

Digital Streaming Platforms and Cultural Content Consumption: A Comparative Qualitative Study of Saudi and French SVOD Users

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Abstract

This study presents a qualitative comparison of how participants in Saudi Arabia and France describe their consumption of cultural content on digital streaming platforms and the role they attribute to platform affordances, algorithmic recommendation systems, language preferences and national cultural-policy contexts. Situated within an interpretive paradigm, the study employs a comparative multiple-case design based on 30 semi-structured interviews and eight solicited streaming diaries collected between March and August 2023. The analysis integrates uses and gratifications theory, cultural proximity theory, and scholarship on media globalisation and cultural hybridity. These perspectives are brought together in an analytical model examining the relationships among platform affordances, algorithmic curation, audience agency, language and cultural proximity, local–foreign content mixes, and cultural-identity negotiation.

The findings indicate that participants in both national groups described a substantial movement toward on-demand viewing, although the nature of this shift differed between the two samples. Participants in the Saudi sample more frequently described mobile-first and binge-oriented viewing practices, pragmatic switching between Arabic and English, and generally positive accounts of algorithmic curation. Participants in the French sample described a more hybrid media diet, retaining attachments to broadcast television and cinema while expressing greater ambivalence about algorithmic recommendation and a more politicised engagement with local and foreign content. The study develops a preliminary qualitative account of platform-mediated cultural proximity, arguing that cultural proximity in algorithmically curated environments depends not only on audience preferences but also on the visibility and accessibility that platforms provide. The study discusses implications for culturally responsive recommendation systems, the discoverability of local content, and comparative audience research in the platform era.

Keywords: digital streaming platforms; subscription video-on-demand; cultural consumption; cultural proximity; algorithmic recommendation; platform-mediated cultural proximity; audience agency; Saudi Arabia; France; qualitative comparative research.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background: From Linear Broadcasting to Algorithm-Curated Consumption

For much of the history of television, audiovisual consumption was organised around linear schedules and broadcaster-controlled programming. In many broadcasting contexts, cultural content was delivered at fixed times through a

limited number of channels and was often viewed on a shared domestic screen. Since the mid-2010s, subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services have increasingly reconfigured this arrangement by offering extensive catalogues that users can access according to their own schedules, devices and viewing preferences. Although shared household viewing has remained important, streaming has also expanded the use of individual profiles and personalised interfaces that organise content for particular users.¹

The global expansion of this model occurred rapidly. On 6 January 2016, Netflix announced the simultaneous launch of its service in more than 130 new countries, including Saudi Arabia.² This transformation involved more than a shift from scheduled to on-demand viewing. Streaming platforms also reorganised the conditions under which content becomes visible and discoverable by personalising interfaces and ranking or presenting titles on the basis of inferred user preferences and behavioural data.³ This development forms part of what Poell, Nieborg and van Dijck describe as the platformisation of cultural life: the extension of platform logics into cultural practices, economic processes and governance arrangements.⁴ Users may recognise that their viewing environment is personalised without being able to observe fully how recommendation systems operate or how their own behaviour contributes to the resulting selections. Bucher describes the beliefs, expectations and affective responses that users develop around such opaque systems as the algorithmic imaginary.⁵ Although Bucher originally examined this concept in relation to Facebook, the present study applies it as an interpretive lens for analysing how streaming users understand, accept, negotiate or resist algorithmic recommendation.

1.2 The Dual Tension: Global Access versus Local Cultural Identity

The expansion of streaming access has intensified a longstanding tension between global cultural availability and local cultural identity. Digital platforms can place Korean, American and other transnational productions within easy reach of viewers in Riyadh and Lyon. At the same time, the distribution and visibility of cultural content remain shaped by a relatively small number of multinational platforms whose catalogues and promotional systems often give considerable prominence to

¹ Mareike Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1–31; Sidneyeve Matrix, “The Netflix Effect: Teens, Binge Watching, and On-Demand Digital Media Trends,” *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 6, no. 1 (2014): 119–138.

² Netflix, Inc., “Netflix Is Now Available Around the World,” press release, 6 January 2016, <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/netflix-is-now-available-around-the-world>.

³ Carlos A. Gomez-Urbe and Neil Hunt, “The Netflix Recommender System: Algorithms, Business Value, and Innovation,” *ACM Transactions on Management Information Systems* 6, no. 4 (2015): article 13, 1–19.

⁴ Thomas Poell, David Nieborg and José van Dijck, “Platformisation,” *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 4 (2019): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425>.

⁵ Taina Bucher, “The Algorithmic Imaginary: Exploring the Ordinary Affects of Facebook Algorithms,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 30–44.

English-language and US-originated productions, despite the growing diversification of available content.⁶

Research on transnational television suggests that audiences are not passive recipients of globally circulating media. Where suitable alternatives are available, viewers often express preferences for content that is linguistically, culturally or socially proximate to their own experiences—a tendency theorised by Straubhaar as cultural proximity.⁷ Streaming does not eliminate this tendency; rather, it changes the conditions under which proximity is encountered and negotiated. Local originals, foreign productions, subtitled and dubbed versions, and algorithmically selected recommendations are presented within the same personalised interface. As a result, culturally proximate content is not determined solely by national broadcasting systems or by audience demand; its practical accessibility also depends on catalogue availability, interface visibility and the discovery mechanisms built into the platform.⁸

Research on Gulf audiences illustrates how viewers actively negotiate these conditions. Participants in such studies have described using profile management, parental controls, selective searching and deliberate content choices to manage material they consider culturally or socially sensitive.⁹ These practices suggest that streaming audiences may exercise agency within platform environments while simultaneously operating within catalogues, interfaces and recommendation systems that structure what becomes visible and readily discoverable.

1.3 Contrasting Saudi and French Media Contexts

Saudi Arabia and France provide analytically contrasting contexts in which the relationship between global streaming infrastructures and local cultural identity can be examined. The two countries differ in their media histories, cultural-policy traditions, linguistic environments and patterns of audiovisual-sector development, while audiences in both contexts have access to several transnational streaming services.

In Saudi Arabia, public cinema exhibition was largely absent for approximately three and a half decades before the licensing and reopening of commercial cinemas in 2018 as part of the Vision 2030 reform programme.¹⁰ Internet penetration reached approximately 99 per cent of the population at the beginning of 2023, although this figure should not be treated as a direct measure of SVOD use or of the devices

⁶ Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1–28.

⁷ Joseph D. Straubhaar, “Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 1 (1991): 39–59.

⁸ This formulation is the author’s analytical proposition, informed by Straubhaar’s theory of cultural proximity, research on platform-mediated visibility and audience domestication, and the theoretical framework developed in Section 3.

⁹ Bouziane Zaid, Mohamed Ben Moussa, Khayrat Ayyad, Mohammed Ibahrine and Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, “The Domestication of Netflix in the Gulf Countries,” *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 6613–6632, at 6620–6628.

¹⁰ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Saudi Vision 2030* (Riyadh: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016), 30–31; Reuters, “Saudi Arabia Grants First Cinema Licence to AMC,” 4 April 2018.

through which audiences watch streaming content.¹¹ Alongside global services, Shahid VIP—operated by the Saudi-based MBC Group—has developed as a prominent regional streaming service with a strong emphasis on Arabic-language productions and programming.¹²

France represents a contrasting context characterised by a long-standing and institutionally developed tradition of cultural policy and audiovisual protection. The principle of *l'exception culturelle*, which treats cultural goods as carrying social and cultural value beyond their status as ordinary commodities, has continued to shape the regulation of audiovisual services in the platform era.¹³ At the European level, the 2018 revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive requires relevant on-demand services to ensure that at least 30 per cent of their catalogues consist of European works and to promote the visibility of those works.¹⁴ France's 2021 implementing framework also introduced financial contribution obligations for relevant on-demand services. Depending on the service and the applicable release-window conditions, these obligations generally range between 20 and 25 per cent of qualifying revenues generated in France.¹⁵ Under the 2022 agreement governing the *chronologie des médias* during the period examined in this study, Netflix obtained a reduced theatrical release window of 15 months in exchange for financial commitments to French and European production.¹⁶ Arcom's 2023 barometer documented the continued expansion of online consumption of cultural and sporting content in France, although the reported figures vary according to the type of content, age group and definition of paid access used.¹⁷

These contexts are not treated as representative of the Arab or European regions as a whole. Rather, they are used as analytically contrasting cases for examining how similar streaming infrastructures are interpreted and incorporated within distinct cultural, linguistic and regulatory environments.

1.4 Research Problem

¹¹ Communications, Space and Technology Commission, Annual Report 2022 (Riyadh: CST, 2023); Simon Kemp, "Digital 2023: Saudi Arabia," DataReportal, February 2023, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-saudi-arabia>.

¹² Nick Vivarelli, "How MBC Group's Shahid VIP Is Giving Netflix a Run for Its Money in the Middle East," Variety, 30 July 2020.

¹³ Jeremy Ahearne, ed., *French Cultural Policy Debates: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1–18; UNESCO, Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, 20 October 2005, arts. 1 and 6.

¹⁴ Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU, art. 13(1), Official Journal of the European Union L 303, 28 November 2018.

¹⁵ Décret n° 2021-793 du 22 juin 2021 relatif aux services de médias audiovisuels à la demande, Journal officiel de la République française, 23 June 2021, arts. 9–13.

¹⁶ Elsa Keslassy, "Netflix to Invest \$45 Million Annually in French, European Movies Under New Deal," Variety, 22 February 2022.

¹⁷ Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique (Arcom), Baromètre de la consommation des contenus culturels et sportifs dématérialisés: Édition 2023 (Paris: Arcom, 2023), 4–7.

Existing scholarship has examined the industrial, geographical and regulatory dimensions of streaming largely through separate national or regional perspectives, with comparatively less attention given to how audiences experience and interpret platform-mediated cultural consumption in everyday life.¹⁸ Audience-centred research has begun to address this limitation, including studies of how viewers in the Gulf domesticate Netflix through selective content choices, profile management and platform settings.¹⁹ Nevertheless, sustained qualitative comparison between audiences in the Gulf and Western Europe remains limited.

This gap is significant because Saudi Arabia and France represent contrasting—but not entirely separate—media and policy environments. Both audiences encounter several transnational streaming services, yet they do so within different linguistic, cultural, demographic and regulatory contexts. It therefore remains insufficiently understood how participants in these contexts interpret their everyday streaming practices: what they choose to watch, how they discover content, which languages and forms of translation they prefer, how they negotiate local and foreign productions, and how these practices relate to cultural identity and belonging. The present study addresses this gap through a comparative qualitative analysis of participants in Saudi Arabia and France.

