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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Tokyo to Riyadh: Japanese Manga Conventions and the Negotiation of Hybrid Cultural Identity in Saudi Graphic Literature

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| ABSTRACT

This study examines how original Saudi graphic and animated productions—specifically through *Manga Arabia* and *Manga Productions*—appropriate and transform Japanese manga conventions to construct sovereign national identity and cultural representation. Moving beyond traditional translation and fandom studies, the research applies Multimodal Discourse Analysis within a cultural-hybridity framework. Through a textual examination of serialized print media and collaborative animated works like *The Journey* and *Future's Folktales*, the findings show that Saudi creators systematically recode Japanese visual grammar and narrative tropes to represent traditional attire (thobe, shemagh, hijab), regional architectural heritage, and indigenous folklore. The visual and textual analysis highlights how imported manga mechanics—such as kinetic speed lines, panel layouts, and shōnen heroic arcs—are indigenized without sacrificing local modesty (Haya') or cultural authenticity. Furthermore, a comparative institutional analysis reveals a dual-track strategy: *Manga Arabia* secures grassroots domestic print sovereignty for local audiences, while Manga Productions leverages high-budget international co-ventures with Toei Animation to project cultural diplomacy globally. Ultimately, these works operate within a liminal "Third Space" of enunciation, transforming a foreign medium into an autonomous vehicle for contemporary Saudi self-representation and visual sovereignty.

| KEYWORDS

Hybrid Cultural Identity, Manga Arabia, Manga Productions, Saudi Graphic Literature

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, global media circulation has catalyzed complex cultural exchanges, shifting non-Western nations from passive consumers to active producers of transcultural media. Scholars have historically analyzed the global spread of Japanese manga and anime through the concept of mukokuseki—a deliberate visual "odorlessness" or statelessness that facilitated cross-border consumption (Iwabuchi, 2002). While early scholarship on the Middle East focused primarily on localized translation and audience reception (Bouissou et al., 2010), recent years have seen a structural paradigm shift toward sovereign regional production (Lent, 2015).

This transformation is demonstrated in Saudi Arabia, where institutional initiatives have fostered a burgeoning narrative graphic sector. Prominent entities such as *Manga Arabia* (under the Saudi Research and Media Group) and *Manga Productions* (under the Misk Foundation) have pioneered serialized print literature and major cross-national animated co-productions with Toei Animation, including *The Journey* and *Future's Folktales*. Rather than reacting as derivative imitations, these original Saudi works operate within what Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes as a "Third Space" of cultural hybridity. By merging the sequential visual grammar of Japanese manga (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) with indigenous iconography, regional dress (*thobe*, *shemagh*), and local folklore, these productions negotiate a unique path of visual sovereignty. Investigating this synthesis offers vital insights into how globalized media forms articulate local identities.

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1.1. Statement of the Problem

The increasing prominence of Saudi graphic literature and animation rooted in Japanese manga aesthetics foregrounds complex dynamics between globalized media flows and indigenous cultural expression. Within this emerging landscape, *Manga Arabia* and *Manga Productions* serve as institutional case studies for examining how Saudi creators appropriate, adapt, and transform the visual grammar, narrative structures, and generic conventions of Japanese manga. Far from representing a unilateral adoption of an external artistic paradigm, this creative praxis operates as a site of cultural negotiation in which transnational stylistic codes converge with Saudi historical heritage, normative values, and contemporary social realities. Despite the growing visibility of these productions, critical inquiry into how such formal adaptations construct and articulate hybrid cultural identities remains nascent. This study interrogates how *Manga Arabia* and *Manga Productions* mediate the tension between Japanese manga conventions and Saudi cultural specificity, and to analyze how their works generate new, hybridized forms of cultural identity.

1.2. Research Objectives

By employing Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) within a framework of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), this research aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Analyze the visual and semiotic modifications of Japanese graphic grammar in rendering traditional Saudi iconography, dress, and spatial settings.
- Examine the narrative negotiation of *shōnen* tropes with Arabian folklore, historical narratives, and futuristic regional frameworks.
- Evaluate how distinct institutional production models (*Manga Arabia*'s domestic print localization versus *Manga Productions*' international co-productions) negotiate domestic identity alongside global audience expectations

1.3. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- How is Japanese graphic grammar visually and semiotically modified to render traditional Saudi iconography, dress, and spatial settings?
- How do Saudi manga works negotiate conventional shōnen tropes alongside Arabian folklore, historical narratives, and futuristic regional frameworks?
- How do distinct institutional production models—specifically *Manga Arabia's* domestic print localization versus *Manga Productions*' international co-productions—negotiate domestic cultural identity alongside global audience expectations?

