

The Domestication of Netflix in the Gulf

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The introduction of subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) services has transformed the media landscape in the television market of Arab Gulf countries. This article adopts Silverstone's domestication theory as a conceptual framework to analyze how users, as individuals and households, incorporate Netflix and engage with its content, how they create their own symbolic meanings and social practices, and how they integrate its algorithmic recommendations and personalization into their temporal-spatial routines. This article relies on qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 young urban adults from the six Gulf countries. The computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package NVivo was used to conduct a series of qualitative analyses. The findings suggest that the users are deliberate in their adoption of Netflix and of the entertainment content they consume, and that Netflix has been incorporated into the users' daily routines and activities to fit with their own personal and cultural needs.

Keywords: Domestication, Gulf countries, localized content, Netflix, SVoD, user reception

In the Gulf countries, which include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, over-the-air and satellite broadcasting have dominated the television market for decades (Zaid, 2018).

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State-controlled broadcasting systems were the norm and mandated to modernize the economy and serve as an instrument for education and social change. However, the introduction of subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) television led by Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Starzplay Arabia, among others, has transformed the traditional TV landscape in the Gulf TV market (Khalil & Zayani, 2021).

The technological convergence between computers, the internet, and TV sets has challenged the existing conceptualizations of television as a technology and a social artifact (Lotz, Lobato, & Thomas, 2018; Manovich, 2020). With SVoD services, households now have access to highly diversified content, individual consumer choice, atomized reception, and personalized interfaces. Television viewers continue to invest in their favorite characters and stories, but they want to do so at a convenient time and on a device that fits their usage patterns and needs (Jenner, 2016; Raikar, 2017). This shifting landscape has called for the reconceptualization of the definition of television itself, of audience/user reception, and the place of television in the social, economic, and temporal-spatial dynamics and routines of family life (Jakubowicz, 2015; Manovich, 2020). Of particular interest is the reconceptualization of audiences as users, which circumvents the notion of audiences as mere receivers of content and highlights the essentially productive aspects of media consumption practices (Jermyn & Holmes, 2006; Livingstone, 2013; Picone, 2017).

Netflix's entry into the Gulf region market is an illustration of what Khalil and Zayani (2021) call "de-territorialized digital capitalism" (p. 201), whereby digital content or services traverse sociocultural, political, and economic borders, and in so doing defy the geographies of nation states. However, when digital content travels across sociocultural borders, it must negotiate a rough terrain of new territories and markets characterized by fundamental differences in cultural values and norms, viewing habits, and cultural tastes (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018; Lobato, 2018; Scarlata, Lobato, & Cunningham, 2021; Turner & Tay, 2009). In other words, as a key global player, Netflix operates both as a de-territorializing company that provides direct access to its content to millions of subscribers worldwide and as a territorialized company that functions within nation states with country-specific technological infrastructure, regulatory regimes, and audiences with different preferences, expectations, and cultural norms.

This article examines how TV viewers in the Gulf countries engage with Netflix and how they adopt and integrate Netflix into their everyday contexts. It uses Silverstone's domestication theory as a conceptual framework to analyze how viewers, as individuals and small social groups (households), adopt Netflix affordances, such as personalization and recommendation, how they incorporate them into their temporal-spatial routines, how they engage with and negotiate their content, and how they create their own symbolic meanings and social practices. Given the current debates on "cultural imperialism" that surround Netflix (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018; Lobato, 2019), the focus on the Gulf countries, a predominantly Arab and Muslim region, is particularly relevant. One important issue in this debate is the amount of local versus American content in Netflix catalogs in various countries. Studies on the origin of films and TV content in SVoD show an overwhelming presence of American content in countries' catalogs around the world, including Western Europe (Lobato, 2018), although the impact of such a presence remains debatable (Lotz, Eklund, & Soroka, 2022).

In this article, we argue that from a cultural imperialism perspective, this pervasive presence of American content translates into cultural domination and policy debates about cultural diversity. However, from the lens of domestication theory, considering how viewers negotiate Netflix content and use its technological

affordances can offer some insights into this aspect of the debate. For instance, we found that although the amount of local content on Netflix catalogs in the Gulf is minimal, viewers could harness the Netflix catalog and its technical features to negotiate the content they deemed culturally sensitive. The findings also suggest that a process of mutual domestication occurs whereby users fully use Netflix's affordances, such as algorithmic personalization and recommendations. Conversely, these affordances shape the relationship that users cultivate with Netflix and translate it into new temporal-spatial reconfigurations of everyday life routines.