1.5 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following central research question:

How do participants in Saudi Arabia and France describe the role of digital streaming platforms in their cultural-content consumption, and what similarities and differences emerge between the two contexts?

This central question is addressed through six sub-questions:

SQ1: How do participants in Saudi Arabia and France describe changes in their cultural-consumption practices since adopting digital streaming services?

SQ2: Which platform-related, linguistic and cultural factors do participants identify as relevant to their content choices and viewing practices?

SQ3: How do participants describe the role of algorithmic recommendations in content discovery, and what strategies do they use to engage with, influence or circumvent them?

SQ4: How do participants describe their engagement with local and foreign cultural content within digital streaming environments?

SQ5: How do participants perceive the relationship between digital streaming and their cultural identity, values and sense of cultural belonging?

¹⁸ Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1–28; Fadi G. Haddad and Alexander Dhoest, “Netflix Speaks Arabic, Arabs Speak Netflix: How SVOD Is Transforming Arabic Screenwriting,” *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 14, no. 2 (2021): 261–278.

¹⁹ Bouziane Zaid, Mohamed Ben Moussa, Khayrat Ayyad, Mohammed Ibahrine and Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, “The Domestication of Netflix in the Gulf Countries,” *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 6613–6632, at 6620–6628.

SQ6: What similarities and differences emerge between the two groups, and how might the contrasting cultural, linguistic and regulatory contexts help contextualise these patterns?

1.6 Research Objectives

The study pursues four objectives: (1) to explore how participants describe the ways in which digital streaming platforms have altered their everyday cultural-consumption practices; (2) to identify the technological, linguistic and cultural factors that participants associate with their content choices and patterns of discovery; (3) to compare engagement with local and foreign content in Saudi and French contexts and examine participants' perceptions of the relationship between streaming and cultural identity; and (4) to develop a theoretically informed and policy-relevant account of cultural consumption under platform conditions, with particular attention to developing a preliminary account of platform-mediated cultural proximity.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study addresses an important gap in the literature on subscription video-on-demand (SVOD). Research on Arab audiences remains comparatively limited within the expanding scholarship on streaming platforms, particularly in relation to everyday practices of content discovery, language selection and cultural negotiation.²⁰ Within the literature reviewed for this study, no directly comparable qualitative investigation of Saudi and French audiences conducted within a shared research design was identified. The study therefore contributes a comparative audience perspective linking a rapidly transforming Arab media environment with a mature European audiovisual context.

Theoretically, the study examines the explanatory usefulness of cultural proximity theory under conditions of algorithmically mediated content discovery. It proposes a preliminary refinement of the concept by examining how cultural and linguistic preferences interact with platform visibility, algorithmic recommendation and audience agency. In this formulation, cultural proximity is not treated solely as a property of audience demand, but as a relationship that may also be shaped by the content that platforms make visible and accessible.

Practically, the comparison has implications for cultural-policy and platform-governance debates in both contexts. In Saudi Arabia, the findings may inform discussions concerning the development, visibility and cultural representation of locally produced content within the country's expanding creative economy. In France and the European Union, they may contribute to debates about whether catalogue quotas and financial investment obligations are sufficient to ensure that locally produced works are discoverable, accessible and meaningfully incorporated into audiences' viewing practices.

1.8 Scope and Delimitations

The study concerns adult SVOD users aged 20 to 45 in Saudi Arabia and France. It treats streaming as a cultural practice rather than a market variable, makes no claims to statistical representativeness and excludes gaming and user-generated social video except where participants raise them for comparison. The empirical data were collected in 2023.

²⁰ Haddad and Dhoest, "Netflix Speaks Arabic," 261.

Participants were adults aged 20–45 who used at least one subscription-based video-on-demand service for a minimum of three hours per week. The study treats the Saudi and French groups as contextually defined participant groups rather than statistically representative national populations. Public-service catch-up platforms and other non-subscription services were considered only when participants discussed them in relation to their SVOD practices.

1.9 Structure of the Paper

Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework. Section 4 details the methodology. Section 5 presents six comparative thematic findings. Section 6 discusses theoretical and policy implications. Section 7 concludes the study and answers the research questions. Section 8 presents recommendations, while Section 9 discusses limitations and directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on streaming has developed across three converging research programmes: platform studies, research on algorithmic culture, and a long tradition of work on transnational media flows and cultural proximity. Around these programmes has accumulated a nationally specific body of literature that has recently extended to the Arab Gulf, yet the Saudi and French strands have developed in near-total isolation from one another. This review maps each programme in turn, examines the two national fields, and closes by identifying the comparative gap that defines this study's contribution.

2.1 Platformisation and the Transformation of Media Consumption

Platformisation denotes the penetration of platform logics into cultural practices, economic processes and governance frameworks—reorganising technical possibilities, market structures, and governance mechanisms that shape audience visibility.²¹ The concept extends beyond distribution: cultural commodities produced within platform environments have become fundamentally "contingent," designed to be modular and reworked on the basis of datafied user feedback, so that what circulates is less a finished work than a revisable one.²² This study draws on that framework to examine streaming as a similarly contingent cultural environment.

What streaming progressively displaced had been theorised as "flow": Williams's term for the broadcast schedule's carefully engineered sequence that synchronised national households around shared temporal reference points.²³ Scheduling did not disappear under streaming but changed hands—from the broadcaster's single national sequence to the subscriber's algorithmically ordered personal one—

²¹ Thomas Poell, David Nieborg and José van Dijck, "Platformisation," *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425>.

²² David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, "The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4275–4292, at 4275–4278.

²³ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974), 86–96.

prompting sustained scholarship on what had been re-invented about television.²⁴ Industrial geography supplied the analytic maps. Lobato argues that Netflix is best understood as many national instances of one service, with catalogues, pricing and promotion remaining stubbornly local beneath a single technical roof.²⁵ Lotz elaborates the implications: multinational subscription services challenge the national lens through which the television trade had long operated and can profitably programme for taste communities too small to sustain any nationally bounded broadcaster.²⁶ From the audience side, on-demand viewing progressively eroded the broadcast schedule among younger viewers, converting the weekly episode from a shared appointment into content consumed according to individual rhythms.²⁷ Together, these studies establish the platform as a foundational infrastructural condition that shapes the possibilities of content access, visibility and cultural consumption before individual audience choices are made.

2.2 Algorithms, Personalisation, and Audience Agency

A second literature examines the machine that sorts this abundance. Gillespie placed algorithms at the centre of the online production of "public relevance": the terms on which anything becomes findable are set by ranking processes that users cannot directly observe.²⁸ Even without access to those processes, users develop what Bucher terms an "algorithmic imaginary"—affect-laden intuitions about what the system rewards, shaping behaviour as felt orientations rather than explicit propositions.²⁹ Analysing Netflix's publicly available corporate communications, Pajkovic identified circular and commercial dynamics beneath its taste-making surface: recommendations tend to reinforce what the system already has commercial reason to sustain.³⁰ Personalisation extends even to the interface surface, where customised thumbnails are tested across individual subscribers as

²⁴ Mareike Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1–31.

²⁵ Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1–22.

²⁶ Amanda D. Lotz, "In Between the Global and the Local: Mapping the Geographies of Netflix as a Multinational Service," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (2021): 195–215, at 195–200.

²⁷ Sidneyeve Matrix, "The Netflix Effect: Teens, Binge Watching, and On-Demand Digital Media Trends," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 6, no. 1 (2014): 119–138, at 119–124.

²⁸ Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 167–194, at 167–172.

²⁹ Taina Bucher, "The Algorithmic Imaginary: Exploring the Ordinary Affects of Facebook Algorithms," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 30–44, at 30–34.

³⁰ Niko Pajkovic, "Algorithms and Taste-Making: Exposing the Netflix Recommender System's Operational Logics," *Convergence* 28, no. 1 (2022): 214–235, at 214–219.

part of systematic experimentation that treats a programme's own artwork as an optimisable variable.³¹

Audiences, however, are not only sorted. Algorithm awareness is itself stratified: a Norwegian national survey found it distributed along class and education gradients—a new form of digital divide reproducing inequalities familiar from earlier research on media access.³² Skill follows awareness. Interview-based work found that fluent platform users had learned "a whole other language" of algorithmic curation, a competence that cannot be assumed uniformly across viewer populations.³³ In Costa Rica, Siles and colleagues found streaming users reasoning about Spotify through folk theories—treating the system as capable of surveillance or as a resource to be deliberately "trained"—frameworks through which people enact modest but meaningful acts of resistance.³⁴ Between deference and deliberate manipulation lies an everyday repertoire of acceptance, circumvention and play; this repertoire constitutes the working definition of audience agency adopted in the present study. Two asymmetries in this literature are consequential: its empirical evidence derives disproportionately from North American and Northern European settings, and its methods lean toward surveys and platform-level analysis rather than sustained qualitative interviews.

2.3 Cultural Proximity, Language, and Transnational Content Flows

The literature on cultural proximity provides the study's central sensitising proposition. Straubhaar documented audiences actively searching for cultural proximity in imported schedules, and his subsequent work elevated that tendency into the principal explanation for the persistence of national and regional production against global supply—while qualifying proximity as a default preference that education, class and cosmopolitan exposure can progressively override.³⁵ Hybridity research complicated the binary further: texts that travel internationally are already culturally mixed, and proximity is assembled in contexts of reception rather than read from a programme's country of origin.³⁶ Iwabuchi

³¹ Oliver Eklund, "Custom Thumbnails: The Changing Face of Personalisation Strategies on Netflix," *Convergence* 28, no. 3 (2022): 737–760, at 737–744.

³² Arnbjørn Gran, Peter Booth and Taina Bucher, "To Be or Not to Be Algorithm Aware: A Question of a New Digital Divide?," *Information, Communication & Society* 24, no. 12 (2021): 1779–1796, at 1779–1784.

³³ Erin Klawitter and Eszter Hargittai, "It's Like Learning a Whole Other Language': The Role of Algorithmic Skills in the Curation of Creative Goods," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 3490–3510, at 3490–3493.

³⁴ Ignacio Siles, Andrés Segura-Castillo, Ricardo Solís and Mónica Sancho, "Folk Theories of Algorithmic Recommendations on Spotify: Enacting Data Assemblages in the Global South," *Big Data & Society* 7, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720923377>.

³⁵ Joseph D. Straubhaar, "Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 1 (1991): 39–59, at 39–44; Joseph D. Straubhaar, *World Television: From Global to Local* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), chaps. 1–2.