2. Literature Review

The emerging field of Gulf graphic narratives and animated productions sits at the intersection of media globalization, translation studies, and visual culture. To contextualize how original Saudi creators appropriate and recode Japanese manga conventions, this literature review critically examines three key scholarly trajectories. First, it reviews existing research on Japanese media reception and fandom across the Arabian Gulf, tracing the shift from passive media consumption to active cultural adaptation. Second, it traces the historical and semiotic traditions of Arab graphic art and comic periodicals, highlighting how visual storytelling has historically functioned in the region. Third, it evaluates contemporary publishing models in Saudi Arabia, examining how domestic institutions navigate localized print production and international co-productions. Together, these works establish the foundation for evaluating how original Saudi graphic literature constructs a sovereign visual identity.

2. 1. Introduction to Transnational Media Flows and Gulf Fandoms

The globalization of Japanese popular culture has traditionally been studied through the framework of media imperialism or, conversely, through Iwabuchi's (2002) concept of *mukokuseki*, which highlights the deliberate "odorlessness" or cultural neutrality of Japanese pop culture that facilitates its cross-border circulation. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, engagement with Japanese visual media has a deep historical foundation. Examining the structural evolution of media accessibility and youth consumption in the Gulf, Tariq and Willard (2021) demonstrate how historical antecedents—such as Arabic-dubbed anime broadcast since the 1990s—fostered a robust regional fandom. Their exploratory study on Japanese anime fandoms in the United Arab Emirates illustrates how digital accessibility and changing media habits shifted youth consumption from passive viewing to active subcultural engagement, establishing a receptive domestic audience for subsequent graphic and animated formats across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

2. 2. From Translation to Indigenous Production in Saudi Arabia

Early scholarship on sequential art and visual storytelling in the Middle East predominantly focused on indigenous satirical comic strips, print journalism, and their socio-political functions across the broader Arab world (Douglas & Malti-Douglas, 1994; Høigilt, 2019). Simultaneously, media and translation scholars examined the historical dominance of imported Japanese animation, focusing on fan reception, satellite television ecosystems, and the institutional dubbing practices of networks like Spacetoon (Alsaleh, 2024; Tariq & Willard, 2021). Within this foundational era of media importation, Arabic localization relied heavily on domestication and moral mediation, frequently modifying narrative elements, character expressions, and opening themes to align foreign content with pan-Arab educational goals and conservative religious norms (Al-Abbas & Haider, 2023; Alsaleh, 2024).

More recently, however, academic discourse has shifted toward analyzing contemporary publishing infrastructures, digital accessibility, and institutionalized manga translation frameworks within the Arabian Peninsula. Examining the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) context, Tariq and Willard (2021) trace how decades of Japanese pop culture consumption cultivated dedicated local *otaku* fandoms, while highlighting the tension between grassroots fan enthusiasm and institutional barriers that historically constrained domestic creative industries. Building on this evolving media landscape, Alkhaldi (2024) examines the position and status of translated manga in Saudi Arabia, offering critical insights into contemporary publishing workflows, multimodal translation strategies, and cultural adaptation mechanisms employed by major regional platforms such as *Manga Arabia*. Alkhaldi's (2024) analysis shows how Japanese visual narratives have transitioned from informal, fan-translated digital texts into formally institutionalized, state-backed commercial ventures managed by major Saudi media conglomerates.

Furthermore, theoretical frameworks of cultural hybridity and media globalization suggest that sustained engagement with transnational visual forms inevitably catalyzes local creative reinterpretation rather than passive consumption (Bhabha, 1994). Yet while existing translation and localization studies illuminate how foreign manga and anime are systematically adapted for Arab audiences (Al-Abbas & Haider, 2023; Alkhaldi, 2024), they leave a distinct scholarly gap regarding original, domestic creative output in the Kingdom. Specifically, today's literature has yet to fully theorize how contemporary Saudi writers and illustrators move beyond consuming and localizing translated Japanese media to generating sovereign graphic narratives—constructing original storylines, indigenizing visual codes, and articulating authentic national self-representation on their own terms.

