

Effect of the Egyptian drama on the Arab youth through a realistic study of the Egyptian serial "The Fugitive"

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the effect of drama on young adults in the MENA region and explore the degree to which tarsier film Company was successful in starting positive intellectual and emotional responses in the arabic speaking world to promote values such as: pluralism, human rights, women`s rights, and fairness in the criminal justice system while taking a stand against the use of religion to promote violent extremism.

This study was commissioned by el-Tayseer Film Company, in partnership with the US government as they prepared to create a sequel for the highly successful 2008 production "*The Fugitive*" which aired during Ramadan. Since the producers and writers of the "*The Fugitive II*" planned to rely upon the same strategies used in the original series to create a drama that was both highly entertaining and embedded with key social messages, this study focused on the original series to gauge the success of the writers and producers in promoting cross-cultural understanding and increasing awareness of key human rights issues.

The study was completed in advance of post-production work on "*The Fugitive II*", so that findings on the original series could inform the sequel, if necessary, to ensure that the production is relevant to young adults in the MENA and able to effectively relay social, cultural, and religious messages of tolerance and cross- cultural understanding.

Keywords: MENA region, the fugitive, human rights, Egyptian drama, Arab youth

Introduction

The data collected in this study had two primary objectives. First, it was designed to enhance current attitudes among young adults about important social and cultural questions in the MENA region as well as obtain general information about their television watching habits and preferences. Secondly, the study was to explore the Egyptian drama, namely "*The Fugitive*" (=Al Hareba in arabic) through analysis of audience opinions to discover not only if they found the series entertaining and relevant, but also to understand whether the underlying social messages made an impact on this population.

Bothe objectives are critical because they provide specific feedback about how this particular audience responded to a previous production of el-Tayseer Film Company supplemented by crucial statistical information about the television watching preferences and habits of young adults the MENA. Each of these objectives may be used to ensure that "*The Fugitive II*" is not only entertaining and relevant to young adults, but is also played on their favorite channels during times they are most likely to watch.

Scope of the study

Thousand (5.000) young adults, aged 19-35 from the MENA, were asked to complete detailed questionnaires ^[1] to ensure the study equally represented the opinions of all regions of the MENA, the area was divided into four regions with 1.250 participants polled in each region.

Regional designations were primarily based upon geographic location, population, and dialects of Arabic language. Some nations were not a natural fit in any particular region (e.g. Sudan) and were placed in regional designations where their

results could be most proportionately represented. The regions are comprised of:

- Region 1: The Gulf & Arabian peninsula (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iraq, Yemen).
- Region 2: the Levant (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan).
- Region 3: Egypt.
- Region 4: the Maghreb (Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania).

Methods

The study was conducted in three phases. The initial phase focused on distributing surveys throughout the MENA on the Internet. The second phase focused on gathering additional information through Face- to- face interviews and focus groups to better gauge the changes and attitudes of the young adults as they watched the series and also to discuss a series of broad questions specific to particular regions. The final stage of the study assessed the findings from the participants and determined the degree to which drama television series are effective way of reaching young adults in the MENA and the degree to which el-Tayseer Film Company is effective in engaging this audience.

The psychometric Likert scale was used to assess participant`s attitudes after interviews and focus groups, while the SPSS (Statistical package for the Social Sciences) data mining software was used to analyze all quantitative results from the surveys.

Findings

Results of the survey and focus groups are detailed here each

of the key findings will be assessed in the next section (Analysis).

Questions posed to respondents covered four broad areas:

1. General television watching habits, preferences, and behavior.
2. General perceptions and opinions about key human rights issues.
3. Ability of drama to educate viewers about issues of social, cultural or political interest.
4. Understanding and perceptions of key social, political, and cultural factors addressed in the television series, "*The Fugitive*".

Findings 1: General Television Watching Habits, Preferences, and Behavior

The respondents polled from each region had similar television watching habits and preferences. The vast majority prefer to watch television on satellite channels rather than local or national stations.

While watching television, it is clear that this demographic watches Arabic speaking television series more than any other kind of programming. The second most popular type of programs to watch on television are foreign films, while music video channels and daily programs (in Arabic) tied as the third most popular type of programs (Figure 1).

In addition, roughly 60% of respondents television is between 7-11 p.m. (Figure 2) Overall television viewing behavior and preferences did not vary significantly between regions, indicating that 18-35 year olds are consistent in their preferred times, channels and programs throughout the region.

[Figures 1 and 2 around here]

Findings 2: General Perceptions and Opinions about Key Human Rights Issue

Responders were asked a series of questions about their views on the MENA region specifically regarding issues such as gender equality, corruption, violence, the judicial process, freedom of expression, health care, and unemployment.