The article begins with an attempt to historicize Arab TV to provide global audiences with an understanding of the various stages of the development of TV in the Arab world. We then give a brief overview of the literature on SVoD research in the Gulf region, reception studies, and the importance of local content for SVoD viewers. We provide a description of Silverstone's domestication theory and its methods. Finally, this article delineates the major findings of the research and provides some concluding remarks.

A Brief History of Television in the Arab World

The history of Arab television can be divided into three main time periods. They refer to, respectively, state-controlled broadcasting, Pan-Arab satellite TV, and multiplatform content distribution with the introduction of online streaming, IPTV, and SVoD. As Jenner (2014) points out, these time periods should be understood as guideposts and not as definitive historical phases in the development of the complex and discursive phenomenon that we call television.

The first phase, from the 1950s to the 1990s, started when the British protectorate administration introduced broadcasting to Kuwait in 1951 (Alsalem, 2021), the UAE in 1969 (Ayish, 2021), Qatar in 1970 (Galal, 2021), Bahrain in 1973 (Jones, 2021), and Oman in 1974 (Al-Kindi, 2021). For Saudi Arabia, the U.S. Air Force and the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) established the first TV stations in the mid-1950s (Boyd, 1999). Sakr (2007) refers to this phase as the "ruler-dependent patronage" (p. 2) of Arab television. The TV content consisted primarily of continuous propaganda campaigns in support of political regimes. Most airtime was allocated to reporting on the activities and speeches of the political leadership (Zaid, 2018). This phase is marked by a scarcity of TV channels, audience homogeneity, and control of state-administered networks.

Phase two started with the advent of satellite television in the mid-1990s, particularly with the emergence of Qatar's Al Jazeera channel. This phase can be described as the era of satellite pan-Arab transnational networks (Khalil & Kraidy, 2017). Al Jazeera brought about major changes in Arab TV ownership, structure, and content. Al Jazeera's talk shows, critical analysis, and news broadcasts were not only visually appealing but also frequently featured controversial perspectives, broke social taboos, and provided a platform for regional political opposition groups (except for issues related to Qatar). Consequently, Arab states launched similar projects, such as the Saudi MBC Group and the Kuwaiti-Saudi OSN Group. This was the era of expansion of the broadcasting landscape, limited state control, and the availability of private TV channels.

Phase three, from the 2000s to the present, refers to the era of technological advances and the market expansion of global entertainment platforms and technologies, including online streaming and DVDs, and later IPTV and SVoD with global players, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, and regional players, such

as Starzplay Arabia, Icflix, and Shahid. This era is characterized by atomized reception, new viewing habits, highly diversified content, and individual consumer choices.

SVoD in the Gulf Region

The growth in SVoD services can be exemplified by Netflix, which in just two decades has transformed from a California-based DVD sale and rental business to a global digital entertainment giant. Netflix is valued at \$198 billion (Forbes, 2023), making it worth more than Exxon Mobile and 1.5 times more than Rupert Murdoch's 21st Century Fox. SVoD revenues in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are projected to reach \$4 billion by 2027 (Digital TV Research, 2022). Since its launch in the Gulf countries in 2016, Netflix is expected to generate \$1.90 billion, almost half of MENA's \$4 billion SVoD revenues, by 2027 (Digital TV Research, 2022). Netflix and Shahid (part of the Saudi MBC Group, launched in 2008) each hold a market share of 22%, while Starzplay Arabia (a UAE-based SVoD service launched in 2015) commands an equal share (Kamel, 2022). The UAE and Saudi Arabia account for about 50% of the total subscriptions in the Arab region (Digital TV Research, 2022). According to a recent market study, Gulf consumers hold the second highest number of SVoD subscriptions per person, with an average of 2.9, second only to the United States with 4.7 (ArabianBusiness, 2023). These figures are not official, since Netflix does not publish the number of its users (Wayne, 2019).

The Gulf countries are perceived as part of the MENA region. However, the economic and financial capabilities of the Gulf states (high levels of per capita income and advanced internet infrastructure and usage) warrant unique consideration in assessing the arrival of SVoD television in the region. The Gulf countries, a market of roughly 60 million people, enjoy advanced ICT infrastructures, high-speed broadband penetration, and a tech-savvy population (Dennis, Martin, & Hassan, 2019). This paves the way for a sustainable ecosystem for SVoD service adoption, usage, and growth in this region. The following section addresses recent research on the introduction of SVoD in the Gulf region.