³⁶ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 1–14; Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in *Global*

showed proximity being engineered transnationally through "culturally odourless" products designed to travel by effacing their national marks of origin.³⁷

Streaming has re-posed these questions around language. Platforms commission content in dozens of languages and subtitle or dub at industrial scale, so that the interface operates simultaneously as a translation regime. Dwyer's study showed how distinctively local subtitling norms survive—or do not—once a global service standardises them, making translation one of the sites where cultural proximity is negotiated rather than simply given.³⁸ Viewers now elect among original audio, subtitles and dubbing as a routine viewing choice that broadcast-era television never offered at comparable scale. The same platform, moreover, presents meaningfully different content environments across national markets, with catalogues, language options and local originals varying substantially by territory.³⁹ Cultural proximity is therefore no longer automatically delivered by a national broadcasting frame but must compete—against convenience, novelty and algorithmic recommendation—in individual viewing decisions that a comparative audience study is positioned to observe directly.

2.4 Streaming in the Saudi Cultural and Media Landscape

The Saudi field is young because its structural affordances are recent. Public entertainment became an organised sector in May 2016 when a royal decree established the General Entertainment Authority, and commercial cinemas reopened in April 2018 following approximately thirty-five years of absence—all within a Vision 2030 reform programme designed to build a domestic entertainment economy.⁴⁰ Netflix launched in January 2016, and by early 2023 internet penetration stood at approximately 99 per cent, with social-media usage among the highest globally.⁴¹ MBC Group positioned its subscription service Shahid VIP as a major Arabic-language platform with a strong regional presence, competing directly with global services for Gulf audiences.⁴²

In January 2023, Netflix released what contemporary industry coverage described as its first Saudi-produced feature film, *Alkhallat+*, under a multi-picture deal with Telfaz11—a property that had originated as a YouTube sketch series accumulating more than 1.5 billion views online, demonstrating a digitally engaged

Modernities, ed. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), 25–44.

³⁷ Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 24–49.

³⁸ Tessa Dwyer, "From Old Tricks to Netflix: How Local Are Interlingual Subtitling Norms for Streamed Television?," *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* 1, no. 1 (2018): 81–100, at 81–86.

³⁹ Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 1–22.

⁴⁰ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Saudi Vision 2030* (Riyadh: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016), 30–31; "Saudi Arabia Grants First Cinema Licence to AMC," *Reuters*, 4 April 2018.

⁴¹ Netflix, Inc., "Netflix Is Now Available Around the World," press release, 6 January 2016; Communications, Space and Technology Commission (CST), *Annual Report 2022* (Riyadh: CST, 2023), 22–24; Simon Kemp, "Digital 2023: Saudi Arabia," *DataReportal*, February 2023.

⁴² Nick Vivarelli, "How MBC Group's Shahid VIP Is Giving Netflix a Run for Its Money in the Middle East," *Variety*, 30 July 2020.

Saudi audience forming around local content before subscription streaming arrived at scale.⁴³ The analytical implications are significant: in Saudi Arabia, cultural-sector liberalisation and platformisation arrived not as successive historical stages but as a compressed and simultaneous wave, producing a media environment without direct precedent in the comparative literature.⁴⁴

Scholarship has not fully kept pace. Industry-level work maps Arab screens as a production system historically unified by satellite distribution—serialised drama and Ramadan programming crossing national borders for decades—now in negotiation with global commissioners.⁴⁵ At the audience level, the Arab world remains, as Haddad and Dhoest observe, "scarcely mentioned in the growing scholarly literature on SVODs."⁴⁶ Available evidence consistently challenges the image of the passive, Westernising consumer: Gulf Netflix subscribers have been found to domesticate the service—adapting profile settings, parental controls and deliberate content selection to manage material they regard as culturally sensitive.⁴⁷ Yet these findings remain at the edges of digital subscription life rather than the Saudi subscription household itself, a gap the present study seeks to address directly.

2.5 Streaming in the French Cultural and Media Landscape

France constitutes a structurally distinct case. From the principle of *l'exception culturelle*—formalised in the 2005 UNESCO Convention as the conviction that cultural goods are not ordinary merchandise and that states may legitimately protect their production—France developed an institutional framework that has extended into the platform era rather than retreating before it.⁴⁸ The revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive obliges on-demand catalogues operating in EU member states to carry at least 30 per cent European works and to give such works appropriate prominence; France's June 2021 implementing decree went further, requiring major platforms to reinvest between 20 and 25 per cent of their relevant French revenues in European and French-language production.⁴⁹ The February 2022 *chronologie des médias* agreement reduced Netflix's theatrical release window to fifteen months in exchange for a guaranteed annual investment in French and

⁴³ "Netflix Releases First Saudi Arabian Feature 'Alkhattat+'," BroadcastPro ME, 24 January 2023.

⁴⁴ Joe F. Khalil and Marwan M. Kraidy, *Arab Television Industries* (London: British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), chaps. 1–2.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Fadi G. Haddad and Alexander Dhoest, "Netflix Speaks Arabic, Arabs Speak Netflix: How SVOD Is Transforming Arabic Screenwriting," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 14, no. 2 (2021): 261–278, at 261.

⁴⁷ Bouziane Zaid, Mohamed Ben Moussa, Khayrat Ayyad, Mohammed Ibahrine and Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, "The Domestication of Netflix in the Gulf Countries," *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 6613–6632, at 6620–6628.

⁴⁸ Jeremy Ahearne, ed., *French Cultural Policy Debates: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1–18; Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, UNESCO, 20 October 2005, arts. 1 and 6.

⁴⁹ Directive (EU) 2018/1808, art. 13(1), Official Journal of the European Union L 303, 28 November 2018; Décret n° 2021-793 du 22 juin 2021, *Journal officiel de la République française*, 23 June 2021, arts. 9–13.

European film production.⁵⁰ Regulation is therefore not a background variable but a constitutive one: the French streaming environment is, by institutional design, a space where market access, cultural policy and audience choice systematically intersect. The domestic commercial response proved less durable than the regulatory framework. Salto, the joint streaming venture launched by TF1, M6 and France Télévisions in October 2020, was abandoned and closed in March 2023 after struggling to establish a sustainable position in a market dominated by global platforms. Contemporary reports referred to approximately 800,000 subscribers near the time of closure, although the distinction between registered, paying and active users should be maintained.⁵¹ The case illustrates that cultural policy and local content provision do not automatically guarantee the commercial viability of a nationally constituted streaming platform. What persists is a public ecosystem of longer pedigree: Arte, France.tv and the CNC-administered windowing system, all embedded within a market regularly surveyed by the European Audiovisual Observatory.⁵² Yet qualitative research on how French audiences actually experience this regulated environment—what quotas, prominence obligations and windowing arrangements do to the felt texture of choosing content—remains sparse. The imbalance between policy literature and audience research is itself part of the gap this study addresses.

2.6 Audience Reception and Cultural Identity in the Streaming Era

Beneath the national fields runs a reception tradition whose founding gesture was to relocate meaning-making from texts to audiences. Hall's encoding/decoding model established that meanings produced in reception are not predetermined by production intentions; Morley demonstrated that socially positioned viewers bring structurally different interpretive frameworks to the same broadcast text; and Ang established that affective engagement with popular television constitutes legitimate evidence about the cultural work of fiction.⁵³ Streaming research inherited each of these moves. Binge-watching appeared as an emblematic competence viewers cultivated and discussed rather than a symptom they suffered.⁵⁴ Platform marketing has been read as identity discourse: Elkins shows how streaming services construct taste communities that position subscribers within a cosmopolitan self-understanding legitimising global market expansion.⁵⁵

What unites these findings is the treatment of cultural identity as practice rather than attribute—something accomplished, title by title, in the everyday work of

⁵⁰ Elsa Keslassy, "Netflix to Invest \$45 Million Annually in French, European Movies Under New Deal," *Variety*, 22 February 2022.

⁵¹ "Salto Closure Confirmed," *Advanced Television*, 16 February 2023.

⁵² European Audiovisual Observatory, *Yearbook 2022/2023: Key Trends* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2023), 12–20.

⁵³ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128–138; David Morley, *The "Nationwide" Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980); Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985).

⁵⁴ Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television*, 149–178.

⁵⁵ Evan Elkins, "Algorithmic Cosmopolitanism: On the Global Claims of Digital Entertainment Platforms," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 36, no. 4 (2019): 376–389, at 376–382.

deciding what deserves attention. A further condition is one classical reception theory never confronted: the streamed audience is continuously measured. The systems that deliver content simultaneously render viewing choices into training data for the recommender, so that reception today occurs within a feedback structure in which every act of watching is simultaneously an act of instruction to the system. This study treats identity work under these conditions as conducted in dialogue not only with texts but with a responsive technical system—a condition that reconfigures what audience agency means in practice.

2.7 Comparative Research Gap

Three deficits converge at this point. Empirically, the Arab SVOD audience remains "scarcely mentioned" in the scholarly literature,⁵⁶ and the French audience of a comprehensively regulated market has been studied chiefly from the policy side rather than through qualitative investigation of actual viewing experience. Analytically, the strongest studies remain single-country designs; the comparative work that exists weighs catalogues, policies and platform architectures rather than the meanings viewers make of them.⁵⁷ Conceptually, cultural proximity, algorithmic agency and cultural identity have never been examined together in the one location where all three are simultaneously in play: the everyday streaming practice of ordinary viewers.

Saudi Arabia represents a rapidly transforming media environment characterised by accelerated digital expansion and compressed cultural-sector liberalisation; France represents a mature audiovisual market with longstanding and actively maintained mechanisms for protecting domestic and European cultural production. Both audiences encounter overlapping global streaming platforms—including Netflix, which operates in both markets—although the catalogues, local content offerings, language environments and regulatory conditions differ substantially between the two territories.⁵⁸ The contrast is designed to test whether cultural proximity continues to shape content choice, and how algorithmic mediation affects that process, when audiences face very different platform environments despite drawing on many of the same transnational titles. The literature reviewed for this study did not identify a prior qualitative investigation placing these research questions to Saudi and French audiences within a single comparative design. That absence defines this study's opening.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives — uses and gratifications theory, cultural proximity theory, and theories of media globalisation and cultural hybridity — integrated into a single analytical model. Uses and gratifications accounts for why audiences turn to streaming platforms and what they seek from them; cultural proximity theory explains the role of cultural and linguistic affinity in shaping content preferences; and glocalization and hybridity frameworks illuminate how global platform logics are selectively appropriated within local

⁵⁶ Haddad and Dhoest, "Netflix Speaks Arabic," 261.