Interviewees were asked to rank a list of sixteen key issues in the region in order from most to least important. Figure 3 reveals the outcome of the responses. Terrorism equality for women, democracy and unlawful arrest / persecution was the key issues identified by the youth who were polled.

The young adults were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of specific human rights questions the key results are depicted graphically in figures from 4 to 7. Responders across all four regions answered consistently to nearly all of the questions. The majority of youth could provide at least a cursory definition of human rights, and shared views on issues of women's rights, human rights, the healthcare system and the electoral process. Specifically they agreed that women did not have equal rights or access to education in the region. They further agreed that human rights are violated inside prisons (Figure 6). They deem their healthcare systems as unacceptable and that in their opinion; elections in the region are not free and fair (Figure 7).

[Figures 4 to 7 around here]

Findings 3: Ability of Drama to Educate and Effect Change

Respondents to the survey indicated a strong belief that drama

can be used to generate awareness about key issues in the MENA, but they were much less confident about whether or not drama could directly solve these issues.

These findings were reiterated in focus groups where the young adults listed the following as important elements for Arabic series wishing to educate and effect change in the MENA. The focused groups found that:

- Dramas must be realistic and honestly reflect key issues of concern for the region without exaggeration.
- Ideally, dramas would include real events (e.g. the War in Iraq) and dramatic depictions of real-life struggles and situations.
- Story lines should be set in the present day since this has far greater impact than historical dramas meant to metaphorically apply to the present.

It is critical that audience polls are used at regular intervals to ensure story lines are relevant to young adults. However, there should be greater awareness of cultural differences within the MENA region incorporated into dramas.

In addition, focus groups discussed the ability of the Arabic media (news and entertainment) to tackle human rights. The result of these discussions was the overarching sense of importance that human rights awareness be addressed in a realistic, non-sensational way so that people could understand the more nuanced aspects of what human rights are and how they are universally applicable. They indicated the importance of addressing a broad range of human rights issues rather than focusing on only one to maximize awareness. Finally, the focus groups wanted to see media outlets to work. Drama's issues could be aired at a similar time, and daily talk shows could address these issues with the actors and actresses.

Findings 4: Perceptions of key social, political, and cultural factors addressed in the "*The Fugitive*".

Over 87% of youth who watched the series, viewed it on one of three satellite stations, namely "Panorama Drama", "Al-Hayat" and "Dubai". The remainder of youth tended to view the series on regional satellite stations that also aired the series.

After gauging where the young adults watched "*The Fugitive*" they were then asked a series of questions about the effectiveness of the series. Interviewees were asked to rank on a scale of "most important" to "least important" the social, economic and political issues addressed. On average, the majority of participants felt that "*The Fugitive*" portrayed the realities of Arab's life accurately. While it is clear that many issues resonated with the youth in various ways, three themes dominated the results across all regions. These were: the treatment of Arabs living as ex-patriots abroad, human rights and terrorism. Not all of the problems were equally recognized everywhere. For example: while human rights, expatriates problems, youth problems abroad, addiction, and greed were stressed in Egypt, The Gulf and The Levant, these same topics went all but unrecognized in the Maghreb, where the themes of terrorism and violence dominated.

In focus group discussions, participants shared views about how the key themes could be enhanced for future productions and determined that there were three primary ways this could be facilitated:

- The public need to be made more aware of the important social messages in the series. The youth suggested that

televised discussions about the major themes of the series (including important cast members) should occur before and during the airing of the series to generate "buzz" about the series and its aims. Universities should also be told about upcoming series such as this so that students are aware and it can be used as an educational tool.

- Studies should continue to gauge the ability of the series to relay its message to youth.
- Human rights should be defined regularly in dialogue throughout the series.

Additionally, the focus groups discussed the actors in the series, specifically Tayseer Fahmy, who plays the "fugitive" and Mohammed Riyad who plays the role investigator of the FBI in Seattle. All participants in the focus groups recognized both actors. They commented extensively on the value and importance of having recognizable, well-known celebrities such as these in the drama. They felt this was an additional way that young viewers would be enticed to watch.

When asked about the overall effectiveness of the series addressing the key issues and enhancing their own understanding about regional concerns, 75% of overall respondents felt that series very effectively addressed the key issues and a further 23% felt the series "partially" addressed the issues. Less than 2% of respondents in the regions get that the issues were not addressed effectively (Figure 8).

[Figure 8 around here]

About 67% of the young adults polled in the study greatly enjoyed the series, ranking it as "excellent" or "good" while 29% said it was "mediocre" or "okay." 4% of respondents did find series "weak" or "uninteresting" (Figure 9).