SVoD Research in the Gulf Region

Media companies offer streaming content and services across sociocultural, economic, and political borders, which imply some level of consideration for the territoriality of the nation-state. In the Gulf region, Netflix and digital media in general are embraced both as symbols of the region's access to the global digital economy and as a challenge to conservative cultures and traditional values (Khalil & Zayani, 2021). The success of SVoD media services in the Gulf depends on the willingness of global television distributors and producers to account for various political and cultural sensibilities. In terms of political sensibilities, Khalil and Zayani (2021) explore an instance where Netflix had to deal with severe restrictions on freedom of speech in a foreign country. In late 2018, Saudi Arabia demanded that Netflix remove one episode from its talk show *Patriot Act* (Minhaj & Preuss, 2018) because the show violated the cybersecurity laws of the country. While the news media characterized this instance as a tension between a global internet platform and an autocratic government, the authors characterize it as a tensionless event and an indication of the symbiotic relationship between states and businesses in the context of the global "de-territorialized digital capitalism" (Khalil & Zayani, 2021, p. 202). Netflix took a reputational risk by refusing to take a stand against censorship laws but managed to maintain its market presence and avoid total bans. They conclude

that the trend in global digital capitalism necessitates that states and businesses engage in mutual accommodation to allow the state's entry into the new digital economy and to allow global digital companies market access and expansion.

In terms of cultural sensibilities, Khalil (2016) identifies a complex dynamic in Arab entertainment television, which he calls a "twin processes of 'business push' and 'local audience pull'" (Khalil, 2016, p. 3632). On the one hand, market forces and various political and policy drivers "push" for more market expansion of global entertainment platforms and technologies, including IPTV and SVoD. On the other hand, the audience's "pull" is partly driven by conservatives' concerns over issues of public and youth morality and the moral impact of globalization. The issue of "foreign content" is highly contested in the Arab region and constitutes a pull factor for many conservatives in the region. For example, the Kingdom of Bahrain requested that MBC cancel its Arab version of the *Big Brother* (Römer, Ross, Shapiro, Grodner, & Meehan, 2000) as a response to public protests against the show as "foreign" (Khalil, 2016).

The smooth entrance of global television content to the Gulf region requires recognition of viewers' agency, an increase in local productions, and greater sensitivity to local identity and culture. The following section addresses the relevance of local content production for Arab users.

SVoD Users and Local Content

Research shows that linguistic proximity and cultural relevance are important factors in determining global TV audiences (Jang, Kim, & Baek, 2021; Ksiazek & Webster, 2008; Straubhaar, 1991, 2007). Cultural proximity refers to the process whereby viewers are more likely to select products from their own culture or from cultures similar to their own (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007). In the context of Gulf countries, recent research suggests that cultural proximity is critical in understanding the popularity of Turkish dramas (Berg, 2017). A 2018 study found that at least eight in ten Arab nationals watch TV in Arabic, and they lament the scarcity of local content (Dennis et al., 2019). They want Arab stories and characters, not just content subtitled or dubbed in Arabic. The phenomenon of "the cultural discount" explains an important dimension in the global flow of media content (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988, p. 501), particularly in geo-cultural markets such as the Arab Gulf. A cultural discount refers to an instance when the original utility value of cultural products is reduced once it is exported to other cultures. Audiences tend to prefer consuming media content that emanates from similar cultures, and when audiences from other cultures are exposed to that content, the cultural value of the content is discounted (Fu & Govindaraju, 2010; Jang et al., 2021).

To respond to market demands, Netflix, Starzplay Arabia, Shahid, and others are currently increasing production in original Arabic content. Netflix secured licensing agreements for a new catalog of 44 movies by Arab directors in 2020 (Netflix, 2020). Netflix also released its first Arabic original series *Jinn* (Chaaya et al., 2019), *AlRawabi School for Girls* (Toukan, 2021), and *Paranormal* (Hefzy & Salama, 2020). These are noteworthy initiatives, but the numbers pale when compared with United States or Bollywood content production. The challenge for SVoD companies is that the Arab film and television entertainment industries do not produce large volumes of films and TV series to satisfy the needs of the market. According to Cairo's Arab Cinema Center, Egypt, the center of the Arab film industry, produces 40 features annually; Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia produce 10–15. The annual combined budget for these productions is estimated at US\$50 million (Smith, 2018), which is less than the average budget for one Hollywood film.

The following section briefly reviews audience analysis research, with a focus on the shift from conceptualizing viewers as audiences to conceptualizing them as users.

