



Globalization of Hollywood: Analyzing the Influence of American Films on the Culture of Arab Youth

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Abstract

This preliminary study explores the influence of Hollywood (American) movies on the cultural identity of Arab youth. The global dominance of Hollywood has led to the widespread distribution of its movies worldwide, resulting in the influence of American culture and values on audiences across different societies and cultures, including in the Arab region. As such, Hollywood movies could have contributed to shaping the cultural beliefs, values, and behaviors of Arab youth. This study aims to uncover the extent of Hollywood movies' influence on the cultural identities of Arab youth and their perceptions of the West. Drawing on the Cultural Imperialism Theory, this study employed a quantitative method using an online questionnaire, which yielded a total of 54 responses. The findings show that the influence of Hollywood movies on Arab youths' beliefs and behaviors is limited. This study contributes to the discussion of globalization and the role of the media in shaping cultural attitudes and behaviors.

Keywords: Cultural imperialism, Hollywood movies, Arab youth, Cultural identity.

1 Background of the study

Cultural Imperialism is one of the modern phenomena that the world has been exposed to continuously over the years. Cultural Imperialism is a theory that has been presented by the American author and media critic, Herbert Schiller in 1973 (Khan et al., 2020). In this theory, Schiller has argued that Western culture has a huge impact on the people of Third World countries to the extent of destroying their own cultural identity (Khan et al., 2020).

Cultural Imperialism can be defined as an expansion of the power of a state or nation outside of its geographical borders. In other words, it is the use of power to impose the stronger nations' will or authority over the weaker ones. This has ramifications for geographical, political, economic, social, religious, and cultural issues (Godsgift & Obukoadata, 2008). Furthermore, the theory supposed that the Western nations dominate the media and this has a significant impact on the Third World countries by transmitting Western values and culture to them. The idea also contends that people relate to what they see on television and make comparisons to their own life (Azab, 2021).

In the modern world, Cultural Imperialism can be called Media Imperialism; where, the United States of America (USA) has the lion's share of the dominance of the media around the world. According to residents of several nations, American books, television shows, music, and movies are very popular around the world, consequently, countries such as Canada, Spain, and France have set restrictions on how much foreign content may be transmitted to the local people through these countries broadcasting systems (Khattak et al., 2012).

A huge team player and contributor to the American media dominance is Hollywood. Hollywood cinematic production is one of the most influential soft power tools of the USA. It is a very powerful tool for promoting American culture throughout the world (Fannia, 2022). Hollywood movies typically portray American society as being superior to other societies in terms of how individuals live their lives (Fannia, 2022). The changes that take place in young people's moral standards throughout the world are also influenced by Hollywood culture. Attitudes, community values, lifestyle, language, and ideologies change over time, however, this transformation happens gradually rather than rapidly (Fannia, 2022).

The effects of globalization on Arab countries have been complicated, mainly related to the religious and cultural aspects. While globalization has brought about increased interconnectedness and diversity, it has also posed challenges to traditional religious beliefs. It was reported that many Arab youths continue to maintain a strong attachment to their faith, despite having reservations about some religious restrictions (Shahrour, 2019). This contradiction emerges from individual needs to balance their freedom of

expression with the limitations set by the concepts of Halal (permissible) and Haram (forbidden) (Shahrour, 2019).

The value of cultural, social, and economic systems of foreign content that are shown on television are typically produced in environments that are very different from the comparable systems in the country in which they are presented (Alghamdi & Bajnaid, 2019). When compared to young people in other developed countries, Arab youth are today lost and confused. They are faced with the notion of Westernization and believe that in order to survive, they must be contemporary and have modern tastes (Almaswari & Khan, 2016).

Stereotyping reduces global cultural diversity and hinders nations from addressing their local issues effectively based on their unique struggles, historical experiences, and current situation. (Saleh, 2022). Hubert Vedrine, the French Minister of Culture, criticized Hollywood for stereotyping culture and attempting to impose American cultural dominance on the rest of the globe. Despite the fact that France and America both share the Western culture, the French Minister of Culture expressed his concerns about the impact of "Americanization" on global culture on peoples' capacity to advance and grow. The intellectuals of the developing nations that have been exposed to Western colonialism for the past 2 centuries have the right to speak loudly about the threat that colonialism poses to their nations' futures and their ability to liberate themselves from dependence on the West (Saleh, 2022).