[Figure 9 around here]

Results

The previously mentioned findings are classified in two broad categories. The first category assesses all the general observations about television watching habits, understanding of human rights issues, and the use of drama as a tool to effect change. The second category of analysis will hone in specifically on "*The Fugitive*" to identify the significance of the specific feedback provided about the series.

Category 1

A. General Television Watching Habits, Preferences and Behavior.

To capitalize on the 'youth' audience, the findings of this study unequivocally indicate that the Arabic serial drama, played on satellite television between 7:00-11:00 p.m. will capture the largest pool of youth adults. Since cable television does not exist in the MENA, satellite is its equivalent.

Given that nearly 30% of the young adults polled indicated they preferred Arabic series over a large number of other types of programming, it is clear that this medium is an effective mechanism to reach this target audience, and no changes should be made to the broadcast mechanisms. In addition, the preferred time for television broadcasters to air Arabic drama series aligns with the watching habits of youth in the region.

Thus, the findings indicate that young adults are watching Arabic drama series, they prefer watching television at the times the programs air currently, and to maximize access to young adults, series should be aired on satellite networks rather than national and local stations.

B: General Perceptions about Human Rights Issues

Over 60% of respondents in all regions of the MENA were able to provide a basic definition of human rights. Despite this majority, approximately one-third (1,500) of those polled were unable to provide a basic definition of human rights and lacked an understanding of the term or what it represents. This significant number illustrates the need for more education and awareness about what fundamental human rights entail and underscores the importance of education and communication on this issue throughout the region.

Answers to specific human rights-related questions illustrated that overall majority of respondents have a sound general understanding of some of the key issues, there are interesting variations from region to region. These variations indicate that despite the fact that the majority of respondent can define human rights, there is a great deal of additional education that needs to occur. For example, gender inequality is often cited as a key human rights issue in the MENA, but in the Gulf and Levant, nearly 30% felt that there was gender equality in the region and in Egypt and the Maghreb, this percentage rose closer to 50%. Bearing in mind that roughly 70% of respondents were male, this perception is both interesting and significant because it implies a need for greater education about gender equality.

This seeming gap between perception and reality is further underlined when observing the responses of the young adults polled when asked if the genders have equal access to education (Figure 5). Nearly half of those from the Gulf said 'yes', that women have equal access to education as men. The Gulf focuses on women's rights campaigns from the United Nation and non-profit organizations around the world that frequently site the challenges women face in obtaining equality in the workplace and in education. This is widely known to be an issue this particular region, making it interesting that roughly 50% of the young adults from the Gulf viewed things differently. It is also interesting to note that of all the regions polled for the study, the Gulf had the lowest percentage of female respondents.

It is evident that while there is a general understanding of human rights, in practice, youth across the MENA region could benefit from more education and information about human rights issues. Dramas focusing on the nuances of human rights, what constitutes a 'right' and what barriers keep these rights from being achieved will be of great educational value to all youth in the region.

C: General Ability of Drama to Function as an Educational / Awareness Tool for Social, Political and Cultural issues

The individuals in the sample felt that television alone cannot solve social and human rights challenges. They did recognize television drama as an important tool to be used in conjunction with political and economic reform. The feeling was that entertaining drama, when done well, creates an awareness that can lead to social change.

Category 2

Specific Understanding and / or perceptions of the key issues addressed in "*The Fugitive*" can be analyzed as follows:

The majority of the poll data retrieved from the respondents echoed the general results. All of the youth viewed "*The*

Fugitive" on satellite stations, and the fact that "Panorama Drama" and "Al-Hayat" were the stations most viewed is not surprising since stations aired the series during Ramadan at 9:00 p.m. The other stations aired the series either during non-peak times or after Ramadan.

As stated in entitled "Identification of Issues Addressed in the Series" there are some interesting results. Positively, it is clear that the youth adults grasped many of the issues tackled in the series, indicating that the producers and writers of *The Fugitive* were highly effective in delivering messages of social change to their target audience.

The fact that there were inconsistencies in the messages that each region identified as the most pertinent indicate one of two things:

- The inconsistency could imply that while el-Tayseer Film Company made the audience generally aware of the issues it was addressed. No one issue was addressed with sufficient focus to create cohesion among the respondents.

Suggestion: To avoid confusion of the most important message, el-Tayseer Film Company should ensure that while they continue to create drama that promotes positive social change, they focus only on a few key messages to ensure that their messages are not diluted. While this is possibility, the fact that three of the four regions identified terrorism, the image of Arabs abroad, democracy and human rights as the key issues in the series, indicates that the majority was clear about the priority topics.