Reception Studies From Audience to User

A survey of the literature on audience analysis shows a rich variety of approaches that draw from functional, psychoanalytic, critical, interpretive, and semiotic theories (Livingstone, 2013). Livingstone (1998) identifies seven trajectories in audience reception research. The first trajectory is Hall's (1980) paired concepts of encoding and decoding, where the focus is on the empirical examination of the process of understanding and interpreting media texts. The second is the uses and gratifications research, which confirms that audiences make deliberate choices to satisfy specific needs. The third trajectory refers to the concept of a "resistant audience." The fourth trajectory refers to the dismantling of the dominant screen theory tradition and the introduction of the concept of the "model reader." The fifth trajectory consists of feminist approaches to popular culture. The sixth trajectory refers to the "ethnographic turn," which shifts the focus away from the text to the context and involves an emphasis on the culture of everyday life (Livingstone, 1998, p. 240).

Finally, the seventh trajectory points to the death of the audience and the birth of the user (Jermyn & Holmes, 2006; Livingstone, 2013; Picone, 2017). This trajectory is particularly relevant to the current study. Picone (2017) argues that the term user is "medium agnostic" in that media content converges and diverges across digital services and platforms, so the focus must shift to the user and the modes of viewing/reading/writing/sharing habits afforded to them by the various platforms, devices, and screens. The term is also "scalable" in that people can be addressed both as individuals and as members of a collective audience. Finally, the term user is "non-linear" in that it circumvents the notion of the audience as merely receivers of content. It also circumvents the notion of "producers" (Bruns, 2008), as it implies the essentially productive aspects of media practices at the cost of concealing the consumptive ones.

This conceptualization of audiences as users has triggered interest in several phenomena in television research, such as binge watching and cord cutting. Binge watching is not a new phenomenon; it emerged when TV networks began to air program marathons (Merikivi, Bragge, Scornavacca, & Verhagen, 2019). Spangler (2013) defines binge watching as viewing several episodes of a program back-to-back in one sitting. Several authors situate binge watching within the framework of uses and gratifications (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015), addiction (Tukachinsky & Eyal, 2018), and narrative immersion (Conlin, Billings, & Averset, 2016). SVoD services have normalized binge watching as the preferred way of engaging with their content and technology (Jenner, 2016; Raikar, 2017). "Cord cutting" is the industry's term for those who cancel TV or cable subscriptions (Strangelove, 2015) and replace them with content available over the Internet which is either free or less expensive than content provided via cable or TV subscriptions. Another group is "cord-nevers," those who do not subscribe to commercial television or cable services and instead get their media diet from Netflix, Amazon Prime, and YouTube (Barker & Wiatrowski, 2017).

Domestication Theory

Domestication theory addresses the question of what happens when media technologies are introduced into a social system and how they are integrated into the practices of everyday life. Roger

Silverstone (1994) focuses on both the practical and the symbolic dimensions of the adoption and use of technologies. Silverstone (1994) defines domestication, referring primarily to television, as “the capacity of a social group . . . to appropriate technological artifacts and delivery systems into its own culture—its own spaces and times, its own aesthetic and its own functioning” (Silverstone, 1994, p. 98). For him, people’s engagement with television as a technology and its content is inseparable from the space-time contexts in which this engagement occurs. In other words, the meaning and significance of media technologies cannot be separated from how users shape and engage with the technology. He acknowledges that television is both a cultural artifact and a carrier of cultural meaning.

Silverstone (1994) adopts a constructivist view of technology. In line with the social shaping of technology theory, he does not consider technologies to be autonomous, endowed with the decisive agency of social change. Rather, technology is a product of social interaction, and the ways a technology is used cannot be understood without comprehending how that technology is embedded in its social context (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999).

Silverstone and Hirsch (2003) focused on the household as a complex social, political, and economic space that impacts both the significance of technologies, and the way technologies are used. Silverstone (1994) identifies several processes that take place when a technology is introduced into a household: appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion. Appropriation refers to the process of acquiring and adopting the technology; objectification refers to the placement of the technology within the home; incorporation refers to how the technology fits with the users’ routines and time structures; and conversion refers to how the technology reflects the identity and culture of the household.

Further developments of the theory include the notion of mutual domestication, which occurs when the users’ incorporation of the platform’s affordances shapes the users’ consumption habits (Siles, Espinoza-Rojas, Naranjo, & Tristán, 2019). Mutual domestication in the context of Netflix involves the dual process whereby Netflix’s affordances, such as algorithmic recommendations, personalize the relationship the users cultivate with Netflix and how the users convert this relationship into temporal-spatial reconfigurations of everyday life routines. While Siles et al. (2019) focused on the relationship between users and algorithms to examine the mechanisms through which mutual domestication takes place, this study focuses on the relationship between users, algorithms, and content.