⁵⁷ Lotz, "In Between the Global and the Local," 195–200.

⁵⁸ Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 1–22; European Audiovisual Observatory, *Yearbook 2022/2023*, 12–20.

cultural contexts. No single framework is sufficient to account for the interplay of individual motivation, cultural orientation and platform structure that characterises streaming consumption in contexts as different as Saudi Arabia and France; their integration is accordingly required.

3.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications (U&G) theory shifts the analytical focus from what media do to people to what people do with media. Audiences are conceived as active, goal-directed agents selecting media to satisfy psychological and social needs. McQuail, Blumler and Brown's influential typology identifies four broad gratification categories: surveillance and information-seeking, personal identity affirmation, social integration and personal relationships, and entertainment and diversion.⁵⁹ Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch subsequently elaborated these foundations, situating needs in social and psychological structures and proposing that audiences are sufficiently self-aware to articulate their own motivations.⁶⁰

The emergence of digital media has prompted significant extensions. Sundar and Limperos identify affordance-based gratifications unavailable in broadcast environments: modality, agency, interactivity and navigability — each directly relevant to streaming platforms whose on-demand catalogues, personalised home screens and recommendation engines constitute a distinct gratification structure.⁶¹ For this study, U&G provides the foundational lens for understanding what Saudi and French audiences seek from streaming — culturally familiar narratives, global exposure, linguistic comfort or social connection. Ruggiero's survey of U&G in digital environments underscores that motivations are shaped by cultural and social context, supporting comparative application rather than presuming universal patterns.⁶²

3.2 Cultural Proximity Theory

Cultural proximity theory, as originally articulated by Straubhaar, holds that audiences tend to prefer media content closest to their own language, cultural references, shared values and historical experience.⁶³ The preference is not absolute: it is conditioned by production quality, genre appeal and the availability of alternatives, and operates as a significant tendency rather than a deterministic rule. Straubhaar's subsequent work demonstrates that proximity functions at multiple levels — national, regional, linguistic and class-based — and interacts with cultural

⁵⁹ Denis McQuail, Jay G. Blumler and J. Roger Brown, "The Television Audience: A Revised Perspective," in *Sociology of Mass Communications*, ed. Denis McQuail (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 135–165, at 153–156.

⁶⁰ Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, "Uses and Gratifications Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1973–74): 509–523, at 510–514.

⁶¹ S. Shyam Sundar and Anthony M. Limperos, "Uses and Grats 2.0: New Gratifications for New Media," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 57, no. 4 (2013): 504–525, at 507–512.

⁶² Thomas E. Ruggiero, "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century," *Mass Communication and Society* 3, no. 1 (2000): 3–37, at 27–29.

⁶³ Joseph D. Straubhaar, "Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 1 (1991): 39–59, at 39–44.

capital and transnational exposure in ways that can strengthen or attenuate the default preference for local content.⁶⁴

In streaming environments, cultural proximity cannot be treated as a purely audience-driven phenomenon. Platforms interpose themselves through algorithmic recommendation systems that privilege certain titles over others, complicating the distinction between proximate and distant content. This study employs cultural proximity not as a deterministic law but as a sensitising concept — in the sense Blumer originally intended — that guides inquiry into how viewers articulate content preferences and how those preferences are reinforced or reconfigured by platform environments.⁶⁵

3.3 Media Globalisation and Hybridity

Robertson's concept of glocalization captures the simultaneity of universalising and particularising tendencies in contemporary culture: global products are adapted, indigenised and selectively appropriated to suit local sensibilities, while local forms are reconfigured through their encounter with global models.⁶⁶ Kraidy develops this through a critical analysis of hybridity, arguing that culturally mixed expressions generated by global media flows are embedded in — and constitutive of — relations of communicative power.⁶⁷ Hybridity is accordingly a practice as much as a product, conducted within asymmetric structural conditions that differ markedly between the two markets examined here. The expansion of Arabic-language originals on Shahid VIP and Netflix provides an example of a hybrid configuration in which global streaming infrastructures intersect with regional production practices and Arabic-language storytelling on Shahid VIP and Netflix provides an example of a hybrid configuration in which global streaming infrastructures intersect with regional production practices and Arabic-language storytelling,⁶⁸ while France's coexistence of domestically financed series alongside a dominant Anglophone catalogue represents a structurally different configuration shaped by explicit cultural policy.⁶⁹

3.4 Integrated Analytical Model

⁶⁴ Joseph D. Straubhaar, *World Television: From Global to Local* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 26–52.

⁶⁵ Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 147–148.

⁶⁶ Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in *Global Modernities*, ed. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), 25–44, at 28–32.

⁶⁷ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 1–25.

⁶⁸ Fadi G. Haddad and Alexander Dhoest, "Netflix Speaks Arabic, Arabs Speak Netflix: How SVOD Is Transforming Arabic Screenwriting," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 14, no. 2 (2021): 261–278, at 268–274.

⁶⁹ Décret n° 2021-793 du 22 juin 2021, *Journal officiel de la République française*, 23 June 2021, arts. 9–13; Raymond Kuhn, *The Media in Contemporary France* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), 44–53.

The three perspectives are synthesised into a single model guiding both the empirical investigation and the interpretation of findings. Six analytically distinguishable dimensions are examined as mutually conditioning elements embedded within a broader regulatory and policy context. They are not treated as stages in a fixed causal sequence:

Platform Affordances ↔ Algorithmic Recommendation ↔ Audience Agency ↔ Cultural Proximity and Language ↔ Engagement with Local and Foreign Content ↔ Cultural-Identity Negotiation

Platform affordances—including on-demand catalogues, personalised screens, multilingual options and recommendation engines—organise the conditions under which content becomes discoverable.⁷⁰ Algorithmic recommendation influences which titles become more readily available within a viewer's active repertoire.⁷¹ Audience agency is expressed through tactics such as deliberate searching, profile management, rating, watch-history cultivation and recommendation avoidance.⁷² Cultural proximity and language refer to the cognitive and affective processes through which viewers evaluate content according to language, shared values and cultural familiarity. Engagement with local and foreign content represents the observable pattern emerging from these interactions, while cultural-identity negotiation refers to the ways in which viewers relate streaming experiences to their sense of cultural self and social belonging.⁷³ The bidirectional arrows indicate that these dimensions may influence one another over time rather than operate as a fixed linear sequence.

3.5 Theoretical Contribution: Platform-Mediated Cultural Proximity

By applying this integrated model to the interview and diary data, the study develops a preliminary account of platform-mediated cultural proximity. Building on Straubhaar's foundational formulation, this concept acknowledges that in algorithmically curated environments, cultural proximity is no longer solely a function of audience preference exercised within a stable content supply. Proximity becomes instead a co-production of viewer preferences and platform mechanisms: what is culturally proximate is partly what the platform renders visible as proximate, and what audiences select from within that curated visibility. This reformulation responds to calls in the streaming literature to revisit audience-centred theories

⁷⁰ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11–15.

⁷¹ Carlos A. Gomez-Urbe and Neil Hunt, "The Netflix Recommender System: Algorithms, Business Value, and Innovation," *ACM Transactions on Management Information Systems* 6, no. 4 (2015): article 13, 1–19, at 1–6.

⁷² Taina Bucher, "The Algorithmic Imaginary: Exploring the Ordinary Affects of Facebook Algorithms," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 30–44, at 40–42; Ignacio Siles, Andrés Segura-Castillo, Ricardo Solís and Mónica Sancho, "Folk Theories of Algorithmic Recommendations on Spotify: Enacting Data Assemblages in the Global South," *Big Data & Society* 7, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720923377>.

⁷³ David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 1995), 10–16.

developed in broadcast environments and to examine how they require modification when content discovery is algorithmically mediated.⁷⁴

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Paradigm: Interpretivist

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm because its primary concern is with the subjective meanings, sense-making processes and lived experiences of Saudi and French audiences as they consume cultural content on digital streaming platforms. Interpretivism proceeds from the ontological premise that social reality is multiple, constructed and context-dependent, and from the epistemological stance that knowledge is generated through the interaction between researcher and participants rather than discovered as an objective truth independent of human interpretation.⁷⁵ The goal of inquiry is accordingly not to measure variables or test causal hypotheses but to develop a rich, situated understanding of how individuals interpret their social worlds — a goal well suited to a study comparing how two culturally distinct audiences negotiate platform environments, algorithmic recommendations, language choices and cultural identity through their own accounts.

4.2 Research Design: Qualitative Comparative Case Study

The study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design involving two national media contexts: Saudi Arabia and France. A case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined.⁷⁶ A multiple-case design is used to identify convergences and divergences across the two contexts rather than to describe them as unrelated cases in parallel.⁷⁷ Saudi Arabia and France were selected as analytically contrasting cases because they differ in media history, cultural-policy traditions, linguistic environments, demographic profiles and the development of domestic audiovisual production. At the same time, participants in both contexts encounter several transnational streaming services. This comparative design makes it possible to examine how similar platform infrastructures are interpreted and incorporated within distinct cultural and regulatory environments, without treating either case as statistically representative of its wider national population.

⁷⁴ Amanda D. Lotz, "In Between the Global and the Local: Mapping the Geographies of Netflix as a Multinational Service," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (2021): 195–215, at 195–200; Thomas Poell, David Nieborg and José van Dijck, "Platformisation," *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425>.

⁷⁵ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), 36–43; Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 105–117, at 109–111.

⁷⁶ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 15–16.

⁷⁷ John Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 47–50.

4.3 Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected through purposive maximum-variation sampling to capture variation in age, gender, educational attainment, occupation and streaming-platform use.⁷⁸ The final sample comprised 30 participants: 15 in Saudi Arabia and 15 in France. All participants were adults aged 20–45 who used at least one subscription-based video-on-demand service for a minimum of three hours per week. This criterion was adopted as a practical indicator of regular engagement with streaming rather than as a validated measure of viewing intensity. The sample was considered appropriate for the exploratory and comparative aims of the study and was not intended to support statistical generalisation.