According to cultural imperialism scholars, non-Western cultures, particularly those from developing nations, frequently lose their traditional values and cultural identities when exposed to Western media (Chen & Shen, 2021). Cultural Imperialism can destroy Third World countries culturally; Western media may misrepresent other cultures and, in certain situations, cause the extinction of indigenous cultures in developing nations, which results in homogeneity (Chen & Shen, 2021).

The objective of this study is to uncover the potential influence of Hollywood movies on the beliefs and behaviors of Arab youths residing in Malaysia. It is possible that those living abroad may reinforce their current identities and maintain strong ties to their culture, but others may change their social and personal identities as a result of exposure to the new culture (Alfurayh & Burns, 2020). By examining the cultural impact of Hollywood movies on Arab youth living abroad, scholars may gain insights into the possible effects of Western media on the cultural identity of Arab youth in the broader sense.

2 Literature Review

In one of his speeches, Mahatma Gandhi remarked,

“The greatest invention of the United States of America is Hollywood, because it makes people believe what is not true” (Allal, 2010).

Hollywood films are very popular worldwide and generate more revenue overseas than in the USA itself (Zeddami, 2016). According to UNESCO, 85% of films shown worldwide are produced in Hollywood (Zeddami, 2016). Hollywood movies dominate the box offices of many foreign countries and in the year 2006, film rentals from foreign countries amounted to more than 9 billion US Dollars (Nyarko et al., 2018).

Hollywood has an undeniable influence on several aspects of the lives of viewers worldwide, including those of the Arab world. Hollywood's global influence has led to a large distribution of American films throughout the Arab world, not to mention that those films are dubbed and translated into multiple languages including the Arabic language to be launched worldwide (Bari & Jabeen, 2020). Consequently, the films have had a substantial impact on the cultural aspect of the lives of Arab youth, influencing their attitudes, behaviors, ideologies, and beliefs.

The audience of Hollywood movies generally takes in political and social values such as freedom, democracy, individualism, and equality, particularly those who are young or considered as youth (Azab, 2021). They readily absorb what they see in the movies without critically assessing or evaluating it (Azab, 2021). Normalizing those behaviours is a way of influencing and transforming the values and manners of the Arabic society. As a result, it is crucial to carefully examine and filter the values that any society promotes, and to be aware of the implications involved (Azab, 2021).

The influence of Hollywood movies on youth can impact various aspects of behavior, including food intake habits (Maisuwong, 2012; Khan et al., 2020), language preferences (Abdulrahim et al., 2009), attire choices (Abdulrahim et al., 2009), romantic relationships (Alghamdi & Bajnaid, 2019; Alardawi, 2020), and feelings toward their own culture (Almaswari & Khan, 2016). Hollywood movies frequently depict characters consuming low-carbohydrate or fast-food meals from American brands like McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) (Maisuwong, 2012). Khan et al. (2020) found that 68% of the participating students in their study were interested in the eating style of Hollywood movie actors and actresses. Meanwhile, 75% of the students agreed that they like to go to McDonald's, KFC and Pizza Hut with their friends to spend their time there.

With regard to language, it is common nowadays that English words used in Hollywood movies are picked up by youth and adopted into their daily spoken language. For example, Abdulrahim et al. (2009) found that although Kuwaiti youth are native Arabic speakers, they use many English words in their daily conversations, mixing the Arabic and English languages while speaking. They believe that using English language in their conversations would be a sign of modernity (Abdulrahim et al., 2009).

The influence of American culture on clothing across the globe has been significant. American fashion trends and brands have gained widespread acceptance and have become a prominent part of international fashion scenes. For instance, many Kuwaiti

youth prefer to dress like what they see in the movies and television, i.e., they prefer to wear jeans and t-shirts (Abdulrahim et al., 2009). This suggests that the reach and impact of American media, particularly through movies and television, could extend beyond mere entertainment, shaping fashion choices and preferences among youth.

