 2.

Table (2): Frames and their indicators

Frame Labels	Attributes and Specification
TikTok-Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creator: The person who made the post. - Date: the time the TikTok gets posted. - Reach: What was TikTok is all about - How many people viewed the TikTok video, liked it, commented on it, and interacted with it. - Hashtags: user-generated labels that are used to identify the TikTok.
Storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does the TikTok video showcase an Arabic skit? - Does the TikTok video showcase a re-enactment of a scene from an Arabic movie? - Does the TikTok video feature an Arabic song within its content? - Does the TikTok video feature lip syncing and acting to an Arabic song? - Is the content of the TikTok video based on an Arab creator's original video?
Cultural Penetration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does the video feature Arabic cultural content? - Does the video include Arabic culture infused with international content? - Does the video exhibit a merge of Arabic culture with another culture? - Does the sound hold any cultural appropriation elements?
Origin of the Sound	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did the sound originate from the MENA region? - Was the sound created by an Arab/MENA region citizen? - Does the sound feature the Arabic language? - Does the sound feature Arabic cultural elements?

Global Outreach/Exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did the content reach viewers outside the MENA region? - Are the global viewers partaking in creating videos with similar sound or content despite residing outside the MENA region? - Are non-Arabs sharing, commenting, or liking Arab content?
Innovative/Technological Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does the video incorporate technological and cinematic elements within its depiction of Arabic content? - Is the video encompassing an innovative approach? - Does the mode of communication for the use of the sound display a dance? - Does the mode of communication in the video include words and dialogue? - Does the mode of communication in the video portray Arabic humour? - Does the video feature Arabic food as its mode of communication?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The comprehensive quantitative content analysis of 121 TikTok videos yields the following tables that include the findings. The first table discusses the percentages of the categories of the videos analysed. The second table outlines the percentages of the presence of each frame.

Table (3): Category of Chosen Videos:

Category	Number of Videos	Percentages
Entertainment (Dance, Art)	98/121	81%
Beauty & Fashion	7/121	5.8%
Humour	11/121	9%
Romance	3/121	2.5%
Food	2/121	1.7%

Table (4): Framework Findings:

Frame	Number of Videos	Percentages
Storytelling	114/121	94.21%
Cultural Penetration	84/121	69.42%
Origin of the Sound	121/121	100%
Global Outreach	121/121	100%
Innovative/Technological Communication	101/121	83.47%

Table (5): TikTok Engagement Levels by Year:

Year	# of Videos	Views	Shares	Likes	Comments
2019	1	54,500,000 M	125,500,000K	3,400,000 M	11,789 K
2020	22	110,221,000 M	116,300 K	23,500,000M	170,685 K
2021	98	913,158,040 M	10,170,605 M	196,386,600 M	657,838K
Total	121	1,078,321,000 B	135,786,905 M	46, 538, 600 M	840,312 K

According to the findings, approximately 81% of the 121 videos distributed Arabic content for entertainment reasons, such as audience-pleasing, Arabic ethnic dances and customs, as well as lip-syncing. In addition, comedy is included in up to 9% of Arabic resurfaced material, demonstrating the preferred form of Arabic resurfaced content. Fashion and beauty, on the other hand, accounted for 5.8% of the overall sample data, a small percentage when compared to entertainment. Alongside, analysing the categories romance and food, which account for 2.5% entertainment tools such as lip-syncing, creative video editing on Arabic songs in the genre classification of romance, and 1.7% for food content, it was discovered that this type of content received the least shares and engagement as the creative spectrum of content creation decreases.

Furthermore, findings also reveal that the Arabic TikTok videos that have gone viral mainly include elements of storytelling, cultural penetration, and global outreach. For instance, 94.21% of the videos analysed included storytelling components that lead to high engagement levels. Also, 100% of the 121 videos studied confirmed that the sounds came from pure Arabic origins and were able to reach a global audience. Moreover, 69.42% of the content analysed displayed evidence of cultural penetration. While, 83.47% of the content examined featured innovative and technological

communication components. Since purposive sampling was used to acquire the TikTok content analysed, all the videos examined were particularly chosen based on having a specific nature, and in such a case, it is to ensemble the usage of Arabic oriented sounds. Hence, the videos chosen all shared a mutually exclusive trait, and that is to firstly, showcase Arabic culture, and secondly to have gained a substantial amount of global exposure. Hence, vindicating the 100% values present in Table 4 of the findings section.