This article applies domestication theory to examine Netflix in the Gulf countries with particular attention to incorporation, conversion, and mutual domestication. We focus primarily on how users, as individuals and small social groups (households), adopt Netflix’s affordances, such as its algorithmic personalization and recommendation systems, into their temporal-spatial routines, and how they engage with and negotiate its content to create their own symbolic meanings and social practices.

Methods

We employed in-depth semi-structured interviews, whereby we used a list of questions that covered specific topics but had some leeway to change the order of the questions and adjust the level and type of language (Berg, 2005). In-depth interviews are considered especially appropriate to engage the

interviewees in discussions about their everyday experiences and their interactions with Internet television as a cultural artifact (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). The sample criterion was purposive (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria are predefined characteristics, such as being an Arab national in one of the six Gulf countries, an urban and young adult, a female or male aged between 20 and 35, and a Netflix subscriber. Interviewing audiences who share the same ethnicity may evoke shared meanings and cultural experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2016). Half of the participants were single and lived with their parents; the other half were married and lived in their homes with their spouses and kids. We interviewed 18 participants residing in six Gulf countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. We used Arabic and English based on the preferred or spoken language of the interviewees. The interviews lasted from 40 to 70 minutes in length and aimed to explore their experiences, insights, and narratives. The interviews were conducted between January and May 2021. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews, approved by the Institutional Review Board, included a letter of informed consent. The letter entailed information on the purpose of the study and ensured confidentiality and anonymity. We hereby use fictitious names to refer to the participants.

Table 1. List of Participants.

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Country
Asma	22	Female	Student	UAE
Yusuf	27	Male	Accountant	UAE
Shahad	29	Female	Store manager	UAE
Mohanad	35	Male	Small business owner	UAE
Aisha	30	Female	PR executive	Kuwait
Shaikha	26	Female	Bank teller	Kuwait
Waleed	30	Male	Consultant	Kuwait
Amna	35	Female	Stay home mother	Qatar
Abdallah	28	Male	Student	Qatar
Mariam	34	Female	Management consultant	Oman
Ibrahim	34	Male	High school teacher	Oman
Hammad	30	Male	Bank employee	Oman
Abdulaziz	30	Male	Nurse	KSA
Shaima	20	Female	Student	KSA
Abderrahman	35	Male	Hotel manager	KSA
Zaina	32	Female	High school teacher	KSA
Shamma	28	Female	Administrative assistant	Bahrain
Ahmed	32	Male	Student	Bahrain

The texts were thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis which include: become familiar with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define themes, and write-up. Thematic analysis (TA) is particularly suitable for analyzing the experiences, perceptions, and understandings of how audiences adopt Netflix as a technology, engage with its content, and create their own symbolic meanings and social practices. We used the computer-assisted qualitative

data analysis software (CAQDAS) package NVivo (Version 12) to conduct a series of qualitative analyses. We exported the participants' responses into a dataset in NVivo. Unlike statistical software, one of the main functions of CAQDAS is to assist in the process of data analysis. While the software can explore word frequency and execute matrix coding, the interpretive aptitude of the researcher remains key in making decisions on identifying and coding themes (Golafshani, 2003).

NVivo was used to analyze the qualitative data by using the text search query of the most frequent words for the interview questions. Counting words provided analytical rigor, an audit trail, and increased legitimation; it also prevented the researchers from overweighting (Golafshani, 2003; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Before running the word frequency queries, we coded individual participants as unique cases and their demographics as case classifications across the datasets: age, gender, and geographic location.

After the codes were identified and collated, we constructed the themes based on their recurrence in the data. References to these themes were tagged and extracted. Guided by the findings from the literature review, we identified three themes: (a) users' adoption of the technology and its content as a form of users' agency, (b) modes of viewing habits in relation to platform affordances, and (c) localization and cultural relevance of Netflix content.

Findings and Analysis

Adoption of Netflix and its Affordances

The interviewees indicated that they were introduced to Netflix as early as 2016, the year of its entry into the Gulf market. Most spend, on average, one hour daily on weekdays and two to three hours on weekends watching Netflix, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, for more than two hours daily and four to five hours on weekends. Many have adopted Netflix as their primary medium for entertainment. Some have abandoned traditional TV altogether and have become what the industry labels "cord cutters." As Shamma, an administrative assistant from Bahrain, said, "once I started using Netflix, I cannot go back to regular TV programming where I have no control over when, how and what to watch." Abdallah, a student from Qatar, echoed the same sentiment with a stronger statement: "we're done with the tyranny of programmed TV." Programmed TV has become, to use Haddon's (2011) concept, "de-domesticated" in the sense that once a new technology serves people's needs better, people give up the use of the old technology.