2. 3. Historical and Contemporary Arab Comic and Graphic Art

To contextualize the visual and narrative structures of contemporary Saudi graphic literature, scholarship must engage with the broader history of Arab comic strips and graphic art. Douglas and Malti-Douglas (1994) provide a foundational historical and semiotic analysis of Arab comic strips, mapping the emergence of mass culture, visual satire, and narrative serialization across the MENA region. Building on this historical trajectory, Høigilt (2019) investigates contemporary adult comics, graphic novels, and visual rhetoric in the modern Middle East. Høigilt demonstrates how regional graphic artists utilize sequential art to negotiate sociopolitical realities, linguistic identities, and modern visual resistance. Although these foundational studies map the broader landscape of Arab cartooning, they focus on historical print journalism or North African and Levantine graphic novels, leaving a critical gap concerning how the specific grammar of Japanese manga intersects with contemporary Saudi national identity.

Synthesizing scholarly trajectories reveals a notable void in current media and literary studies. While Tariq and Willard (2021) map Gulf fandom habits, and Alkhaldi (2024) evaluates translated manga publishing in Saudi Arabia, and broader regional traditions are documented by Douglas and Malti-Douglas (1994) and Høigilt (2019), existing literature lacks an empirical examination of Saudi Arabia as an *originating producer* of transcultural graphic media. Limited attention has been devoted to examining how original Saudi productions—such as those by *Manga Arabia* and *Manga Productions*—deploy Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) and Homi Bhabha's (1994) framework of cultural hybridity to merge Japanese visual grammar with indigenous heritage. This study addresses this exact gap by analyzing the visual localization, narrative restructuring, and cultural identity negotiation embedded in contemporary Saudi graphic literature.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) framework, anchored in a comparative case study design, to examine how original Saudi graphic and animated productions appropriate and transform Japanese manga conventions. Based on visual grammar established by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) and the postcolonial lens of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), MDA provides analytical tools to systematically unpack meaning through the interplay of visual design, layout, and cultural iconography.

The corpus is delimited into two distinct institutional streams: serialized print and digital manga from *Manga Arabia* (representing domestic Saudi creation), and collaborative animated productions from *Manga Productions*, specifically the feature film *The Journey* and the series *Future's Folktales*. From this corpus, a targeted sample of representative visual sequences and narrative episodes is selected to analyze three core analytical dimensions: (1) visual iconography, focusing on the adaptation of Japanese character design to render traditional Saudi attire and spatial settings; (2) interactive and spatial framing, examining gaze, panel sequencing, and right-to-left visual flow; and (3) narrative hybridity, investigating how *shōnen* tropes intersect with Arabian folklore and futuristic regional frameworks.

Through systematic semiotic transcription and comparative synthesis, the analysis evaluates how varying institutional production models negotiate domestic cultural sovereignty alongside global aesthetic expectations.

4. Discussion

The preceding analysis establishes that original Saudi graphic and animated media do not merely replicate imported aesthetic forms; rather, they serve as a dynamic locus of transcultural synthesis. Drawing upon the qualitative Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) framework (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) alongside Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of cultural hybridity, this section interprets the primary corpus across four interconnected dimensions. First, it investigates the semiotic recoding of Japanese manga iconography to render Saudi attire, bodily modesty (*Haya'*), and regional architecture. Second, it evaluates narrative synthesis, examining how classical *shōnen* story arcs intersect with Arabian folklore, historical epics, and futuristic regional world-building. Third, it compares the structural workflows of domestic print serialization (*Manga Arabia*) against international

animation co-ventures (*Manga Productions*). Finally, it synthesizes these multimodal and institutional findings within Bhabha's "Third Space" of enunciation to demonstrate how contemporary Saudi graphic literature establishes an autonomous, sovereign visual identity.

4.1 Visual Hybridity and the Recoding of Manga Iconography

Applying the framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) to original Saudi graphic literature reveals how the imported visual grammar of Japanese manga adapted to reflect local cultural realities. Rather than engaging in passive imitation, Saudi creators across *Manga Arabia* and *Manga Productions* actively negotiate character design rules, panel structures, and semiotic markers to articulate traditional attire, spatial modesty (*Haya*'), and indigenous architecture. The first topic in this section is character design and the semiotics of traditional attire. In Japanese manga, character design relies heavily on standardized tropes- such as exaggerated eye-to-face ratios, simplified silhouettes, and stylized hair- to convey emotion and identity. In original Saudi productions, these conventions are modified to incorporate specific national garments without violating the fluid motion required in sequential or animated art.