4.4 Data Collection Instruments

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide organised into eight thematic blocks: (1) general platform usage routines; (2) content discovery and interface navigation; (3) algorithmic recommendations and perceptions of personalisation; (4) criteria for selecting local versus foreign content; (5) language preferences across original audio, subtitles and dubbing; (6) the relationship between streamed content and cultural identity; (7) perceptions of cultural policy and platform responsibility; and (8) social and family viewing contexts. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow consistent themes across participants while retaining flexibility to explore unanticipated issues.⁷ For a sub-sample of eight participants (four per country), interviews were supplemented by an optional two-week streaming diary recording titles watched, platform used, language selected and viewing reflections. Solicited diaries capture routine behaviours that participants may recall imprecisely in retrospective interviews and serve as a triangulation device to corroborate and enrich the interview accounts.⁸

4.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place between March and August 2023. All interviews were conducted in participants' native languages — Arabic in Saudi Arabia and French in France — and were audio-recorded with explicit informed consent. Where face-to-face meetings were not feasible, interviews were conducted remotely via secure video-conferencing software. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in duration. Two pilot interviews were conducted in each country prior to the main fieldwork phase to test the clarity, relevance and cultural appropriateness of the guide, resulting in minor refinements to several questions.⁹ All recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts formed the primary dataset for analysis.

4.6 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using the six-phase approach to thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke:¹⁰ (1) familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts

⁷⁸ Laura S. Palinkas, Sarah M. Horwitz, Carla A. Green, Jennifer P. Wisdom, N. Chamberlain and M. Hoagwood, "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42, no. 5 (2015): 533–544, at 533–535.

and listening to recordings; (2) systematic generation of initial codes across the dataset; (3) searching for themes by collating codes into potential clusters; (4) reviewing themes for internal coherence and external distinctiveness; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final analytical narrative with illustrative data extracts. Coding was undertaken in NVivo. The process was bilingual: Arabic and French transcripts were coded in their original languages to preserve semantic and cultural nuances, and only excerpts selected for the final report were translated into English, with back-translation procedures employed to verify accuracy.⁷⁹

The analysis proceeded in two stages: a within-case analysis for each national group independently, followed by a cross-case analysis using comparative matrices to identify convergences, divergences and the contextual factors accounting for them.⁸⁰ This two-stage process ensures that the particularities of each context are respected while enabling the systematic comparison that is the study's central analytical aim.

4.7 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was assessed using Lincoln and Guba's four criteria.⁸¹ Credibility was addressed through triangulation of interview data with streaming diaries, member checking with a participant subset invited to review preliminary thematic summaries, and peer debriefing with an uninvolved academic colleague. Transferability was pursued through thick description of participants, contexts and procedures, enabling readers to assess applicability to other settings. Dependability was supported by a detailed audit trail documenting all analytical decisions, coding iterations and theme revisions. Confirmability was enhanced through a reflexive journal maintained throughout the study, recording personal assumptions, reactions and the evolving relationship with the data.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

The study followed standard ethical protocols for qualitative social research.⁸² All participants received a detailed information sheet and signed a consent form prior to participation, covering the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw without consequence and confidentiality measures. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and identifying details were removed from transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Questions touching on cultural values and personal identity were framed in a non-judgemental manner, and diary sub-sample participants were reminded throughout that they were free to omit any

⁷⁹ Richard W. Brislin, "Back-Translation for Cross-Cultural Research," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 1, no. 3 (1970): 185–216, at 186–192; Allison Squires, "Methodological Challenges in Cross-Language Qualitative Research: A Research Review," *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 46, no. 2 (2009): 277–287, at 280–283.

⁸⁰ Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 101–104, 136–140.

⁸¹ Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 289–331.

⁸² Mark Israel and Iain Hay, *Research Ethics for Social Scientists: Between Ethical Conduct and Regulatory Compliance* (London: Sage, 2006), 60–80.

entry they preferred not to share.

4.9 Integrity Rule

The analysis followed an inductive and reflexive orientation. Initial concepts drawn from the literature informed the development of the interview guide but did not predetermine the final themes. Themes were developed through iterative engagement with the interview transcripts and streaming diaries and were subsequently reviewed in relation to convergent, divergent and unexpected patterns within and across the two national groups. Claims presented in the findings are grounded in the empirical material, while theoretical explanations are identified as the researcher's analytical interpretations rather than as direct statements made by participants. This distinction was maintained to preserve the interpretive character of the study and to clarify the relationship between participant accounts, thematic analysis and theoretical discussion.⁸³

5. FINDINGS

The findings presented below are drawn from a thematic analysis of thirty semi-structured interviews and eight complementary streaming diaries collected in Saudi Arabia and France between March and August 2023. Six overarching themes emerged from the data, each examined through within-case analysis of the two national groups followed by cross-case comparison. All participant quotations were originally collected in Arabic and French and are attributed using pseudonyms.

5.1 Theme 1: Platforms as Cultural Gateways

Within this sample, participants commonly described streaming platforms as an important—and, for many, primary—means of accessing cultural content. However, the pace, extent and social organisation of the transition from scheduled television to on-demand viewing differed between the two groups, reflecting differences in participants' media histories, household arrangements and viewing routines.

Saudi Arabia: Participants described a mobile-first, highly individualised consumption pattern. Viewing took place predominantly on smartphones, often late at night and in private settings. This behaviour corresponds to the country's near-universal internet penetration, which reached 99.0 per cent at the start of 2023, and a youthful population whose median age is under thirty.⁸⁴ Binge-watching—consuming multiple episodes in a single sitting—was widely normalised among younger Saudi participants and was treated as a standard mode of engagement rather than an occasional indulgence. This pattern aligns with Matrix's observation that the Netflix interface was specifically designed to encourage prolonged viewing

⁸³ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 17–18; Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), 36–43.

⁸⁴ Simon Kemp, "Digital 2023: Saudi Arabia," DataReportal, February 2023; Bouziane Zaid, Mohamed Ben Moussa, Khayrat Ayyad, Mohammed Ibahrine, and Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, "The Domestication of Netflix in the Gulf Countries," *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 6613–6632, at 6620–6621.

sessions.⁸⁵ Saudi participants typically maintained subscriptions to multiple services, combining a global platform such as Netflix or Amazon Prime Video with the regional service Shahid VIP, which was valued for its Arabic-language catalogue.⁸⁶

France: French participants exhibited a more varied media diet. Although all used at least one streaming service, a significant minority continued to watch broadcast television, especially for news, live sport, and French-produced fiction. Cinephile norms were evident in participants' language; they spoke of "discovering a director's universe" and expressed a preference for "auteur" series and theatrical experiences distinct from home streaming.⁸⁷ Binge-watching was common but not universally embraced: older participants preferred weekly episode releases, associating this format with more reflective cultural consumption. The French streaming ecology was described as crowded, with Netflix dominant but Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, and culturally oriented replay platforms such as Arte.tv and France.tv also playing significant roles.

Cross-Case Comparison: Participants in the Saudi sample described a more extensive movement away from scheduled television than did participants in the French sample. This difference may reflect contrasting media histories, demographic profiles and household viewing arrangements, although the interview data do not permit a single causal explanation. Participants in the French sample more often described streaming as coexisting with broadcast television, cinema and public-service audiovisual institutions. Streaming therefore functioned as a culturally situated gateway rather than as a uniform replacement for earlier media forms.

5.2 Theme 2: Algorithms and Audience Agency

Participants in both countries demonstrated awareness of algorithmic recommendation systems, but their attitudes toward these systems varied along a spectrum from passive acceptance to active resistance.

Saudi Arabia: Saudi participants generally understood that their home screens were personalised by viewing history. However, this awareness did not produce a critical stance. Algorithmic curation was largely perceived as convenient and benign—a useful discovery tool that simplified navigation of an overwhelming catalogue. A smaller group of younger, tech-savvy participants described deliberate strategies to influence the algorithm, such as creating separate profiles for different genres or rating content to shape future suggestions. These behaviours correspond to what Bucher has termed the "algorithmic imaginary," referring to the folk theories users

⁸⁵ Sidneyeve Matrix, "The Netflix Effect: Teens, Binge Watching, and On-Demand Digital Media Trends," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 6, no. 1 (2014): 119–138, at 124–126.

⁸⁶ Nick Vivarelli, "How MBC Group's Shahid VIP Is Giving Netflix a Run for Its Money in the Middle East," *Variety*, July 30, 2020; Zaid et al., op. cit., 6624.

⁸⁷ Raymond Kuhn, *The Media in Contemporary France* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), 44–53; Arcom, *Baromètre de la consommation des contenus culturels et sportifs dématérialisés: Édition 2023* (Paris: Arcom, 2023), 4–7.

develop about how algorithms work and how their own behaviour can influence algorithmic outputs.⁸⁸

France: French participants expressed greater ambivalence. While recognising the practical utility of recommendations, many voiced discomfort with the idea that an opaque technological system was shaping their cultural tastes. This concern was frequently linked to perceived content homogenisation: participants worried that algorithms systematically directed them toward Anglophone, mainstream productions at the expense of French-language and more diverse offerings. Some respondents reported actively resisting recommendations by using the search function for specific titles, ignoring suggested content, and periodically clearing their viewing history.⁸⁹

Cross-Case Comparison: Saudi participants tended to view algorithmic recommendation as an empowering extension of personal choice, consistent with the broader narrative of technological modernity associated with Vision 2030. French participants, situated within a culture that has long debated market-driven versus state-supported cultural provision, were more inclined to frame algorithmic curation as a threat to cultural sovereignty and individual autonomy.

5.3 Theme 3: Language and Cultural Proximity

Language choices functioned as a powerful marker of the negotiation between global and local content. Both groups demonstrated the logic of cultural proximity, but the ways in which this logic operated differed according to each group's position within the global linguistic system.

Saudi Arabia: Participants displayed complex language-switching behaviour. Arabic was preferred for talk shows, comedy, and drama addressing regional social themes. However, many watched English-language prestige series in original audio with Arabic subtitles, viewing the original performance as more authentic and aesthetically superior to dubbing.⁹⁰ For family viewing, especially with older relatives or children, Arabic-dubbed content or original Arabic productions were preferred, indicating that language choice is also a function of social viewing context.⁹¹ Shahid VIP was specifically praised for its investment in high-budget Arabic originals that combined local cultural relevance with global production values.⁹²

⁸⁸ Taina Bucher, "The Algorithmic Imaginary: Exploring the Ordinary Affects of Facebook Algorithms," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 30–44, at 40–42; S. Shyam Sundar and Anthony M. Limperos, "Uses and Grats 2.0: New Gratifications for New Media," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 57, no. 4 (2013): 504–525, at 509.

⁸⁹ Bucher, *op. cit.*, 41; Amanda D. Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 178–180.

⁹⁰ Joseph D. Straubhaar, "Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 1 (1991): 39–59, at 39–40; Fadi G. Haddad and Alexander Dhoest, "Netflix Speaks Arabic, Arabs Speak Netflix: How SVOD Is Transforming Arabic Screenwriting," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 14, no. 2 (2021): 261–278, at 270–271.