The interviewees incorporated Netflix into their daily routines and activities as collective and individual practices. Once these routines become systematic and anchored within spatial and temporal processes, they become rituals. Couldry (2003) conceives rituals as "actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance . . . helps legitimate the underlying 'value' expressed in the idea that the media is our access point to our social center" (p. 2). The interviewees confirmed that Netflix occupied a space in their daily activities. Collective domestication includes setting up a place and time to engage in the ritual on a daily or weekly basis, which is a continuation of the same practice during the traditional and linear TV era. Amna, a stay-at-home mother from Qatar, said that she, her husband, and their 14-year-old son watch one hour of Netflix every day after dinner. They watch various episodes of the Arab comedy series to laugh together before her son goes to bed at 10 p.m. She said that on Friday

evenings, they include their 10-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son to watch a Disney movie during dinner, which consists of food delivery and homemade popcorn. She said, "a lot of the family discussion all week is about what we're going to watch on Friday and what food to order. This is how Netflix helps us organize some of our family activities."

At the individual level, the interviewees expressed their preference for watching alone, as their prior experiences had shown that watching shows with friends or siblings was more difficult and less fun, as they found it hard to negotiate what to watch. With traditional TV, watching TV was a family experience that fostered intimacy and closer personal ties. Given its affordances, Netflix offers unique and personalized content to each viewer, which has transformed TV watching for many users in the Gulf countries into a highly individualized experience. Yusuf, an accountant from the UAE, said that when *Black Mirror* appeared on Netflix, he watched one episode each night after dinner. He said the format of the series, consisting of separate sci-fi stories dealing with different technologies, "made me treat the series as short films. I can't binge on this; the point is to enjoy each episode and learn about Charlie Brooker's dystopian view of the future." Shaima, a student from Saudi Arabia, said:

I watch shows on my phone when I am cooking dinner or ironing my clothes. I used to watch YouTube videos, but since Netflix allows me to do the same on my phone anywhere I want, Netflix became my companion; it's like someone standing next to me telling me a story while I'm doing my chores.

The freedom Netflix affords viewers to choose when and what to watch explains the de-domestication of traditional programmed TV. Viewers organize their leisure time based on when they are ready to watch the shows, not when the shows are programmed to be aired.

Engaging With Personalization and Recommendation

For many interviewees, the decision to adopt Netflix was based on the perceived quality and diversity of the content and, more importantly, on the personalization afforded by the platform. Netflix provides the possibility of creating profiles and accounts. Mariam, a management consultant from Oman, said that each member of the family has a profile: hers, her husband's, and their 10-year-old daughter. She said that "it's not like we don't have similar tastes in films, we do have evenings where we watch things as a family, but it is nice that each one of us has their own profile because we do like different things to watch when we're alone." Zaina, a high school teacher from Saudi Arabia, said:

Having personalized profiles makes it easy for each person to get recommendations from Netflix based on our personal choices, and if we stop in the middle of an episode, it's easier to get back and continue watching from where we left off. It's somehow private and convenient.

Profiles and accounts seem to give users a sense of ownership over their consumption habits and represent a key instrument of attachment to the platform.

For the interviewees, one of the key benefits of having personalization is to receive appropriate recommendations, so they make sure to protect their profiles. Yusuf, an accountant from the UAE, explained the importance of having personal profiles. He said that he did not want his younger brother and sister to “pollute” his media consumption experience:

I am a big fan of sci-fi films and shows and I want Netflix to recommend similar shows when they come out, so I don't want my brother's love for comedies or my sister's love for crime series to pollute my profile. I don't want to see their tastes in film mixed up with mine, it's frustrating.

Amna, a stay-at-home mother from Qatar, said:

Netflix is the one thing I do for me when my husband and kids are out. When my kids use my profile, usually by mistake, I open my profile and what I see are kids shows and that bothers me. My profile is who I am, I want it to reflect my taste and I want the experience to be fun.

