ESSAY

Using Collaborative Gaming to Engage Arab Youth in Cultural Memes

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of cultural memes on social media platforms as a tool for engaging Arab youth in Arabic culture and a method of cultural transmission among youth. Engagement in the creation, publishing and promotion of memes can be accomplished if the youth involved in the early stages of the creation process can be trained so that they become highly skilled at the task and at the same time are presented with challenges that match their skills, and have clear goals and measurable outcomes. The paper draws on flow theory's premise that a state of total absorption, 'flow', can be attained in a game-like environment were the actors are highly skilled and the challenge

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matches their skill set. By combining the viral properties of memes and their ability to transmit cultural content with the strength of engagement that a state of flow can create, the basis for a framework solution to engage youth in cultural content by creating memes in a collaborative game-like environment requires: (1) upskilling the youth involved in the creation of the memes; (2) consulting with local community elders and leaders in the initial storytelling; and (3) designing a game-like environment as a multi-phased competition that requires using the skills attained to perform difficult challenges and that promises rewards in the context of cultural stature and local and regional recognition.

T he initial optimism that swept the Arab world passed with the same speed it had arrived. It is now completely erased; the Arab Spring has turned into a long winter and the Arab world is in turmoil politically, economically and socially. As a result, Arabic identity is facing a crisis like never before and Arabic cultural content is taking a background role in the identity formation of Arab youth. The phenomenal rise of optimism around the Arab world and its equally phenomenal fall has created a sense of despair and doubt about identity. The future of what it means to be an Arab politically, ideologically, and more importantly, culturally, is now uncertain. This has hit young Arabs the hardest. Arab youth are often found on social media expressing confusion and frustration, asking the very important question of what does it mean to be an Arab amid all the chaos of

Daesh (ISIS), the failure of the Egyptian democratic process, the war in Syria and the increasing sectarianism of the Arab world (Tarawnah, 2011).

The last survey conducted by ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller (2014) of 3,500 Arab youth between the ages of 18 and 24 across 16 Arab countries found that Arab youth are losing faith in any positive outcome of the Arab Spring. Furthermore, young Arabs feel increasingly more positive about their own national government. Their sentiment is gradually shifting – in the aftermath of the Arab Spring – from that of positive pride in their Arabic identity to an inward-looking nationalistic view that relies on one's national government and identifies with its local agenda, and whose primary concern is economic stability, not cultural identity. In effect, as the Arabic collective process fails, young people tend to look at the national narrative of economic stability and their government's ability to fight terrorism as a natural response to the disappointment of the premise of an Arab awakening.

Since the Arab Spring there has been very little cultural content within the Arab media ecology, with the exception of music, poetry and art, that have preserved a pan-Arab narrative, as clearly demonstrated on pan-Arab TV shows like Arab Idol (Fuller, 2014), where contestants and judges often promote a united Arab world narrative. This narrative carries on in social media through the use of Arabic language music videos, poetry, movies and humorous memes that include jokes and satire. Arab youth have managed to preserve a pan-Arab narrative only when it relates to entertainment content but not content of a political or cultural nature. This, on the one hand, shows that not all is lost, but it also demonstrates an urgent need

to re-engage young Arabs in their cultural identity. A meme that has both entertainment and cultural messages can be an effective way to reintroduce young Arabs to the discussion around what it means to be an Arab and to identify with being an Arab while distancing themselves from the political confusion engulfing the Arab world.

Cultural memes serve a dual purpose for these youth of identifying their Arabism, while not having to deal with the political and ideological problems that come with being an Arab in the age of ISIS. The more these cultural memes become sophisticated, the more they become viral and are able to spread and infect more youth, and the more there is a likelihood that they can be effective in providing a counter ISIS narrative. Thus, cultural memes that have entertainment value have also the potential to elevate engagement in politics, albeit indirectly. This level of elevated engagement is likely to happen the more that cultural memes are transmitted across the Arab world by influencer youth. And with this cultural transmission comes the possibility that these memes will morph and revert in such a way that would resonate strongly with the needs of these youth, and would generate the required level of engagement such that any youth exposed to these cultural memes will feel a desire to pass them on to their social network.