In terms of the questions posed earlier in the study, and their coherence with the data available at hand, it becomes clear how the engagement levels have been increasing in 2020, acknowledging the fact that there was little to no globalized Arab/MENA material in 2019. The data reveal that the content distributed in 2021 has proved to be rising; reachability is thought to have a significant impact in the Arabic content counter-flow. As a result, the data demonstrates the wide range of Arabic content consumed, as well as the emergence of MENA cultures with Western cultures, illustrating the growth of Arab music and its reachability. Additionally, as a result of digitization and increased accessibility, research has revealed that the manifestation of Arabic content in the West is progressing, as consumers are drawn to Arabic content, particularly when it reflects the artists' cultural origins. TikTok functioned as a common platform for people all over the world, and it provided possibilities for making music and sound; subsequently, allowing producers to be more creative.

The findings confirm that the majority of Arabic content being circulated on a global scale lies within the Entertainment category, which includes either dance or song-related content. As shown in Table 3, around 81% of the circulated content happens to be content created for entertainment purposes. The remaining categories such as beauty and fashion, humour, romance, and food yield relatively low percentages, lying between 10% to 1%. This sheds light on the prospect of entertainment content reaching and appealing to a vast audience. As for the qualities present in the videos, findings reveal that when storytelling elements, cultural attributes, and innovative communication factors are present, it tends to increase the likelihood of an Arabic sound or video reaching an audience-base that lies outside the Arab world or MENA region.

According to Table 5, 98 videos from the year 2021 were examined, whereas 22 videos were analysed from the year 2020, and one video from the year 2019. The use of purposive sampling to accumulate the data lead to more extensive research regarding the videos published throughout 2021 specifically due to TikTok's algorithm. TikTok features "user-centric algorithmic content curation" that caters personalized content specifically for the user that is scrolling through the application (Rach & Peter, 2021). Due to this reason, the content that surfaces on the application is usually content that has the highest levels of engagement. As Table 5 suggests, videos from 2021 and 2020 tend to have higher engagement levels, thus, the use of purposive sampling mainly

focused on these “viral” videos that offered the most prominent and noticeable engagement levels.

Discussion:

An indisputable characteristic of Media content as a whole is its degree of fluidity, and how it tends to flow through the umpteen mediums available at hand. Hence, the smooth flow of content within such a context is determined based on a number of factors including, the source of delivery, the availability of channel flows, and the grounds on which it is being perceived. Hence, creating the paradigm of roles, where the flow of material is derived from the commitment to specific roles that allow for such delivery to happen. That being said, the Western media outlets to a great extent are always considered the “deliverers”, meaning the initiators of this flow, while audiences from other countries are believed to be the “receivers”. That said, in this study, this ‘game of chess’ was put under the test, in which a plethora of the most viral TikTok’s were gathered, picked, and thoroughly examined, for the purpose of investigating how each of them tends to relatively defy this theory of generalization, were Western content is regarded as the ‘pack leaders’ while all other countries submissively tag along. On the contrary, the videos analysed accentuate the degree on which Middle Eastern culture is starting to climb the ladder of hegemony, each in their unique and distinctive approaches, whether it is in the form of storytelling, entertainment (dance and song), beauty and fashion, or even through the adaptation of Arabic humour.