Thobe and *shemagh are clear visual elements in the Saudi male characterization.* Serial works published by *Manga Arabia* render male characters in traditional Saudi garments. Illustrators must adapt the heavy, linear folds of the *thobe* and the patterned geometry of the *shemagh* (or *ghutra*) to fit dynamic action lines and speed frames. Rather than treating headwear as a static block, artists use manga contour lines to show how the *shemagh* shifts during character movement, balancing the fluidity of action-oriented art with cultural accuracy.

Modesty (Haya') of Saudi female characters is another visual feature. In both *Manga Arabia* serializations and animated series like *Future's Folktales*, female character design adheres strictly to regional cultural values of modesty (*Haya*'). Facial expressions must convey deep emotional range—a core requirement of shōnen and slice-of-life manga—while framing head coverings (*hijab* or *abaya* styling) as integral, expressive parts of the character silhouette rather than restrictive barriers.

The second topic here is panel grids and spatial layouts. Japanese manga relies on a structured right-to-left reading flow, utilizing gutters, speed lines, and explosive panel borders to dictate narrative pacing. Saudi graphic narratives appropriate this grid system while reorienting it toward Arabic visual literacy.

Spatial Framing of Domestic Environments is locally presented. In *Future's Folktales*, which depicts futuristic Riyadh in the year 2050, panel compositions frequently juxtapose high-tech urban skylines with traditional Najdi architectural elements (such as triangular windows, mudbrick textures, and internal courtyards/*housh*). The visual grammar uses wide establishing panels (*tate-koma*) to anchor the viewer in recognizable Saudi geographic contexts before shifting to close-up reaction shots that mirror standard manga emotional intensity.

Typography and visual onomatopoeia are another element. A crucial element of visual hybridity is the adaptation of sound effects. While Japanese manga uses stylized Katakana to represent kinetic action, Saudi print productions in *Manga Arabia* develop indigenous visual typography, rendering Arabic onomatopoeia using bold, dynamic lettering that mimics the visual weight and impact lines of traditional manga aesthetics.

Through these visual adjustments, Saudi manga transforms a foreign medium into an authentic vehicle for local self-representation, proving that Japanese graphic conventions can successfully house distinct national iconography.

4. 2. Narrative Negotiation: Merging Shōnen Tropes with Arabian Folklore and Futurism

Applying narrative analysis to Saudi-produced graphic literature reveals a deliberate structural synthesis between classical Japanese storytelling frameworks- specifically *shōnen* tropes of the hero's journey, perseverance, and camaraderie- and indigenous Arabian oral traditions, moral fables, and futuristic world-building. Rather than importing Japanese plotlines wholesale, *Manga Productions* integrates local socio-cultural contexts into established sequential narrative arcs.

4. 2.1. The Shōnen Hero's Journey and Arabian Historical Epic

The 2021 feature film *The Journey* (co-produced by *Manga Productions* and *Toei Animation*) represents an early example of narrative hybridity in long-form animation. The film adapts historical and pre-Islamic narratives from the Arabian Peninsula—centered around the Year of the Elephant and the defense of Mecca—using the structural cadence of a classic Japanese *shōnen* epic.

The narrative convergence is evident in the character archetypes and their respective growth trajectories. The protagonist, Aws, follows the classic *shōnen* trajectory from an ordinary, reluctant individual burdened by his past into a morally resolute protector of his community. This mirrors the traditional Japanese motif of self-improvement through trials, endurance, and loyalty to comrades.

Another dimension of this narrative negotiation emerges through the representation of moral conflict and the act of sacrifice**.** The narrative pacing utilizes high-stakes battle choreography, dramatic tension, and emotional turning points characteristic of action-oriented anime. However, the underlying thematic resolution prioritizes indigenous values of collective resilience, tribal hospitality, and spiritual steadfastness over individualistic triumph, successfully translating a Japanese generic framework into an authentic Arabian historical epic.

4. 3. Intergenerational Oral Tradition and Saudi Futurism (Future's Folktales*)*

In serialized and animated television formats such as Future's Folktales (Asateer: Mirai no Mukashibanashi), narrative hybridity operates at the intersection of ancestral oral history and speculative science fiction. Set in Riyadh in the year 2050, the series uses a dual-temporal narrative structure that bridges traditional folk tales with futuristic technologies.