The recommendation system was a source of frustration for most of them. Users want to make sense of why they receive the recommendations Netflix deems appropriate for them. The lack of transparency in algorithmic recommendations makes it difficult to assess the impact of the recommendation system on the diversity of users' media consumption (Johnson, Sandvoss, & Grant, 2022). The interviewees see their personalization as part of a transaction with the platform whereby they provide Netflix with cues about their consumption habits, and as a result, Netflix must generate a more accurate understanding of their taste. Mohanad, a business owner in the UAE, said:

The recommendation is based on my viewing history, much like how YouTube works, but most of the time Netflix gets it wrong. I am not interested in what is trending or most popular, so I don't understand why Netflix keeps showing these categories to me on top of the screen.

Many Gulf countries have large communities of expatriates from different parts of the world. The UAE and Qatar, for example, consist of roughly 90% expats and 10% citizens. Therefore, what is trending or popular in these countries based on sociocultural data can be misleading. Other interviewees expected Netflix to identify their personal preferences more accurately. Abdulla, a high school teacher from Oman, said:

When my wife once used my profile to watch one of her Turkish series, I started receiving Turkish shows as a recommended category. I never watch these series, and Netflix should know better. There has to be some consistency in their recommendation system.

Most interviewees mentioned that they rely more on recommendations from friends and colleagues than on the platform's recommender system. Many of them engage in discussions about Netflix shows in face-to-face conversations and on their social media accounts. They also read online reviews before deciding to watch a particular show.

Localization and Cultural Relevance of Netflix Content

While many of Netflix's affordances are appreciated, such as personalization or control over one's own viewing habits, a widespread criticism among our interviewees was the prevalence of sexual content on the Netflix catalog, particularly the visuals or posters depicting the shows. This is an illustration of the phenomenon of cultural discount. While domestication reduces the cultural discount, it does not eliminate it, especially when it comes to issues of cultural and religious values, which are important for Gulf countries' audiences. The cultural value of Western media content diminishes once consumed by Arab viewers. Gulf countries are Muslim-conservative societies, and media laws are strict in matters of decency. Even films screened in theatres are subject to prior censorship, and sexual scenes are deleted before the film is made available to the public. However, Netflix remains exempted from these legal requirements, and audiences are left alone to deal with this on their own, reflecting the regulatory dilemma that transnational SVoD and other media content streamed online pose to both consumers and governing bodies at the local level. This is particularly a highly sensitive issue in the context of conservative Gulf societies, where overt sexual content remains taboo for the most part, with a few exceptions of pay TV content. On September 2022, Gulf countries initiated a move to censor LGBTQ content (The Guardian, 2022). At the time of writing, Netflix has not yet reacted to these demands.

In addition to the explicit scenes within the shows, the promotional posters on the platform could also be quite revealing. The interviewees said that they use the forward function to skip the scenes, but the posters remain there, which is troublesome for many of them when they open their profiles in front of their kids. Aisha, a public relations executive from Kuwait, said:

Netflix seems to be designed to be watched individually. When my 6-year-old boy opens his profile, all you see are cartoons and there is nothing sexual there. But when my husband and I open our accounts, we see all sorts of posters, and some of them are very sexual.

Asma, a graduate student from the UAE, said:

I stopped opening my profile when my parents are around because it is embarrassing for them and for me. Even PG 13 films sometimes have posters with couples kissing or women and men in swimsuits. I can't see that in the presence of my parents.

Shahad, a store manager in the UAE, drew attention to another sensitive cultural phenomenon that illustrates the importance of Straubhaar's notion of cultural proximity. She said that:

Most shows include scenes of funerals, and when I watch a Western show, usually the body is cremated and that is totally against my beliefs, and I usually press the forward button to avoid seeing such scenes of corpses being put in a cremator. We should honor the dead and not expose them to fire. When I watch an Arab or a Turkish show, the Islamic ritual of burial is followed and there is a sense of respect for the dead.

Turkey, as a Muslim country, is culturally more familiar with Arab culture (Berg, 2017). Users exercise their agency, and they adapt the technology (in this case, the forward button) to cope with their cultural sensitivities.

Research shows that most Arab audiences prefer to watch content in Arabic (Dennis et al., 2019; Ksiazek & Webster, 2008). Whether the Arabic shows are Netflix's original productions or not, the interviewees said that all Arabic content seems to be of better quality once cataloged on Netflix. They prefer them for their intense narrative styles, multifaceted storytelling, realistic characters, and more importantly, for their cultural sensitivity. Asma, a UAE student, said, "Netflix is unique in providing engaging content and entertainment. I find the characters to be different and unique than in shows produced by traditional Arab TV or film industries." The interviewees also liked the content because the shows do not include nudity or indecent language, which makes the content suitable for family viewing. Commenting on *Grand Hotel* (Habib, 2016), a newly added Egyptian series, Abdurrahman, a hotel manager from Saudi Arabia, "the show is clean, no kissing, no bad language, I can sit and enjoy the show with my family. The cast is amazing; the production quality is great; we get to see talented actors in very nice clothes and nice locations and settings, and the story is compelling."