- It is also possible that respondents related to (and therefore remembered) issues that are most relevant to them, based on their living circumstances. If respondents reacted to the series in this way, it is not surprising that those polled within the same region would have shared experiences/views and also that there would be regional variations. In the Maghred, for example, terrorism is an issue that featured more prominently in the minds of the young viewers than elsewhere, indicating that this Issue is perceived as a higher priority for youth in that region, thereby making them more 'tuned in' to the aspects of *The Fugitive* that dealt with terrorism.

Suggestion: If this second possibility was the reason for regional variations in the results, el-Tayseer was highly effective in creating a drama series that educated youth about important social issues that resonated with the entire MENA region and they should not alter their approach.

Based on the fact that so many of the youth disagreed about what the key issues in the drama series were, it is not surprising that nearly one quarter of all the responders found that the series only 'partially' addressed these issues. However, 75% of those polled agreed that *The Fugitive* addressed the key issues effectively. Less than 2% felt the series did not address the key issues. With the vast majority indicating that key issues were to some extent addressed in the series, there is little doubt that el-Tayseer was successful in relaying the desired message to the audience.

Finally, slightly less than 70% of the respondents felt that the series was "excellent /good" indicating that the series successfully captured the youth audience. They recognized the lead actors and felt that celebrity status of cast members was a key factor in recruiting young adult views. The youth also responded well to the fact that the series addressed real

life concerns in a realistic manner and this served to both hold their attention and enhance the credibility of the storyline. This fact, combined with the degree to which the youth were able to identify a number of the key issues addressed in the series, indicates that watched were entertained, understood the social messages, and are likely to watch again.

The focus groups strongly encouraged that additional advertising for the series, focused at young people, in addition to televised discussions about the key issues featuring the lead actors / actresses would enhance awareness of the key issues the series wishes to highlight. This could also be used as a tool to ensure that the audience was focused on the right set of issues.

Conclusions

Issues such as terrorism and human rights are both profound complex. Societies differ in their perceptions and handling of these important issues. This fact makes it critical that communication methods and strategies must continue to be devised to address any and all emerging gaps.

In the MENA region in particular, these issues are vital. The Arabic drama is an unusual, yet powerful tool that can be used to educate and inform young adults in the MENA region about these important issues. This study found conclusively that the youth of the region watch and enjoy this form of entertainment, that they enjoy dramas (such as *The Fugitive*) that combine traditional fast. Paced, soap-opera style drama that is laced with relevant social and political messages, and they will understand the issues that are addressed through this form of medium.

Although el-Tayseer has already been very effective, to further improve its ability to relate to this young audience, they should work to ensure that their dramas are aired during the 7:00-11:00 Pm time period, during periods when the youth are most likely to watch (such as during religious or school holidays). In addition, to ensure that the key messages of the series are relayed clearly, they should have televised discussions featuring the lead actors/actresses prior to the airing of the series to generate awareness and excitement about the production.

The difficulties cited in this study and identified by the respondents are not going away easily. The majority of revelations are encouraging. Young people are increasingly developing awareness of crucial issues of social justice and cross-cultural understanding. The dramatic Arabic television series has a clear and important role to play in continuing this positive trend.