This paper examines the changes in the media ecology of Arab youth social media consumption from before the Arab Spring, during its peak period of euphoria and after its failure, in order to address Arab youths aspirations for a future where a new, proud, Arab identity becomes possible by reinventing a cultural narrative that can be memed on social media platforms in a process of

cultural transmission. The use of cultural memes, if they are enabled with the ability to generate engagement and connect Arab youth with a positive narrative of their history, culture and identity, is then able to create a contact zone (Pratt, 1991) in which a new collective media ecology will emerge that will be able to define a future Arab cultural narrative that preserves these young people's sense of belonging, regardless of the difficult political situation.

The paper proposes that the initial creator of a meme must also be involved in the process of publishing and promoting this meme in order for the meme to engage young people to an elevated state able to generate a forward momentum and secondary transmission. The process requires significant time and commitment on the part of the creator. This commitment can be accomplished if the creator attains a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory states that when a state of flow is attained, an actor becomes totally absorbed in the process of creation, so that the final goal becomes less important and the process itself provides engagement (1975). Such that the person in that state is less aware of the self and totally absorbed in the task at hand. The state of flow requires that the actor has good skills and that the challenges to achieve the goal are difficult but within one's skill set. By combining a meme's ability to transmit culture with the engagement produced when a state of flow is attained, we are able to engage youth in cultural content over social media. In order to do so, I propose that: (1) a process of training young people should include workshops for each phase so that they acquire the right skills required for each specific phase; (2) that the local elders and community leaders be involved in the process, especially at

the creation phase; and (3) that the program provides clear challenges with clear rewards in multiphase game-like environments.

The Literature on Cultural Memes

The concept of a cultural meme was first noted by biologist Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Dawkins used the term to describe ideas or behaviors that can spread from one person to another within a culture. Since then, the concept of memes as units of cultural transmission has been adopted by sociology and philosophy, with Douglas Hofstadter coining the term 'memetics' by analogy with the biological equivalent of genetics (1981). By the end of the twentieth century, memetics was a term used regularly – if not without controversy – around what is the smallest unit that would constitute a meme (Brodie, 1996; Blackmore, 1999). The term has since been re-appropriated by the Internet to a more narrow definition of self-contained units of media that have cultural values, and are able to spread virally via the Internet from one person to many (Distin, 2005; Shifman, 2012; Shifman, 2013).

As mentioned above, there has been a lot of debate over what constitutes a cultural meme, and what is the smallest unit of a cultural meme and is that unit a vehicle of content or the content itself (Atran, 2001; Dawkins, 1982)? What resulted are two different approaches to memetics. These two differ on who is the boss: is it the actual idea expressed by the meme, or is it the vehicle carrying this meme? Susan Blackmore (1999) refers to people as meme machines operated by numerous memes who are helpless in the process. While Conte (2000) considers

memes as spreadable ideas and people as actors contributing to this spread. I adhere to the latter premise, as I consider cultural transmission and cultural content only one part of the complex human-media interaction, where the totality is part of the new emerging media ecology (Postman, 2000). Regardless of how internalized or externalized memes are, and in relation to who is the transmitter, what matters most is that memes operate from a micro level of personal transmission to a macro level of cultural value adaptation. In addition to the embedded ability of memes to transmit cultural information, a successful meme is able to reproduce itself in multiple versions while preserving the ideology of its content (Thompson, 2012). This would be a powerful tool of cultural transmission, both utilizing the local context at the micro level and then expanding it by re-versioning to fit other locations – as part of the macro level.

What makes memes powerful and of interest for the process of youth engagement is that they carry a cultural message, and this message, once memed, will have a life of its own that is capable of growing, mutating and infecting generations to come, thus carrying out the task of cultural preservation that was traditionally transmitted orally from generation to generation (Checkoway, 2011). The proposed process is primarily digital and over social media, with the exception of the first phase of meme creation, in which the stories need to be first collected offline in consultation with community elders. In fact, the older forms of oral storytelling: *Hatota* or *Kharareef* in the Arab world, were non-digital forms of cultural memes not too dissimilar from the process of Internet memes. Only the platform changes to digital, which also changes the target audience

to young people. The new memes available on social media are mutations of these older memes. In this case the mutation was caused by the introduction of a new medium or a new mechanism of infection. One can argue that the change of medium is a major shift that requires in-depth understanding of cultural transmission via social media, its pros, cons and implications for the final results. Even though there is a lot of research conducted on Internet memes, there has been no in depth explanation of the long-term effect of such cultural transmission occurring on the new digital platforms.