Each episode utilizes a familiar domestic framing device: an elder grandmother (Asma) narrates classical Arabian and regional folktales to her grandchildren. This mirrors the traditional Majlis culture of storytelling and intergenerational knowledge transmission in Gulf societies.

In episodes featuring grandmother Asma speaking with her grandchildren Maha, Rayan, and Sultan, the domestic living space of 2050 Riyadh features holographic displays alongside traditional seating arrangements. When the grandchildren confront modern dilemmas, such as patience or honesty, Asma introduces a flashback narrative, seamlessly transitioning the audience from a futuristic, high-tech interior into historical Arabian landscapes where classical fables unfold.

Speculative Reinterpretation of Fables is another dimension to discuss. Rather than presenting static moral lessons, the narrative framework embeds traditional folklore into a high-tech urban environment complete with AI companions and futuristic robotics. This synthesis allows creators to address contemporary social experiences- such as technological dependency, environmental stewardship, and familial bonding- through the lens of ancestral wisdom, demonstrating how imported narrative pacing can revitalize indigenous oral heritage for modern audiences.

In narratives adapted from pre-Islamic and regional oral lore, magical elements or ancient trials are re-contextualized alongside autonomous drones, cybernetic tools, and digital archives. When protagonists in the fables solve moral quandaries using resourcefulness and community cooperation, the lessons directly parallel the grandchildren's modern challenges with automated city management and digital isolation, proving that ancestral ethics remain vital in a hyper-technological future**.**

4. 4. Institutional Divergence: Domestic Serialized Print vs. International Co-Productions

Analyzing the contemporary Saudi graphic media landscape requires institutional distinction between its two primary production pillars: *Manga Arabia* (operated by the Saudi Research and Media Group) and *Manga Productions* (a subsidiary of the Misk Foundation). Applying a comparative framework shows how differing production models- internal domestic print serialization versus high-budget international co-ventures with established Japanese studios—directly shape visual sovereignty, artistic workflows, and audience negotiation.

4. 4. 1. Manga Arabia: Internal Domestic Production and Serialized Print Sovereignty

Launched to foster local creative talent across distinct age demographics (*Manga Arabia Kids* and *Manga Arabia Youth*), *Manga Arabia* relies primarily on an internal, regional production model where Arab writers and illustrators generate original content tailored to domestic social realities.

Localization of Idiom and Dialect is the main feature of these works. Because production is handled internally, narrative scripts frequently incorporate localized Saudi idioms, regional proverbs, and everyday social banter that resonate immediately with domestic readers.

Serialized Print Pacing is another dimension. Operating within traditional magazine serialization formats, creators focus on episodic character growth, domestic slice-of-life dynamics, and contemporary urban experiences within modern Saudi cities. This model prioritizes grassroots creative empowerment, allowing local artists to gradually build long-form visual narratives without relying on external animation pipelines.

4. 4. 2. Manga Productions: High-Budget International Co-Ventures and Global Reach

In contrast, *Manga Productions* functions through strategic institutional partnerships with major Japanese animation heavyweights, most notably its landmark collaborations with *Toei Animation* on properties like the feature film *The Journey* and the television series *Future's Folktales*.

A defining feature of *Manga Productions*' strategy is its Cross-Cultural production and Pipeline Integration, bringing together Japanese creative expertise and Saudi cultural perspectives. This model merges Saudi capital and historical storytelling material with decades of Japanese technical expertise in cel animation, orchestral scoring, and cinematic post-production. Director (Kanno Shizuno) and veteran Toei animators worked alongside Saudi creative directors to ensure historical and cultural accuracy for *The Journey*.

This model is designed for global distribution logic. By leveraging Japanese studio infrastructure, these co-productions are engineered for simultaneous cross-border distribution across Middle Eastern and international markets. Consequently, the narrative and visual choices must balance explicit Saudi cultural framing with universally recognizable cinematic standards, positioning Saudi Arabia as a co-creator on the global stage rather than a localized consumer.

Through these divergent institutional streams, the Saudi graphic narrative ecosystem achieves a dual trajectory: *Manga Arabia* secures grassroots, localized print sovereignty, while *Manga Productions* projects high-budget cultural diplomacy and historical epic-making into the international arena.