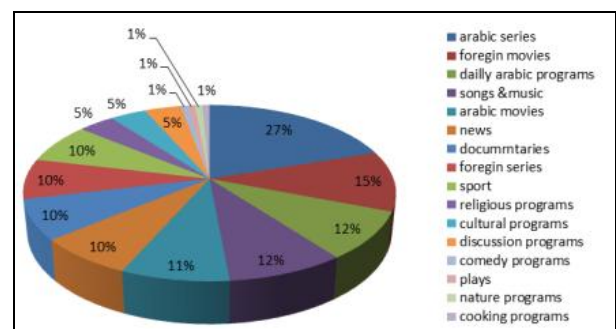


Fig 1: Preferred television programming

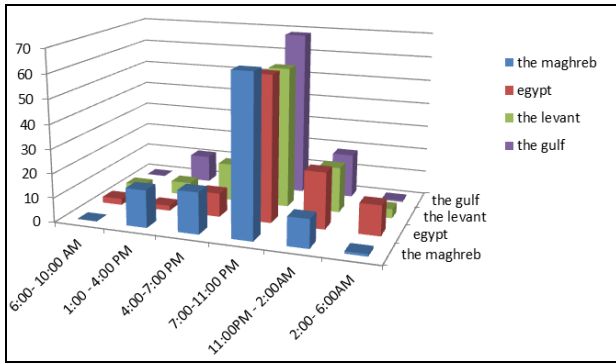


Fig 2: preferred times to watch television

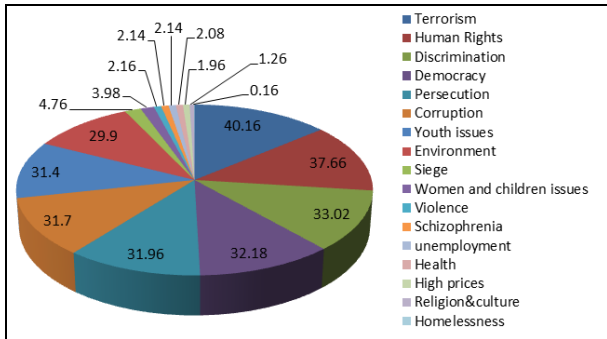


Fig 3: Assessment of key issues in the MENA region

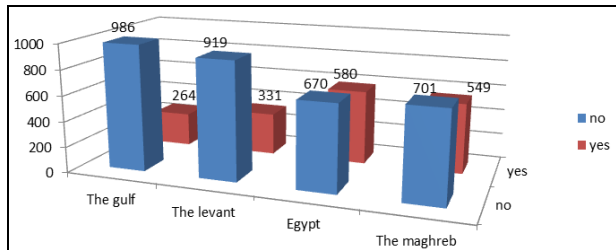


Fig 4: Gender equality in the region

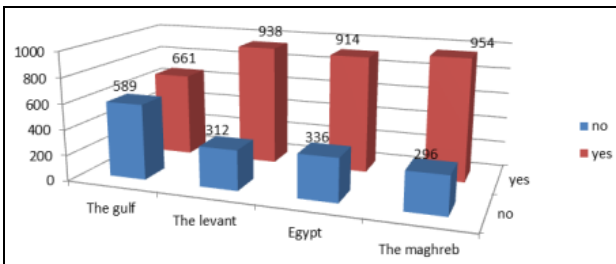


Fig 5: Women have equal access to education

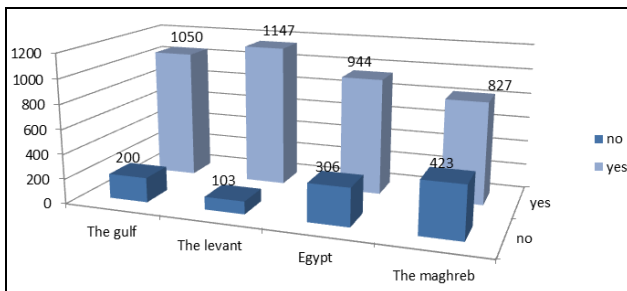


Fig 6: Human rights are violated inside prison

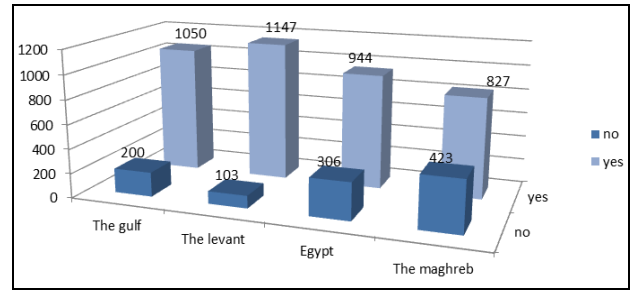


Fig 7: Elections are fair and transparent

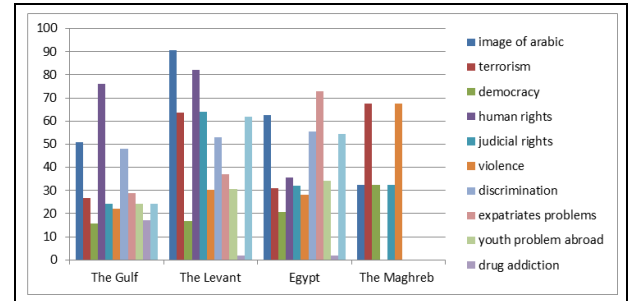


Fig 8: Identification of issues addressed in the series

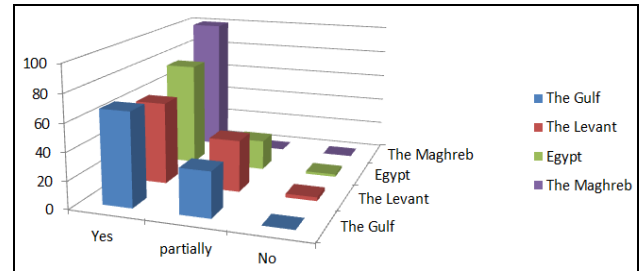


Fig 9: Did the series effectively address the key issues?

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