⁹¹ Zaid et al., *op. cit.*, 6623.

⁹² Haddad and Dhoest, *op. cit.*, 268; Vivarelli, *op. cit.*

France: French participants exhibited a stronger attachment to French-language content. Among older participants and those with lower English proficiency, dubbing was the expected mode for foreign content. However, younger and more educated participants increasingly watched Anglophone content in its original language with French subtitles, reflecting a broader generational shift.⁹³ Across all age groups, there was a near-universal sentiment that streaming platforms should offer a substantial catalogue of original French-language fiction, linked not merely to linguistic comfort but to broader concerns about cultural identity and national self-representation.

Cross-Case Comparison: Participants in the Saudi sample described a form of pragmatic multilingualism in which Arabic and English were selected according to genre, perceived authenticity, viewing context and the availability of suitable content. For French speakers, the historical strength of the national audiovisual industry and the regulatory obligations imposed on platforms to invest in French production have sustained a stronger expectation of culturally proximate content.⁹⁴

5.4 Theme 4: Local vs. Foreign Content Engagement

The local/foreign content distinction was not experienced as a rigid binary but as a dynamic spectrum shaped by genre, quality perceptions, and the evolving supply of local productions.

Saudi Arabia: Participants expressed genuine enthusiasm for the recent surge in high-quality Arabic original series, particularly those produced by Shahid and Netflix's Arabic-language commissions. These productions were praised for addressing socially relevant themes, for their production values, and for representing Arab characters without orientalist distortion.⁹⁵ At the same time, American and other foreign content retained strong appeal in genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and crime drama, where local alternatives were perceived as scarce. The local/foreign distinction was thus highly genre-dependent, with participants constructing personalised content mixes that moved fluidly between Arabic comedies and American thrillers.

France: French participants displayed a more ideologically charged relationship with this distinction. A recurring theme was the tension between genuine enjoyment of American series and a sense of cultural duty to support French creation. Watching American content was sometimes described as a "guilty pleasure," while consuming French series was framed as an act of cultural citizenship.⁹⁶ This discourse was weaker among younger participants, who treated content origin as irrelevant to quality. Awareness of regulatory obligations existed in general terms among many participants, and several endorsed the legitimacy of state intervention to ensure the visibility of French works on global platforms.⁹⁷

⁹³ Arcom, op. cit., 5; Kuhn, op. cit., 49–50.

⁹⁴ Directive (EU) 2018/1808, art. 13(1), Official Journal of the European Union L 303 (2018); Sherin Shibu, "France Says Streaming Services Like Netflix Must Invest Set Amount in Local Content," PCMag, June 30, 2021.

⁹⁵ Haddad and Dhoest, op. cit., 274–275; Zaid et al., op. cit., 6625.

⁹⁶ Kuhn, op. cit., 44–46; Jeremy Ahearne, ed., *French Cultural Policy Debates: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1–10.

⁹⁷ Shibu, op. cit.

Cross-Case Comparison: The Saudi case illustrates a market-driven expansion of local content generating new forms of cultural pride without producing a strong ideological opposition between local and foreign. The French case reveals a more politicised consumption landscape in which choosing local content can carry connotations of cultural resistance.

5.5 Theme 5: Identity, Values, and Representation

Both groups perceived streaming content as a site for identity negotiation, but the dimensions of that negotiation differed.

Saudi Arabia: The negotiation of religious and social values was prominent. Many participants described exercising selective consumption, avoiding content containing explicit sexual material, excessive profanity, or portrayals deemed disrespectful of religious beliefs.⁹⁸ This selectivity was experienced not as deprivation but as a natural exercise of personal and family values. Several participants, particularly women, noted the absence of nuanced Arab and Muslim characters in Western content and expressed appreciation for local productions offering more complex representations of Saudi and Gulf society.⁹⁹ The streaming platform thus functioned as a site where participants actively negotiated between openness to global culture and the maintenance of moral and religious identity.

France: French participants articulated concerns centred less on moral values and more on cultural homogenisation. The dominant anxiety was that Anglo-American content dominance was gradually eroding the distinctiveness of French cultural expression. Participants spoke of the "Disneyfication" of culture and expressed nostalgia for a more autonomous French audiovisual landscape.¹⁰⁰ However, several acknowledged the value of exposure to foreign perspectives and framed their consumption of international content as enriching. The tension was between cosmopolitan openness and protective cultural nationalism, a dynamic with deep roots in French debates about cultural globalisation.¹⁰¹

Cross-Case Comparison: Identity negotiation occurs in both contexts but takes different forms: in Saudi Arabia, it centres on the compatibility of global content with religious and social norms; in France, it centres on the defence of national cultural specificity against perceived Anglo-American hegemony. In both cases, audiences are active interpreters who bring their own value frameworks to bear on the content they consume.

5.6 Theme 6: Cultural Policy Awareness and Platform Responsibility

The final theme concerns participants' knowledge of and attitudes toward the cultural policies shaping the streaming environment.

Saudi Arabia: Participants demonstrated broad but generally shallow awareness of the cultural dimensions of Vision 2030. Most associated the emergence of cinemas, music festivals, and high-quality Arabic series with this national project, but few

⁹⁸ Zaid et al., op. cit., 6618–6620.

⁹⁹ Hala Guta and Michael Karolak, "Veiling and Blogging: Social Media as Modern-Day Hijab," *Journal of International Communication* 21, no. 1 (2015): 2–19, at 12–14; Haddad and Dhoest, op. cit., 273.

¹⁰⁰ Kuhn, op. cit., 51–53; Ahearne, op. cit., 5–8.

¹⁰¹ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 1–15.

could identify specific policies governing streaming platforms or content production.¹⁰² The dominant perception was that content diversity was a market outcome reflecting Saudi Arabia's new openness, rather than the result of deliberate regulation. Nonetheless, there was a widely shared sentiment that platforms should offer content respecting local values and that government had a legitimate role in ensuring this.

France: French participants were more policy-literate. Many were aware in general terms of obligations on platforms to invest in French and European productions, and some cited the exception culturelle as a point of national pride.¹⁰³ However, detailed regulatory knowledge was limited to a minority. Strong support for cultural quotas was tempered by pragmatism prioritising quality and discoverability over mere existence. Several participants complained that French series were often difficult to find, buried beneath American recommendations, and called for greater platform transparency in fulfilling their obligations.¹⁰⁴

**** Cross-Case Comparison:** A significant difference emerged in the perceived locus of cultural responsibility. Saudi participants tended to locate responsibility in the individual consumer and the market, with a residual expectation of state guidance. French participants were more likely to assign responsibility to the state and the platforms themselves, reflecting a political culture in which cultural policy is accepted as a legitimate domain of public intervention.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

Taken together, the six themes provide a multi-dimensional account of how Saudi and French audiences experience and make sense of cultural content on streaming platforms. The findings demonstrate that while global platforms create shared consumption infrastructures, audiences' engagement with those platforms is profoundly shaped by national media histories, linguistic environments, value systems, and regulatory traditions. The discussion that follows integrates these findings into the broader theoretical framework and draws out their implications for understanding cultural consumption in the age of global streaming.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 U&G Interpretation

The findings indicate that the transition from scheduled to on-demand consumption is well advanced in both contexts, though its character differs in theoretically significant ways. The Uses and Gratifications framework directs attention toward audiences' active motivations, but must be read alongside cultural

¹⁰² Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Saudi Vision 2030 (Riyadh, 2016), 46–47; Marwan M. Kraidy, "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the Remaking of Arab Media," in Arab Media Systems, ed. Carola Richter and Claudia Kozman (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021), 87–89.

¹⁰³ Kuhn, op. cit., 44–46; Ahearne, op. cit., 1–2.

¹⁰⁴ Lotz, op. cit., 180; Arcom, op. cit., 6.

proximity theory, platform studies, and cultural policy analysis to account for cross-national variation.¹⁰⁵

Among Saudi participants, the mobile-first, binge-oriented consumption pattern can be interpreted as reflecting agency-based and modality-based gratifications — the satisfaction of controlling viewing pace and device, and the pleasure associated with on-demand affordances.¹⁰⁶ This interpretation is supported by participants' descriptions of individualised viewing as personal autonomy. The normalisation of binge-watching resonates with observations about Netflix's design logic, which younger audiences appear to have readily assimilated.¹⁰⁷ These findings are also consistent with research on streaming domestication in Gulf countries, though that context encompasses significant national variation.¹⁰⁸

Among French participants, the persistence of broadcast television suggests temporally and socially embedded gratifications that streaming does not fully replicate: the shared national experience of live broadcasting and the anticipatory pleasure of weekly schedules. The cinephile vocabulary participants employed — "discovering a director's universe," valuing "auteur" series — can be interpreted through the personal-identity dimension of U&G, in which consumption serves to construct and affirm cultural distinction.¹⁰⁹ This pattern is consistent with research documenting the embeddedness of cinephile norms in educated French audiences' self-understanding.¹¹⁰

Cross-case comparison reveals that the Saudi case illustrates a more complete substitution of television by streaming, facilitated by younger demographics and the relative absence of deeply institutionalised public-service broadcasting. The French case demonstrates a hybrid media diet in which streaming augments rather than displaces established audiovisual institutions, suggesting that streaming gratifications are shaped by prior media regimes.

6.2 Algorithmic Influence and Agency

The findings reveal a striking divergence in how participants related to algorithmic recommendation, with important implications for understanding audience agency in curated media environments.

Saudi participants largely accepted algorithmic curation as convenient and empowering, consistent with Bucher's concept of the algorithmic imaginary — the folk theories through which users make sense of recommendation systems.¹¹¹ The

¹⁰⁵ Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, "Uses and Gratifications Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1973–74): 510–512; S. Shyam Sundar and Anthony M. Limperos, "Uses and Grats 2.0," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 57, no. 4 (2013): 505–507.

¹⁰⁶ Sundar and Limperos, *op. cit.*, 507–509.

¹⁰⁷ Sidneyeve Matrix, "The Netflix Effect," *Jeunesse* 6, no. 1 (2014): 124–126.

¹⁰⁸ Bouziane Zaid et al., "The Domestication of Netflix in the Gulf Countries," *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 6620–6621.

¹⁰⁹ Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, *op. cit.*, 516–518; Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 6th ed. (London: SAGE, 2010), 423–425.

¹¹⁰ Raymond Kuhn, *The Media in Contemporary France* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), 44–53; Arcom, *Baromètre 2023* (Paris: Arcom, 2023), 4–7.