The interviewees shared the same sentiment with regard to profanity and sexual content and added the ease with which they identified with the characters and the storylines in local productions. Mariam, a management consultant from Oman, said:

I can relate to the men/women relationships, the sense of decency and grace that characterizes these relationships in our societies. We don't just kiss and make love when we like someone; that's what I see in Western shows on Netflix. In Arabic shows, the characters wait till they're married, and I can relate to that. Doing things while following Islamic practice is important for me.

Discussion and Conclusion

Television is more than a medium of information and entertainment. Scholarship on television, from Hall (1980) and Williams (1974) to Livingstone (1998) and Straubhaar (1991), reminds us that "nothing about television is ever just about television" (Bennett & Strange, 2011, p. 4). Domestication theory continues to be a useful conceptual framework for understanding how television is adopted, negotiated, and incorporated into people's everyday lives.

The findings show that the processes of adoption, conversion, and mutual domestication remain significant. The decision to adopt Netflix is based on its perceived superiority over traditional TV in terms of its technological properties and affordances and the quality of its content. In the process of domesticating Netflix, the interviewees have "de-domesticated" traditional TV and turned it into "cord-cutter" and "cord-nevers." In particular, the personalization properties afforded by the platform made it attractive to the interviewees and seemed to have disrupted their consumption habits and created new ones.

In the context of the Gulf countries, where collectivism and conformism are core cultural dimensions, TV consumption is both an individual and a communal ritual. Access to Netflix allowed the interviewees to express themselves as unique individuals and media consumers. As many interviewees said, they prefer to watch TV alone, and they prefer to keep their personal profiles intact; they do not want family members to “pollute” their Netflix experience. However, some households maintained their family rituals of shared media consumption over the weekend and, in some instances, daily around a meal.

Mutual domestication involves a dual process. On the one hand, the interviewees reported that they make full use of Netflix’s affordances, such as algorithmic personalization and recommendations. Conversely, these affordances shape the relationship that the users cultivate with Netflix and translate it into new temporal-spatial reconfigurations of everyday life routines. The interviewees gave accounts of how Netflix has been incorporated into the interviewees’ daily routines and activities and seems to have become central in people’s daily lives. At the same time, the platform’s affordances shape users’ consumption habits and “turn them into ideal consumers through its algorithms” (Siles et al., 2019, p. 500).

The interviewees’ concerns over issues of public morality are an illustration of the entry of a de-territorialized digital company into a territorialized media market with audiences that have different preferences, expectations, and cultural norms. This applies to content as much as it applies to technological affordances. Concerns over issues of public morality confirm what media scholars have long observed about “local audience pull” (Khalil, 2016). The interviewees criticized the pervasiveness of sexual content on Netflix. Instead of pulling out, the interviewees gave accounts of how matters of decency are important to them, and while the personalization properties partly solved this problem, the interviewees remained alert to this issue when they engaged with the technology as individuals and as small groups. They used the personalization function to separate their profiles from their kids, and they used the forward function to skip unwanted scenes. Although the amount of local content was minimal, viewers were able to harness the Netflix catalog and its technical affordances to negotiate the content they deemed culturally sensitive.

The recommendation system seems to have been built with the assumption that the target population is culturally and ethnically homogenous. For the interviewees who live in countries with large populations of expatriates, such as the UAE and Qatar, the categories of “trending” and “popular” can be quite misleading. In the UAE, the percentage of Indian and Pakistani expatriates is over 40%. When Netflix recommends Bollywood films to an Arab viewer based on what is trending, the recommendation system becomes a source of frustration for many interviewees. The availability of Arab content on Netflix could partly solve this problem. In 2019, Todd Yellin, Vice President of Products at Netflix, promised to produce more original content in Arabic (Gupta, 2019). Considering that the market for SVoD services is competitive and that the amount of Arabic content on Netflix is minimal, the extent to which Netflix’s promise of bridging the content divide will go in favor of its Gulf audiences remains to be seen.

Although its share of the market is still limited, Netflix has triggered new forms of production, innovative delivery systems, and emerging consumption patterns in the Gulf. As the presence of SVoD services is likely to intensify, traditional television in the Gulf needs to find suitable formats to broadcast personalized content to its audiences.

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