It is important to note here that while in biology high fidelity transmission is the norm, with Internet memes – especially memes with high cultural value – high fidelity transmission is the exception rather than the norm (Atran, 2001). This can be problematic if we need to ensure a successful spread of a cultural idea, thus it becomes important not to rely entirely on Internet memes and vital that these memes operate within a media ecosystem capable of receiving and transmitting them efficiently so that we can minimize the low fidelity found cultural memes. Thus the environmental and cultural context in which these memes are created and then released becomes a very important factor in providing the right parameters for such cultural transmission to occur effectively (Atran, 2001; Sperber, 1985). Even though cultural memes have low fidelity, it still holds true that they possess most of the characteristics of other Internet memes in that they are easily replicated, they carry a cultural value that can transfer from one person to another and are adaptable, and thus can also mutate and provide a second tier of transmission.

Most Internet memes rely on humor, unexpectedness

or pure emotional value to make them go viral. Cultural memes often lack the element of light entertainment and have to resort to other methods in order to compensate for this deficiency. In most cases, the viral value of these cultural memes can and does rely heavily on the creators' stature in their local community and their online network once they publish it on social media. This is why the human factor becomes key to the success of cultural memes. In other words, we need to ensure that the initial transmitters and creators of a cultural meme do so with such strong belief that it can be infectious within their immediate networks, and with such force and enthusiasm that gives it momentum to be further transmitted to a third tier, thus creating a snowball effect. In order to do this, we need to look at the concept of flow developed by Csíkszentmihalyi, "which is about creating a holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 36). This holistic experience and total absorption can only be achieved if the person creating the meme has such an enjoyable experience that nothing else seems to matter: "The experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). If we ensure that the initial phases of creating these cultural memes take place in a game-like environment with high skills and high challenges, we can create optimal conditions for flow to occur, ensuring that such a meme will have enough energy to go past the first tier transmitters (Asakawa, 2004).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identified the following key factors, which, if present, will create a flow experience: (1) Intense concentration on the task at hand while still pre-

serving awareness of the actions taken; (2) Loss of reflective self-consciousness; (3) The sense of total control over the actions and tasks undertaken; and (4) The process of undertaking the tasks will become as rewarding as the goals expected from completing that task. Once these elements are achieved, we can say that the person executing this action has attained flow. This flow can occur in a game-like environment if there are milestones of obstacles and rewards.

In our proposed model, the creator of the cultural meme must first be trained offline through a deliberate process involving an incubation period and a final validation of skills. Once highly skilled, the creator is then given game-like tasks with milestones that include capturing the content, converting it into micro stories (digital memes), publishing it and finally promoting it to their social networks. This process will achieve a state of flow that is capable of creating viral transmission of the cultural meme. It is also important to understand the concept of low-fidelity in the transmission of culture, which itself is a mechanism for cultural preservation. In order to preserve culture we need to transmit it, but it is equally important that transmission should be managed in such manner that ensures a transmission speed high enough to generate flow but low enough to preserve the cultural content from the danger of rapid mutation (Gergely & Csibra, 2006; Cavalli-Sforza, Feldman, Chen, & Dornbusch, 1982; Bisin & Verdier, 2001). Thus a delicate balance needs to be struck so that we ensure cultural transmission but at a rate that preserves the original meme from too much mutation.

Arabic society is a highly contextual culture where in-

terpersonal contact is more important than the value of the message itself (Hall, 1976), which puts even more emphasis on the personal relationships among the elders, the meme creators and the audience. Community elders and leaders also ensure that the value of this transmission is such that it can relate to the cultural context. Thus, it is essential to understand the local context of the transmission of Arab cultural memes in relation to each Arab country, each region, city or even village because each locality is its own context. These variations have the potential to confuse but, if handled correctly, can add depth and a macro tapestry of cultural knowledge.

One can argue that in spite of the variations within each local community, the power of the receiver in the interpretation of a meme will have a direct influence on the nature and fidelity of the transmission of such a meme. Atran in his article *The trouble with memes* uses the example of a group of marching Maoists, noting that:

> In the statement 'Let a thousand flowers bloom,' you can bet most marchers do not have the same flowers in mind, or any flowers at all, or even a medium fidelity version of what others have in mind. What the crowd has in common is a context, for example, a rally against 'western influence'. The shared context mobilizes background knowledge in people's minds. (Atran, 2001, p. 365)

In the case of the Arab world, identity becomes that important shared context necessary to preserve the originality of such variants across Arab locales.