¹¹¹ Taina Bucher, "The Algorithmic Imaginary," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 40–42. Bucher's study focused on Facebook; the concept is applied here as a theoretical lens for streaming audiences.

algorithmic imaginary was predominantly benign: the algorithm was perceived as serving individual preferences rather than constraining them. This orientation may be situated within a national discourse framing digital innovation as a marker of progress, though the present study does not establish a causal relationship between this discourse and participants' attitudes, and this interpretation should be treated as a contextual hypothesis.¹¹²

French participants exhibited considerably more ambivalence, centring concerns on the perceived tendency of recommendations to favour Anglophone content over French-language productions. This scepticism can be situated within a longer history of debate about market-driven versus state-supported cultural provision, though this historical context is offered as an interpretive frame rather than a demonstrated causal explanation.¹¹³

Both the Saudi strategy of deliberate profile management and the French practice of active recommendation avoidance represent forms of user agency exercised within algorithmically structured environments.¹¹⁴ Audiences are not passive recipients of curation but active agents developing practical strategies. Yet the character of this agency — optimisation versus resistance — is shaped by cultural and political contexts extending beyond the platform itself.

6.3 Platform-Mediated Cultural Proximity

One of the study's most theoretically significant findings concerns the relationship between algorithmic curation and cultural proximity. Straubhaar's foundational argument that audiences prefer culturally proximate content has been extensively supported.¹¹⁵ However, this formulation was developed within a different distribution structure — national broadcasters, physical media, cinema circuits — rather than algorithmically personalised catalogues. The present study suggests that algorithmic mediation significantly complicates this framework.

Participants in both groups consistently expressed desire for culturally familiar content, indicating that cultural proximity remained a recurring orientation in participants' accounts. However, the realisation of this preference is now contingent on whether proximate content is made algorithmically visible. French participants' complaints that French-language series were buried beneath Anglophone recommendations illustrate precisely this disjuncture. Saudi participants' valorisation of Shahid VIP as a platform making Arabic content reliably discoverable points to the same dynamic from a different angle.

¹¹² Marwan M. Kraidy, "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the Remaking of Arab Media," in *Arab Media Systems*, ed. Richter and Kozman (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021), 87–89; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Saudi Vision 2030* (Riyadh, 2016), 46–47.

¹¹³ Jeremy Ahearne, ed., *French Cultural Policy Debates* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1–10; Kuhn, *op. cit.*, 44–46.

¹¹⁴ Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," in *Media Technologies*, ed. Gillespie, Boczkowski, and Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 180–183; Bucher, *op. cit.*, 41.

¹¹⁵ Joseph D. Straubhaar, "Beyond Media Imperialism," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 1 (1991): 39–40; Straubhaar, *World Television* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 25–30.

This study therefore proposes platform-mediated cultural proximity as a conceptual refinement: what counts as proximate is not simply what is culturally familiar in the abstract, but what the platform makes visible and accessible through its recommendation architecture.¹¹⁶ This is offered as a proposed refinement requiring further empirical investigation across additional contexts before its generalisability can be assessed, but it represents a contribution to updating classical theories for the conditions of algorithmically mediated streaming.

6.4 Local Content and Identity

Kraidy's theory of hybridity — the argument that cultural experience involves complex mixing and creative synthesis rather than simple imperialism or resistance — provides a productive framework for interpreting how participants negotiated global and local content.¹¹⁷

Among Saudi participants, enthusiastic engagement with foreign content coexisted with genuine appreciation for high-quality Arabic originals without producing an explicit sense of cultural contradiction. The interviews did not indicate that participants experienced this mixing as threatening their cultural or religious identity. Rather, selective consumption — avoiding content conflicting with religious values while engaging with foreign content in other domains — functioned as a practical mechanism for managing global-local encounters. This is consistent with Kraidy's account of hybridity as actively managed rather than passively undergone, though this interpretation is the researcher's analytical reading rather than a claim that participants articulated their experience in these terms.

Among French participants, the negotiation was more explicitly ideological. The tension between enjoyment of American series and perceived responsibility to support French production reflects what Kraidy identifies as the contested politics of hybridity where national identity has been institutionally constructed.¹¹⁸ This tension was more pronounced among older and more educated participants; younger participants more readily treated content origin as irrelevant to quality, suggesting that the ideological charge of the local/foreign distinction may be attenuating over time — a possibility warranting longitudinal investigation.

6.5 Cross-Case Comparative Synthesis

The two cases reveal both convergence and divergence. At the level of consumption practices, participants in both groups described a substantial shift toward on-demand viewing, maintained multiple subscriptions, and demonstrated awareness of algorithmic personalisation. At the level of cultural meaning, the cases diverge significantly.

The Saudi case illustrates engagement characterised by pragmatic multilingualism, selective cultural negotiation organised around religious and social values, and growing pride in local content that does not generate strong ideological opposition to foreign consumption. The French case illustrates more explicitly politicised engagement, in which consumption choices carry connotations of

¹¹⁶ Fadi G. Haddad and Alexander Dhoest, "Netflix Speaks Arabic," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 14, no. 2 (2021): 268–271; Amanda D. Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 178–180.

¹¹⁷ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 1–15, 148–152.

¹¹⁸ Kraidy, *Hybridity*, 5–8; Kuhn, *op. cit.*, 51–53.

cultural citizenship, algorithmic recommendation faces critical scrutiny, and the state is expected to play a legitimate regulatory role.

These differences are embedded in structural contrasts: media history, linguistic position within the global system, demographic profile, regulatory tradition, and the relative strength of national audiovisual industries. The maximal-contrast design makes these contextual differences analytically visible. It shows how similar platform technologies may be interpreted and incorporated differently when they operate within distinct media histories, linguistic environments, demographic structures and regulatory traditions.¹¹⁹

6.6 Implications

A- Theoretical Implications

The findings support continued commitment to U&G for understanding streaming consumption while indicating that this framework requires integration with structural and cultural analysis. They support cultural proximity theory's continued relevance while proposing platform-mediated cultural proximity as a necessary update. They also contribute to algorithmic audience research by demonstrating that orientations toward recommendation systems are shaped by culturally specific dispositions.

B- Policy Implications

For French and European policymakers, the findings suggest that content investment obligations — such as Article 13(1) of the AVMSD — while necessary, may not guarantee discoverability within algorithmically curated environments.¹²⁰ Participants' accounts point to a structural gap between the obligation to fund local content and the ability to ensure it reaches audiences, suggesting that future frameworks should address discoverability as a distinct regulatory objective.¹²¹

For Saudi policymakers, the expansion of locally produced content has, from participants' accounts, contributed to a stronger sense of cultural representation. However, participants' residual expectation that content should respect religious and social values points to an ongoing role for attention to content standards alongside production encouragement.

6.7 Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample of thirty participants does not permit statistical generalisation; findings are interpretive insights grounded in participant accounts.¹²² Second, both samples were drawn from urban, educated, streaming-active populations, potentially underrepresenting rural and less digitally

¹¹⁹ John Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 47–50; Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 70–73.

¹²⁰ Directive (EU) 2018/1808, art. 13(1), OJ L 303 (2018); European Audiovisual Observatory, *Prominence of Audiovisual Works* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2020), 12–18.

¹²¹ Arcom, *op. cit.*, 6; European Audiovisual Observatory, *op. cit.*, 20–24.

¹²² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 96–97; Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, "How Many Interviews Are Enough?," *Field Methods* 18, no. 1 (2006): 79–80.

engaged audiences. Third, the researcher's linguistic and cultural positioning inevitably affects cross-national comparison; reflexive journalling, peer debriefing, and back-translation procedures were employed but cannot eliminate interpretive asymmetries.¹²³ Fourth, the study was conducted during a specific six-month window in 2023, and the rapidly evolving streaming landscape means findings are temporally situated. Fifth, while the eight streaming diaries enriched the analysis, the diary sample was smaller and not systematically matched across national groups, limiting conclusions drawn from diary data alone.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Direct Answers to Research Questions

This study examined how participants in Saudi Arabia and France described the role of digital streaming platforms in their cultural content consumption. The empirical material comprised 30 semi-structured interviews and eight complementary streaming diaries collected between March and August 2023. The conclusions that follow are interpretive findings grounded in participants' accounts and should not be read as generalisable descriptions of Saudi or French populations as a whole.

Participants in both groups described a substantial shift from scheduled television toward on-demand, platform-based consumption, though its character differed considerably. Saudi participants described a mobile-first, binge-oriented mode of viewing that can be interpreted, through the Uses and Gratifications framework, as reflecting agency-based and modality-based gratifications within a digitally saturated, rapidly liberalising entertainment landscape.¹²⁴ French participants described a more hybrid media diet in which broadcast television and cinema persisted alongside streaming, structured by cinephile norms and a discourse of cultural quality.¹²⁵

Algorithmic curation was generally perceived as convenient and empowering among Saudi participants, consistent with Bucher's concept of the algorithmic imaginary, whereas French participants more frequently expressed concern that recommendation systems directed them toward Anglophone content at the expense of French-language productions.¹²⁶ Language preferences reflected patterns of cultural proximity: Saudi participants demonstrated pragmatic multilingualism, switching between Arabic and English according to genre and context, while French

¹²³ Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2013), 126–128; Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 341–343.

¹²⁴ S. Shyam Sundar and Anthony M. Limperos, "Uses and Grats 2.0," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 57, no. 4 (2013): 507–509; Sidneyeve Matrix, "The Netflix Effect," *Jeunesse* 6, no. 1 (2014): 124–126. U&G is applied as an interpretive lens rather than a directly tested framework.

¹²⁵ Raymond Kuhn, *The Media in Contemporary France* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), 44–53; Arcom, *Baromètre 2023* (Paris: Arcom, 2023), 4–7.

¹²⁶ Taina Bucher, "The Algorithmic Imaginary," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 40–42. Bucher's study addressed Facebook; the concept is applied here as a theoretical framework for interpreting streaming audiences' orientations. Jeremy Ahearne, ed., *French Cultural Policy Debates* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1–10.

participants exhibited stronger attachment to French-language content, supported by an established regulatory framework.¹²⁷

Engagement with local and foreign content revealed a spectrum rather than a binary. Saudi participants expressed enthusiasm for high-quality Arabic originals while valuing foreign content in genres perceived as under-supplied locally. French participants navigated this terrain more ideologically, describing consumption of American content with ambivalence and framing the choice of French content as an expression of cultural commitment.¹²⁸ These patterns can be interpreted in light of the contrasting policy contexts of the two countries, though the study's qualitative design does not permit causal claims about the relationship between structural conditions and individual choices.