Furthermore, the findings exhibit the notion that since the year 2019, there has been a monumental increase in Arabic content counterflow, whether it is through the increased number of TikTok videos featuring non-Arab individuals embracing Arabic culture, or the number of accumulated likes, comments, shares, as well as views. That being said, all the aforementioned factors tend to elucidate how Arabic content has been on a continuous rise, since 2019 until the present day. Another integral aspect of such a measurement is how the numbers are in fact increasing in an exponential fashion, meaning that instead of increasing gradually, they are currently skyrocketing in a rather abrupt and prodigious manner. Upon first glance, and if one is to analyse this phenomenon by comparing the numbers from 2019-2020 exclusively, it would certainly seem like this divergent and contemporary notion is not one that could be taken on a prominent note, due to the unexplainable nature of how the numbers increased suddenly. However, with the numbers being further amplified on a much more colossal scale in the year 2021, the concept of Arabic content counter-flow is honed even further, whereas now it appears to stand on a solid infrastructure compared to the years 2019-2020 where although there was a noticeable increase in engagement numbers, the argument was still considered ambiguous, out of context, and overall debilitated.

In fact, previous literature such as the article “Countering cultural hegemony: Audience research in the Arab world” conducted by Mellor in 2013, suggests that the flow of informational materials is derived from a one-dimensional archetype and channel flow

and that is, directly from West to the world, including the MENA region. Yet, this theory does not liberate the fact that although the West are still the -Gurus of cultural hegemony-, this does not by any means invalidate or falsify the fact that there has been a minor shift in the nature of content cultural flow, as well as a drastic turnover in user's "calibre of interest" in which it is evident how recently, users have been much more vocal and firmer in highlighting what content they are interested in, and hence what they will consequently engage with. Unlike the previous notions, where individuals supinely consumed what was spoon-fed to them, without actually taking part in the processes and attributes of the informational flow of content, prosumers are not behaving in a different manner. This can spring from a myriad of reasons, however one may suggest that the impact of globalization, content digitization, cultural movements, as well as the "bustling minds of Gen Z" presently all contribute to the formation of a globally interconnected society. That being said, Gen Z or the youth today, who constitute the largest number of users on the TikTok app (Muliadi, 2020), have a certain intellect that is built differently from those generations that preceded it, in which the "old-school" characteristics of certain behavioural trends may have been the long lasting barrier that hindered the outburst of content counter-flow that the world is undeniably witnessing today, in which those "malleable" burdens are gradually disappearing, and this dynamic of roles is turning into a worldwide societal movement of "string like effect". This might suggest that each culture could potentially hold the string of content from one end, rather than viewing the digitalization era as a tool used by a doctrine or authoritarian "bulk".

TikTok on such a note, has stimulated the flow of material through indirectly initializing a unique phenomenon of equilibrium, in which the circulation of content within the Chinese app does not operate by any means on the basis of singular flow, but rather paves the path for the exchange of videos within a wide umbrella of limitless horizons. Henceforth, resulting in both the flow and counterflow of informational and cultural goods, where the MENA region is now part of this "content exhibition chain" in the same way that the West does so, which not only creates this unprecedented approach when it comes to the flow and reception of material, but rather fills the void in what used to be the norm, in a way that eliminates those barriers that strengthened the practice of a one-sided flow of material usually received from Western regions. This unprecedented change consequently creates an invisible wall between the possibility of cultural exchange amongst world countries. On a grander note, it is essential to fathom that this phenomenon is not perceived as a challenge or direct threat to the content flow dynamics of Western content, but rather it should be viewed as the birth of a new trend of media content-sharing, where the flow and counterflow should come hand in hand, in the sense where both tend to complement one another, thus creating an infinite stream of a dual-sided content flow, with a wide pool of diversity and availability, as the heartbeat to the new era of content digitization.

Howbeit, although the numbers are continuously rising and the global engagement with Middle Eastern culture content is dominantly present, it is still abundantly crucial to

take into account the possibility that this phenomenon could more or less turn into an “ephemeral boom”, where it may only be a matter of time until this encapsulation of content, along with the liberation of Arabic culture would find its resting grounds, and its light would slowly dim away, where the orthodoxy of “Western control” over the media landscapes would possibly take over and continue to lead the new world of digital content. In fact, what paves the path for the thorniness of this implication, is how media platforms whether be it TikTok or not, are bombarded with an overwhelmingly tidal wave of uncertainty, which in return burdens one’s ability to peculiarly and factually determine if this counter flow and surge of cultural content from the MENA region to the West would be accompanied with longevity, or not. In other words, Arabic content could continue to knock the doors of the “one dimensional cubical” of Western content, or on the polar opposite, it could gradually die out similar to the myriad trends that came before it. If that’s the case, then one can vindicate that this eye-opening cultural penetration taking place would soon unravel and “roles” would go back to what is believed to be the sacrosanct ‘touchstone’.