The Question of Arab Identity

Arabic identity is defined both by language and geogra-

phy. Although an overwhelming majority of Arabs are Muslims, there are still a sizable Christian minority that also identify as Arabs, in this case religion is not a defining factor of Arab identity. Many non-Arabic-speaking minorities that are geographically located in the Arab world, might or might not identify with being an Arab depending on the context. In the pan-Arab TV show Arab Idol, contestants from Kurdish background who spoke and understood very little Arabic, were announced by the host and judges as Arabs, with one of the judges even addressing one of the Kurdish contestants: 'Welcome to Arab Idol, the program of all Arabs', so in this case Arab nationalism included non-Arabic-speaking Kurds (Fuller, 2014).

Since the early days of Islam, there have always been two distinctive narratives, one closely tying Arab Nationalism to Islam, the other emphasizes that religion is not a defining factor in being an Arab; that is, being a Muslim, does not necessarily mean being an Arab, and vice versa, being an Arab does not imply being of the Muslim faith. Arab nationalism dates back to 1868, when Ibrahim Al-yazigi, a Syrian Christian Arab philosopher, urged the Arabs to recover their lost ancient vitality and rebel against the Turks (Maalouf, 2000; 2001; 2011). At the time, the Arab world had been subjected to 400 years of Ottoman occupation, which was deliberate in trying to erase Arab identity and replace it with a narrative of the Ottoman Islamic empire, which was expansionist in its mandate. This meant that it needed total control of its subjects, systematically erasing their cultural identity. However, the Ottomans did not manage to erase the Arabic language, which remained the main spoken language with only minor modification in the form of a few Turkish expressions

(Maalouf, 1984).

Arab nationalism was born slowly from a small beginning with Al Yazigi and a small group of Arab elites who were both rebelling against the Ottoman Empire and trying to sculpt an identity based on language and geography and not religion (Tamari, 2008). This movement reached its height with Abdel Al Nasser's attempts to unify the Arab world and with the creation of a confederation between Egypt and Syria. Arab nationalism was fated to fail miserably with the repeated Arab defeats by Israel over three wars. Finally, with the death of Abed Al Nasser the United Arab experiment was totally abandoned. Two things remained festering in the background over the next 50 years, and until the Arab Spring. First, the Baath Party in Syria, which clings to some remnant of Arab nationalism by virtue of its secular mandate. Second, the Palestinian question, which had somehow united Arabs against a common enemy that had damaged their pride and, at the same time, occupied a very important symbol of their identity, Jerusalem. This desire to unite against a common enemy and restore Arab pride was constantly oppressed by two counter narratives. On one hand, the Arab regimes were eager to align with the United States of America as to preserve the narrative of Israel as the enemy. On the other hand, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, which also tried to redefine the Palestinian question as an Islamic one, with some success. *'Al Quds Al Arabyi',* Arabic Jerusalem became *'Quds Al Islam'*, Islam's Jerusalem. The tug of war between Arabic vs. Islamic identities, and western-backed regimes vs. underground Islamic movements vs. a small leftist, pan-Arab movement contributed to the delicate equilibrium of the status quo.

In spite of the clear show of strength by Islamic parties and the apparent death of Arab nationalism, the early days of the Arab Spring and the few years preceding it showed a steady resurrection of Arab identity, even though this was short-lived after the Arab Spring, especially when it became clear that the Muslim brotherhood and other Islamic parties were the clear winners of the Arab Spring. Subsequently, the Arab Spring devolved into a chaotic sectarian war that spanned the Arab world and threatens to yet again put religion and, worse, sectarianism as the key winner, while pushing the Arab identity agenda further into silence. This new development and the increased loss of faith in the Arab Spring has resulted in Arab youth being forced to abandon the Arabic cultural narrative and resort to their own country's national narrative, and, in some cases, western values (ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, 2014).

The few pockets of resistance in the Arab world that call for the resurrection of Arab identity often try to associate it with Arab nationalism. In my opinion, this is a grave mistake that threatens to taint their message and attach it to previous failure. A more effective approach is to use cultural memes to connect the positive aspects of Arab cultural heritage with a new modern twist that can resonate with youth. Thus we bypass the last 500 years of turmoil and introduce a new Arab identity narrative based on Arabic culture, history and language.