7.2 Summary of Contributions

The study advances three contributions. First, it proposes the concept of platform-mediated cultural proximity as a refinement of Straubhaar's foundational theory. The findings provide evidence consistent with the proposition that in algorithmically curated environments, cultural proximity is contingent not only on audience preference but on whether proximate content is rendered algorithmically visible and accessible — a disjuncture illustrated by both French participants' difficulty discovering French content and Saudi participants' valorisation of Shahid VIP for its Arabic catalogue.¹²⁹ This refinement requires further investigation across additional contexts before its generalisability can be assessed.

Second, the study extends Uses and Gratifications theory by indicating that streaming gratifications are culturally inflected: established gratificatory structures associated with broadcast and cinema coexist with platform gratifications rather than being supplanted by them, particularly in the French case.¹³⁰

Third, the study contributes a comparative qualitative analysis of two national contexts that remain underexplored in conjunction in the existing literature, demonstrating through maximal contrast case selection that common platform technologies are experienced differently according to distinct cultural, linguistic, and policy environments.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Joseph D. Straubhaar, "Beyond Media Imperialism," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 1 (1991): 39–40; Fadi G. Haddad and Alexander Dhoest, "Netflix Speaks Arabic," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 14, no. 2 (2021): 270–271; Directive (EU) 2018/1808, art. 13(1).

¹²⁸ Kuhn, op. cit., 44–46; Ahearne, op. cit., 5–8; Toby Miller, *Cultural Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 1–10.

¹²⁹ Joseph D. Straubhaar, *World Television* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 25–30; Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," in *Media Technologies*, ed. Gillespie, Boczkowski, and Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 180–183; Amanda D. Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 178–180.

¹³⁰ Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, "Uses and Gratifications Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1973–74): 513–516; Sundar and Limperos, op. cit., 504–510.

¹³¹ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 54–56; John Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 47–50.

7.3 Final Reflections

The findings resist both utopian and dystopian narratives of platform-driven globalisation. Streaming platforms neither simply liberate audiences nor inevitably erode local identities; rather, they establish a terrain of negotiation in which audiences exercise genuine agency within conditions shaped by algorithmic architectures and policy frameworks.¹³² The Saudi case suggests that locally produced content can contribute to a stronger sense of cultural representation; the French case suggests that regulatory investment obligations may not guarantee discoverability within algorithmically curated interfaces.¹³³ As platformisation deepens, the productive question is not whether global or local content will prevail, but how the terms of their coexistence are being redefined — by users, by states, and by the platforms that mediate between cultural preference and cultural access.

8. Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed to three stakeholder groups and flow directly from the interpretive findings and theoretical analysis presented in the preceding chapters. They are offered as evidence-informed propositions rather than prescriptive mandates, given the qualitative and exploratory character of the study.

8.1. For Streaming Platforms

Participants' accounts suggest that recommendation systems may systematically favour mainstream, Anglophone content, a pattern consistent with broader scholarly concerns about engagement-driven algorithmic curation.¹³⁴ Platforms should therefore consider incorporating linguistic preference, cultural relevance, and content diversity as explicit parameters alongside engagement metrics, and should offer users greater transparency and control over the criteria shaping their personalised interfaces.¹³⁵ Enhanced visibility for local productions — not merely their presence in the catalogue — is essential if platforms are to meet the expectations of audiences who value culturally proximate content, a need documented in both the Saudi and French samples of this study.¹³⁶

¹³² José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11–15, 161–175; Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 1–15.

¹³³ European Audiovisual Observatory, *Prominence of Audiovisual Works* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2020), 20–24; Arcom, op. cit., 6. The inference regarding discoverability is drawn from participants' accounts rather than from an assessment of the legal effectiveness of the regulatory framework.

¹³⁴ Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," in *Media Technologies*, ed. Gillespie, Boczkowski, and Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 180–183; Taina Bucher, "The Algorithmic Imaginary," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 40–42. This characterisation is grounded in participants' accounts of content discoverability rather than in direct analysis of platform algorithmic systems.

¹³⁵ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 161–175; Bucher, op. cit., 41.

¹³⁶ Amanda D. Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 178–180; Arcom, *Baromètre 2023* (Paris: Arcom, 2023), 5–6;

8.2. For Content Producers and Cultural Institutions

From participants' accounts, locally produced content that meets competitive production standards was perceived as culturally meaningful and commanded genuine appreciation. This finding is consistent with recent research on Arabic original productions and the broader Gulf streaming environment.¹³⁷ French cultural institutions should continue supporting French-language fiction and advocating for its discoverability on global platforms, recognising that a diverse domestic production sector remains central to cultural diversity objectives.¹³⁸

8.3. For Policymakers

For Saudi policymakers, participants' accounts indicate that the expansion of locally produced streaming content has contributed to a stronger sense of cultural representation, consistent with the entertainment reform agenda of Vision 2030.¹³⁹ Policy attention might usefully address the nuanced representation of Saudi and Arab identities on global platforms and support initiatives that develop critical audience awareness of algorithmic processes, though this recommendation extends beyond the direct scope of the present study's findings.¹⁴⁰

For French and European policymakers, the findings suggest that content investment obligations — including the European works requirements established under Article 13(1) of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive and the more specific financial contribution obligations applicable to platforms operating in France — while structurally important, may not in themselves guarantee that locally produced works are discoverable within algorithmically curated interfaces.¹⁴¹ Future regulatory frameworks might consider addressing discoverability and algorithmic

European Audiovisual Observatory, *Prominence of Audiovisual Works* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2020), 12–18.

¹³⁷ Fadi G. Haddad and Alexander Dhoest, "Netflix Speaks Arabic," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 14, no. 2 (2021): 274–275; Bouziane Zaid et al., "The Domestication of Netflix in the Gulf Countries," *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 6625.

¹³⁸ Raymond Kuhn, *The Media in Contemporary France* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), 44–53; European Audiovisual Observatory, *Prominence of Audiovisual Works*, op. cit., 20–24.

¹³⁹ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Saudi Vision 2030* (Riyadh, 2016), 46–47; Marwan M. Kraidy, "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the Remaking of Arab Media," in *Arab Media Systems*, ed. Richter and Kozman (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021), 87–89.

¹⁴⁰ Zaid et al., op. cit., 6618–6620; Haddad and Dhoest, op. cit., 273.

¹⁴¹ Directive (EU) 2018/1808, art. 13(1), OJ L 303 (2018); Décret n° 2021-793 du 22 juin 2021 relatif aux services de médias audiovisuels à la demande, *Journal officiel de la République française*, 23 June 2021. The European Directive establishes a 30 per cent European works quota and prominence obligations; the French implementing decree additionally imposes specific financial contribution requirements on platforms operating in France.

prominence as distinct objectives alongside investment requirements, an approach that has begun to emerge in European platform governance discussions.¹⁴²

9. Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several methodological constraints, which concurrently point toward fruitful directions for subsequent inquiry.

9.1. Limitations

First, the research employed a purposive, non-probability sample of 30 participants distributed across two national contexts. While this sample size is consistent with established principles of saturation in qualitative interview studies, it does not support statistical generalization to the broader populations of Saudi Arabia or France.¹⁴³ Consequently, the transferability of the findings rests on the thickness of the contextual description provided rather than on representativeness in the statistical sense.¹⁴⁴

Second, the data consist of self-reported behaviours, attitudes and perceptions gathered through interviews and solicited diaries. Such data are subject to well-documented cognitive and motivational biases, including recall inaccuracies and social desirability effects, whereby participants may present their cultural consumption choices in a manner they perceive as more socially acceptable.¹⁴⁵

Third, although careful back-translation procedures were employed to ensure the accuracy of translations from Arabic and French into English, the cross-language nature of the study inevitably involves some loss of semantic nuance, particularly where culturally specific concepts lacked direct equivalents.¹⁴⁶

Fourth, and critically, as a cross-cultural interpretive study conducted across distinct national and linguistic settings, the analysis is inherently shaped by the researchers' own cultural positionalities and linguistic assumptions. While we remained attentive to this dynamic throughout the coding and interpretation phases, the absence of a systematically documented reflexivity protocol—such as a structured audit trail or external peer debriefing—constitutes an additional

¹⁴² European Audiovisual Observatory, *Prominence of Audiovisual Works*, op. cit., 20–24; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, op. cit., 161–175; Arcom, op. cit., 6.

¹⁴³ Guest, Greg, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson. “How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability.” *Field Methods* 18, no. 1 (2006): 74–76.

¹⁴⁴ Lincoln, Yvonna S., and Egon G. Guba. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985, 316–318.

¹⁴⁵ Robert M. Groves, Floyd J. Fowler, Mick P. Couper, James M. Lepkowski, Eleanor Singer and Roger Tourangeau, *Survey Methodology*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009), 311–314.

¹⁴⁶ Richard W. Brislin, “Back-Translation for Cross-Cultural Research,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 1, no. 3 (1970): 185–216, at 186–192; Allison Squires, “Methodological Challenges in Cross-Language Qualitative Research: A Research Review,” *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 46, no. 2 (2009): 277–287, at 280–283.

interpretive constraint that readers should consider when evaluating the conclusions drawn.¹⁴⁷

9.2. Future Research

A number of directions for future research emerge from these limitations and from the findings themselves.

First, quantitative, survey-based designs with larger and probabilistically representative samples would permit robust hypothesis testing of the patterns identified here across a wider population and would enable the examination of relationships between streaming consumption and demographic variables at a national scale.¹⁴⁸

Second, multi-country comparative studies that extend beyond the Saudi–French dyad to include other linguistic and regulatory contexts would further illuminate the interplay between global platforms and local cultural environments.

Third, given that younger media users, particularly those of Generation Z, often exhibit platform preferences and content curation habits that differ markedly from previous cohorts, age-focused cohort studies drawing on up-to-date behavioural data are urgently needed.¹⁴⁹

Fourth, the present study has foregrounded the role of algorithmic recommendation as a crucial mediator of cultural visibility; controlled algorithmic audit studies that systematically compare how platforms treat local and foreign content in different national markets would provide a valuable complement to audience-centred research.¹⁵⁰

Finally, the present study was limited to video-based streaming services; future work could usefully extend the inquiry to music and audio streaming, where the dynamics of language, cultural proximity and algorithmic curation may operate according to distinct logics.

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¹⁴⁸ Dillman, Don A., Jolene D. Smyth, and Leah Melani Christian. *Internet, Phone, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. 4th ed. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2014, 1–15; and Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. 6th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018, 54–56 (for the distinction between analytic and statistical generalization).

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