American TV shows play a considerable role in promoting ideas about romantic relationships. A study conducted by Alghamdi & Bajnaid (2019) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia examined the impact of the American TV show “How to Get Away with Murder” on Saudi youth. The findings indicated that, while the participants tended to accept romantic relationships, they refused to accept infidelity (Alardawi, 2020). The highlight of sexual content in Hollywood movies and TV cannot be ignored. Alardawi (2020) indicated that despite the sexual content presented in the “Game of Thrones” TV series, the Saudi youth still watch it. These findings illustrate the complex dynamics between cultural values, media influence, and the choices made by individuals when consuming such content.

Prolonged exposure to Hollywood movies could gradually instill a feeling of loath and shame in the unconscious minds of the Arab youth towards their own culture, leading them to abandon their own traditions and values (Almaswari & Khan 2016). The portrayal of Arab culture in such movies reinforces negative stereotypes, depicting it as ignorant and reactionary. As such, Arab youth are drawn towards the more free-form and liberal aspects of Western culture (Almaswari & Khan, 2016).

The literature presented here demonstrates that American movies and TV shows have the power to influence Arab youths’ beliefs and behaviors, and impact how they see their own culture and feel about it. However, more studies are required to fully comprehend the extensive influence of those movies on cultural identity and its implications.

3 Methodology

3.1 Sampling

This study is a preliminary investigation aimed at exploring the potential impact of Hollywood movies on Arab youth, particularly those living in Malaysia. Malaysia is known for its multicultural society, with a significant population of Arab students studying in the country. Exploring the perceptions of Arab youth living in Malaysia provides insights into the intersection of Arab culture and global influences.

Non-probability sampling was employed, and an online survey was distributed among the first author’s personal and professional contacts. The Malaysian National Youth Development Policy (NYDP) 1997 defines youth as individuals within the age range of 15 to 40 years (Islamic Development Bank, 2019). However, in line with legal and ethical considerations, only individuals who are 18 years old and above have been

reached out to. A total of 54 complete and usable surveys were received (Male 64.8%; Female 35.2%), (18 - 24 years old 52%; 25 - 34 years old 37%; 35 - 40 years old 11%), with the nationality of the respondents presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' Nationality

Country	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Egypt	29	53.7%
Saudi Arabia	6	11.1%
Syria	5	9.3%
Palestine	4	7.4%
Yemen	3	5.6%
Iraq	3	5.6%
Sudan	2	3.7%
Oman	1	1.9%
Tunisia	1	1.9%
TOTAL	54	100%

3.2 Questionnaire Design & Data Analysis

The questionnaire included questions about the respondents' perceptions of Hollywood movies and statements on how those films might have impacted their beliefs and behaviors. Specifically, it covered aspects pertaining to their food intake habits, language preferences, attire choices, romantic relationships, and feelings toward their own culture, with five items assessing each aspect. The items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with one open-ended question to describe the reason for their preference or non-preference for Hollywood movies. Basic descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data from the surveys.

4 Findings

The findings indicate that a majority of the respondents (90.7%) watch Hollywood movies, and a significant portion among them (81.5%) expressed a preference for Hollywood movies over films produced in their own country. The main reason reported for this preference was the high production quality, as reflected in responses such as "More attractive, exciting, and better quality", "High quality, better production, great storylines with talented actors", and "Professionalism". However, despite the favorable response towards Hollywood movies, many also agreed that such films often perpetuate stereotypes and misrepresentations of different cultures (61%).

In terms of the influence of Hollywood movies on food intake habits, the findings suggest a limited to no impact. A significant number of respondents (33%, 24%, and 13% respectively) answered 'neutral', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree' to the statement "Watching Hollywood movies often influences my cravings for certain types of food."

Similarly, when asked about the statement "Hollywood movies have influenced my food choices and preferences," a considerable proportion of respondents (35%, 31%, and 16% respectively) responded 'neutral', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree'. These responses indicate that the influence of Hollywood movies on the food preferences and habits of the participants is minimal or non-existent. Despite the frequent depiction of fast-food consumption in Hollywood movies (Maisuwong, 2012), it does not significantly influence the respondents' food intake habits.