Arab Youth and Social Media

In the early days of Social media, Arab youth were primarily used the platform as a tool of communication to chat between friends, to announce social events and to

share humorous memes that were often just a direct re-hashing of western memes. Over the five years of social media use before the Arab Spring, the content slowly changed to include original Arabic memes, albeit mainly non-political. A study on the use of Facebook in the Arab world prior to the Arab spring found that:

> The overwhelming presence of the above-mentioned applications did not manifest in actual Arab cultural and social presence. A closer look at the content of video applications contained by the sample profiles indicated that foreign content made up 65 percent of applications. (Fauad, 2009, p. 96)

A great deal of research discusses the role of social media in political engagement in general, and among youth in particular. While it is not yet clear how much this role leads to tangible results on the ground, most researchers agree that, indeed, social media play a positive role in participatory political and civic engagement. This role is amplified among youth due to the high rate of social media consumption among this group (Loader, 2007; Bennett, 2008; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). Particular to the Arab world and in relation to youth's engagement in the Arab Spring and in politics pre and post the Arab Spring, I would argue that before social media the Internet had been used as a tool of communication among activists, as well as to organize and spread particular messages of dissent, but that this was limited to a hardcore group of activists (Dahdal, 2013; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010). Furthermore, in the Arab world among Arab youth, the typical use of social media was mainly of a non-political nature. Nevertheless, this engagement, especially with the added benefit of ease of use

and accessibility that social media brought to the table, had the effect of narrowing the digital divide and later proved important in creating the right environment for these same youth to politically engage when the time came. While some researchers argue that social media might be a distraction that will generate the opposite effect by keeping people busy (and guilt free) online and off the streets (Morozov, 2011; Gladwell & Shirky, 2011), most researchers agree that social media had been instrumental in providing a ripe environment in the years preceding the Arab Spring. It is clear that social media were used by activists as an effective tool to communicate and mobilize the online communities that were then utilized to mobilize the crowd, and more importantly, show the world what was happening as it unfolded (Shirky, 2008; Khanfar, 2011; Abdulla, 2011). For example, when Egypt banned journalists from Tahreer Square, social media and net citizens were able to deliver powerful images, videos and messages that were then broadcast by traditional media (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). Here it is important to note that social media power was not just used for communication, mobilization and news gathering – a more important role that social media played in the events of the Arab Spring was already years in the making before the events in Tunisia and before January 25.

The Internet was first introduced to the Arab world in Egypt in 1993. In those early days it was used by youth to communicate, especially using the then popular *MSN chat*, and *PalTalk* in North Africa, so when *Facebook*, *MySpace* and *Hi5* became popular in the west, they also quickly became popular among youth in the Arab world. Social media gradually became a content generator and a place for

youth to consume content. By 2005 blogging became another prominent aspect of Internet use, as a natural progression from using the Internet as a communication tool to using it to distribute content, and as a forum to debate current social and political problems (Lim, 2012). Arab blogger and online activists started distributing political content and we saw the emergence of some coordinated civic campaigns. *Kefaya*, translated 'Enough', was one such campaign that used the Internet to create a community. Thus we have the beginning of the use of the Internet's full range of communication, content and community – something later utilized by the newly developed social media platforms. Thus blogging was the first mode of online civic engagement, with prominent bloggers such as Wael Abbass daring to take on regimes (Abdulla, 2010).

This pre-Arab Spring role of social media was key for two reasons: (1) for building online communities that discussed the dire political, economical and social situation in the Arab world; and (2) for creating a slow cultural revolution through the dissemination of cultural content over these social media platforms (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). In addition, there were, if to a lesser degree, some key political events that were initiated on social media pre Arab Spring. One incident that clearly illustrates the use of social media in political activism before the the Arab Spring is that of Esraa Abdel Fattah, who formed a Facebook group called 'April 6 Youth Movement' in which she asked workers to simply stay at home and not go to work on April 6 as a form of civil action and solidarity of workers in the city al Mahala Al Kubra who planned to demonstrate on that same day. Esraa was able to garner 73,000 members to her Facebook group, a great success in those early