That being said, this degree of content counter flow is in fact carving the path for the birth of an even larger degree of cultural torrent from the MENA region to the West and vice-versa, in which the interaction and engagement with Arabic culture on a pioneering platform such as TikTok can possibly result in a fundamental bridge of cultural acceptance, where individuals from both ends of the world (MENA) and the (West) are steering this wheel, thus becoming politically, culturally, and socially liberated, receptive, and unprejudiced. This in its own terms would not only mirror a new era of mutual embracement between countries, but also initiate the vanishment of existing cultural entanglements. That being said, the “dance” and “lip syncing” videos could potentially become the -moderator- of this mutual hospitality of cultural acceptance and consequently, Gen-Z could finally be responsible for commencing a plateau that was difficult to achieve for so long.

Nonetheless, it is also essential to highlight how the fact that Arabic culture is being welcomed by individuals from Europe, the United States, and all around the globe is not only providing it with vast exposure, but it also builds the grounds on which an ever-growing exchange of cultural information would perhaps take place on the long run, and what was once believed to be “unattainable” is being birthed and embarked on, under the simple yet sophisticated harbinger known as an -indisputable TikTok video-. Hence, it strongly proves how a single 15 second video holds under its belt an unrivalled degree of power, where the counter flow of culture has now become possible, once again due to the driving engine behind it; TikTok.

CONCLUSION

This study examines viral Arabic TikTok content that originated from the MENA region between 2019 and 2021, and eventually became featured within the Western world throughout the platform. The study uses purposive sampling to accumulate TikTok videos that accentuate several categories, all within an Arabic culturally-related context.

The content amassed was thoroughly analysed as per the frames present. In conclusion, the findings and discussion elucidate that the majority of TikTok's viral Arabic videos tend to feature entertainment elements, such as dancing or singing. Also, the findings report that most of the videos analysed include evidence of storytelling, cultural penetration, global outreach, and innovative communication elements.

Although Western media outlets have been considered to be the centres of dissemination of media content, this study reveals that Arabic content is gradually entering the global scene. As the findings and discussion suggest, Middle Eastern cultural content can be currently regarded as a new source of cultural hegemony and digitally invasive sovereignty. This study reveals the evidently low levels of engagement pertaining to Arabic content on the platform during the year 2019. However, the engagement levels have exponentially increased from the year 2020 to 2021, as indicated in Table 5. This sudden exponential rise in numbers suggests an observable surge in the counterflow of Middle Eastern content to the West, which is a notion that completely shifts the content-flow paradigm that the media realm was previously accustomed to. Moreover, the content analysis could suggest a form of equilibrium that has been established regarding the diversity of cultural content that spreads throughout TikTok. As presented in appendix one, almost every video features a non-Arab creating content that features some form of Arabic elements. All in all, this study emphasizes TikTok's ability to create an interactive landscape of digitally communicated cultural exchanges across the world, with Arabic cultural content being one of the leading hegemonic forces at the forefront of this unprecedented media movement.

RECOMMENDATION

This study focuses on the West as the dominating entity of cultural hegemony in the Middle East; it has, in a way or another, an impact on the Middle East. TikTok has paved the way for new cultural groups to emerge and exert influence around the world. TikTok has created a platform that allowed Arabs to louden their voices and enter the content creation space; however, further research should be conducted through analysing the platform as a whole, as well as delving into its trends and app algorithm, including the control and production of the "for you page," which is a form of personalization aimed at consumers.

Another suggestion would be to conduct another analysis in the next 10 years on a wider spectrum, in addition to empirical research on the motivations for making platform-friendly material, and analysing the reasons for the TikTok algorithm favouring certain videos over others in order to get greater recognition. Analysing the cognitive paradigm and comprehending the psychological motivations underlying the platform's interaction approaches can help with this. The study also suggests examining TikToks using random sampling rather than a targeted analysis.

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