However, the findings suggest a considerable influence of Hollywood movies on the language spoken by the respondents. With the exception of one question, all questions in this section received favorable responses. For instance, the statement "Watching Hollywood movies has made me more comfortable using English in my daily communication" garnered an 'Agree' response from 42% of the participants and a 'Strongly Agree' response from 22%. Similarly, the statement "The language depicted in Hollywood movies has influenced the way I pronounce certain words or phrases" received an 'Agree' response from 44% and a 'Strongly Agree' response from 22%. The only question that did not receive a positive response was "I think people who use English words while talking Arabic are more modern and well-educated," with 22% disagreeing and 44% strongly disagreeing, indicating that the respondents do not perceive the English language as superior to their language. These findings differ from those of Abdulrahim et al. (2009), who reported that Kuwaiti youth considered the use of English as a sign of modernity.

The influence of Hollywood movies on the respondents' clothing choices appears to be mixed, leaning slightly towards a lack of influence. Many respondents expressed a 'Neutral' stance in relation to the statements in this section, with a small number agreeing and a larger number disagreeing. For instance, the statement "Hollywood movies have influenced my fashion choices and personal style" received an equal distribution of responses, with 28% each for 'Agree', 'Neutral', and 'Disagree', while 16% strongly disagreed. Similarly, the responses to the statement "Watching Hollywood movies has influenced my perception of what is considered fashionable or trendy" were as follows: 26% 'Agree', 28% 'Neutral', 26% 'Disagree', and 20% 'Strongly Disagree'. Although Abdulrahim et al. (2009) found that Kuwaiti youth preferred to emulate the clothing depicted in Hollywood movies, the findings of this present research do not seem to support such a trend.

Many respondents indicated that watching Hollywood movies does not influence their behavior in romantic relationships. For example, when asked about emulating aspects of romantic relationships depicted in Hollywood movies in their own lives (e.g., holding hands, kissing their partner), 39% strongly disagreed and 17% disagreed. Furthermore, when asked about their acceptance of the idea of having sex outside of marriage as shown in Hollywood movies, 76% strongly disagreed and 9% disagreed. These findings suggest that the respondents do not engage in intimate physical contact with their partners outside of marriage, despite the portrayal of such relationships in Hollywood movies. This behavior could also be influenced by the strict teachings of

Islam – the official religion of Arab countries – where physical contact between the opposite sex before marriage is considered Haram (forbidden) (Shahrour, 2019).

Finally, regarding the influence of Hollywood movies on the respondents' perception of their own culture, while many agreed that Hollywood movies often perpetuate negative stereotypes about Arab culture and people (40% 'Agree', 35% 'Strongly agree'), these representations do not affect their perception of their own culture. In fact, 50% strongly disagreed and 22% disagreed with the statement "Watching how Hollywood movies portray Arabs makes me somewhat ashamed of my culture." This contradicts the claim made by Almaswari & Khan (2016), where Hollywood movies were said to evoke feelings of loath and shame among Arab youth towards their own culture. The findings of this present study indicate that the respondents strongly hold onto their cultural identity and were not influenced by the negative portrayal of their culture in Hollywood movies.

5 Conclusion

This preliminary study examined the potential influence of Hollywood movies on the beliefs and behaviors of Arab youth. The findings reveal limited influence, with Hollywood movies only impacting the language spoken by the Arab youth, but having no distinct effect on their food intake, romantic relationships, and perceptions of their own culture. The influence on their clothing choices, however, was mixed. It is worth considering that the respondents currently reside in Malaysia, a majority Muslim country, where religious and sociogeographical factors may have influenced their beliefs and behaviors. In conclusion, despite the preference, widespread availability, and global reach of Hollywood movies, these Arab youth demonstrate a resilient cultural identity, maintaining a strong connection to their own heritage. This study challenges the proposition of the Cultural Imperialism theory, presenting a different perspective on the impact of Western media on Arab values and culture. Future research should further investigate the specific factors involved in how Hollywood movies influence cultural beliefs and behaviors among Arab youth, taking into account social, cultural, and contextual dynamics. It contributes to a broader discussion on globalization and the role of the media in shaping cultural attitudes and behaviors.

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