days of social media activism in the Middle East in 2008 (Abdulla, 2010). Another example of political activism prior to the Arab Spring is the 'We Are All Khaled Said' Facebook page, which was launched in 2010, six months before the Arab Spring and is often credited as a key factor in organizing Egyptian youth in the days before January 25 (Howard & Hussain, 2011). The page had begun initially as a response to the brutal killing of a young citizen outside an Internet café in Alexandria by the then infamous Egyptian internal security police. The page called for street action and for the two months following its launch managed to mobilize five silent demonstrations protesting the injustice and holding two pictures of Said: one of a young clean-shaven youth and the other of his badly battered face (Eltanhawy & Wiest, 2011; Lim, 2012). Thus social media use had, in fact, evolved as a prelude to the message that the Arab Spring carried, which is: "We dare to rebel from what is to what can be." This message was only possible as a direct result of the cultural awareness created by pages like the Said page. It is therefore important to note that the Arab Spring had in effect been building up for years before it broiled to the surface (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011).

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on 17 December 2010, a wave of uprising took the Arab world and the rest of the world by surprise. But the seeds for such widespread revolt against the status quo would have not been unexpected by activists using digital media in the Arab world. The digital media and online readiness for the early spread of the Arab Spring was firmly in place many years before the December 2010 events (Mcquillan, 2011). The early days of euphoria that accompanied the Arab

Spring disappeared as quickly as they had occurred, with the failure on the part of youth to capitalize on this momentum. This provided the opportunity for the religious parties, who were reluctant to lead but happy to hijack the revolution (Howard & Hussain, 2011). This may be attributed to many factors, including external political pressure, but one cannot deny the apparent failure of the youth of the revolution to formulate a strong platform of post revolution messages. In my opinion, this was primarily due to the lack of a unified cultural message that is able to articulate a cultural identity that can directly embrace the values of a democratic Arabic world, and at the same time connects to the once strong Arab nationalist identity. Thus the youth revolutionists faced a dilemma: to embrace the revolution they needed to be progressive and at the same time anti-Western. This narrative would only resonate with a small group of hardcore activists; the rest would need a much stronger cultural message. Arab nationalism would have fit this narrative but was not utilized, and this missed opportunity was taken advantage of by many external powers and by local Islamic parties, which eventually led to an alienation and marginalization of these youth and took the Arab world into a period of instability that still persists at the date of writing this article and will do so for a long time. In the current period, any still active diehard youths that once were mobilized against regimes are finding themselves calling for these same regimes as the lesser of two evils. But most activists went underground or abandoned activism altogether.

It is important to note that there are a lot of memes on social media platforms that have been published by young people from the Arab world, but that most are of enter-

tainment value in the form of local humor or direct trans-
lations of western humor. These memes originating in the
Arab world tend to spring from either the micro level of
local country-specific memes to the macro, either Arabic
rehashing of western memes or of religious Islamic
memes, thus bypassing the regional Arab cultural identity
memes (Arab Memes on Facebook, 2015; Arab Meme on
Instagram, 2015; Esposti, 2013; Le Arab Memes, 2015;
York, 2012). This is why there is an urgent need to provide
an outlet for youth to re-mobilize, by giving them hope for
an alternative narrative that is based on their identifying
with the Arabic language and culture. This is where a well
-devised cultural campaign is needed, that mobilizes youth
to generate cultural memes with the aim of resurrecting
an Arab narrative that can be post Arab Spring, and, more
importantly, look to the future, to bring an unstable Arab
world to a new phase of democratic stability and stronger
Arab nationalism (Murphy, 2012).

Collaborative Flow as a Tool for Engagement

The picture above paints Arab youth as helpless, un-
motivated, escapist at best, and confused about their cul-
ture and Arab identity (Murphy, 2012; Khalaf & Khalaf,
2012; Tarawnah, 2011; Herrera, 2009). This bleak picture
should not be taken as a problem of character that results
in lack of motivation for matters directly related to culture
and identity but, rather, a result of a lack of viable options
presented to these youth. It is possible to motivate youth
everywhere, and the Arab world is no exception, if given
the chance and if given a worthy challenge that is within
their skill set and that has clear tangible and achievable
goals. Flow theory is often used in reference to sports, mu-

sic, painting, dance and any other creative activity where the actor is totally immersed in the activity so that the experience itself carries more reward that the accomplishment of goals. Cultural activities might not be at face value as engaging to youth as a football game or dancing to their favorite tunes or even creating a painting, but creating cultural memes, if planned correctly, can achieve flow in the same way as any other creative activity (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

I propose that youth should be introduced to a game-like learning environment were they can gain the necessary skills to create cultural memes. Once they gain the required skills, they are then introduced to a second phase of this game-like environment in which they will create the meme. This will be followed by the two phases of distribution and promotion. This multi-phased game-like process can happen in a collaborative environment that not only engages youth individually, but as part of a community, thus achieving collaborative flow (Admiraal, Huizenga, Akkerman, & Ten Dam, 2011; Kaye, 2016; Pace, 2004; Sa, Teixeira, & Fernandes, 2007). Once young people are engaged and attain a state of flow, it is argued that the nature of the content, being of a cultural nature, will directly influence their identity formation. If and when Arab youth are presented with an opportunity to make an actual change (even if the goals are challenging), they will engage, as evidenced in the *#youstink* campaign in Lebanon that demonstrated a high level of frustration by youth united by a common goal (to get rid of corrupt politicians). This common goal has united Lebanese youth from all factions, demonstrating in the thousands in the

streets of Beirut carrying only the Lebanese flag, while leaving their respective sectarian flags at home, suppressing their sectarian affiliations and united by the goal of overthrowing the government (#youstink Facebook Page, 2012). It is important here to note that this campaign started on social media and then spread to the streets. Even though the campaign's final goals are not well defined, it has still managed to attract young people from all religious and political affiliations, some of whom have never engaged in activism before. Another example of youth engaging with online content are the non-sectarian demonstrations in Iraq demanding the arrest of ex-Prime Minister al Maliki. These demonstrations were also non-secretion and nationalistic, with heavy participation online and in the streets (Al-Hasan, 2015). These two cases show that in fact youth are willing to engage if an opportunity is presented – even after the failure of the Arab Spring and the apparent helplessness of the Arab status quo (Staeheli & Nagel, 2013).

So does this translate into engagement in Arab cultural identity and would this translate into engagement with Arab cultural memes? I find that a comparison cannot be made here because it is clear that the above movements are nationalistic and not pan-Arab movements. Nevertheless, they do stem from frustration with the status quo and show that young people, if given the right goals, will act on them, if the environment is ripe for such engagement. The question of engagement in a greater pan-Arab cause of reclaiming pride in Arab cultural identity requires a lot more that a goal to achieve this because this goal is too broad and cultural content is not as viral as purely humorous memes. What I am proposing to compen-

sate for that is to: (1), train youth in creating these cultural memes; (2) utilize the highly contextual cultural values in Arab communities by engaging community elders and leaders; and (3) ensure that the process is game-like, with high skills training followed by challenging tasks, so that these youth can achieve a state of flow. Once the cultural memes are created and transmitted on social media, there remains the question of how much the state of flow will be embedded as part of the meme itself in order to generate cultural transmission from the local to the pan-Arab and back to the local as a re-versioned meme.

Conclusion

The current political, economic and social situation in the Arab world is extremely unstable and consequently the environment in which Arab youth are living is increasingly frustrating. As a result, when young people communicate over social media or seek content that can help them identify with their community and culture, they are presented with either foreign values or extreme ideological and religious values with very little if any cultural and identity forming content. This lack of cultural content leaves youth in a state of confusion about their cultural values, identity and geopolitical affiliations. The youth of today rely heavily on social media, and most of their interactions with the outside world and the formation of their worldview occur online over social media. Currently, Arabic language memes on social media are either pure entertainment, nationalistic political propaganda, direct translations of western memes or religious messages that are often propagated by extremist groups with the intention of recruiting young people to their cause. Clearly, there is a

large gap in addressing the cultural identity of Arab youth, and this gap risks providing an opportunity for youth to either feel drawn to the extremist message or to look to western culture and values as the only viable alternative to the extremist message. Thus any chance of a pan-Arab youth culture is lost in the muddle of the chaotic aftermath of the Arab Spring. To counter this and to utilize the increased penetration of social media across the Arab world, we should aim to deliver meaningful cultural content that can help young Arab form their identity, so that in the future they can help build a more stable Arabic narrative that is able to counter the extremist message.

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