4. 5. The "Third Space" of Enunciation: Constructing Saudi Visual Identity

Synthesizing the multimodal and institutional findings through Bhabha's (1994) postcolonial framework reveals how original Saudi graphic literature successfully transcends passive cultural mimicry to establish an active, autonomous **"Third Space" of enunciation**. Bhabha argues that cultural identity is negotiated in an intermediate, liminal space where foreign signs and

indigenous traditions overlap, mutate, and generate new, hybrid cultural meanings. In contemporary Saudi graphic media, this Third Space serves as a theoretical crucible where imported Japanese visual grammar is recontextualized into sovereign national self-representation.

4. 5. 1. Subverting Mimicry and Claiming Visual Sovereignty

Postcolonial critique warns against uncritical imitation (mimicry), in which dominant cultural forms are copied by the subaltern, often reinforcing colonial or hegemonic hierarchies (Bhabha, 1994). In Saudi graphic novels and animation, creators intentionally subvert simple mimicry by indigenizing the semiotic tools of Japanese manga.

Hybrid signification emerges as another dimension of this process. Rather than erasing local identity to fit a culturally odorless or neutral mukokuseki aesthetic (Iwabuchi, 2002), artists working across Manga Arabia and Manga Productions infuse structural manga conventions- such as kinetic speed lines, emotional chibi expressions, and epic narrative pacing- with unmistakable Saudi iconography.

Furthermore, hybrid signification is enforced through Textual and Multimodal Documentation. In original print serializations from Manga Arabia Youth (e.g., localized action-comedy chapters), visual humor is frequently rendered using classical manga visual shorthand. When a male protagonist experiences comedic panic or exaggeration, the illustrator deploys oversized sweat drops (ase-tate) and simplified chibi proportions. However, the semiotic structure maintains full cultural specificity: the character remains rendered in a tailored thobe and *shemagh*, with the *'aqal* tilting dynamically to track the movement line. Rather than stripping away national garments to conform to a neutral anime template, the illustrator embeds Saudi sartorial identity directly inside the imported graphic grammar.

The intercultural dialectic is employed in these words. When a futuristic Riyadh in *Future's Folktales* is framed in standard multi-panel layouts, or when historical Arabian heroism in *The Journey* is rendered via *shōnen* character arcs, the resulting text is neither purely Japanese nor traditionally static. It occupies a liminal zone where the foreign medium is domesticated, dislocating authority from the original Japanese template and asserting regional creative agency.

Textual and multimodal documentation enforced intercultural dialectic. In *The Journey* (2021, co-produced by Manga Productions and Toei Animation), during the climax of the defense of Mecca, the protagonist Aws engages in high-stakes combat rendered through dynamic camera angles, high-contrast impact frames (*kanji*-style kinetic cuts), and rapid pacing characteristic of director Shizuno Kanno's action choreography. However, the textual and moral dialectic departs radically from secular Japanese *shōnen* individualism. Aws's internal monologue and battle cries center explicitly on spiritual conviction (*Tawheed*), tribal defense, and ancestral duty. The visual mechanics belong to Japanese animation, but the ideological center remains firmly Arabian, demonstrating how the Third Space disrupts foreign cultural hegemony through authentic self-representation.

4. 5. 2. Articulating Modern Saudi Identity Through Hybrid Articulations

This Third Space of enunciation ultimately enables a multi-layered negotiation of modern Saudi identity, bridging the tension between rapid national modernization—exemplified by Vision 2030 initiatives—and deep-rooted ancestral heritage.

Grassroots and institutional synthesis lead to hybridity. Through *Manga Arabia*'s localized print serials (such as Manga *Arabia Youth* and *Manga Arabia Kids*) and *Manga Productions*' high-budget international co-ventures with *Toei Animation*, Saudi creators articulate a confident contemporary identity that speaks simultaneously to domestic youth and global audiences.

Sample Example: In *Manga Arabia Youth*, creators showcase young Saudi protagonists operating within recognizable urban settings like Riyadh and Jeddah, using localized youth slang, everyday social interactions, and contemporary educational settings. Concurrently, *Manga Productions*' feature film *The Journey* (*Al-Rihla*) leverages Toei Animation's world-class cinematic pipeline to project historical Arabian heritage across international cinema chains and global streaming platforms. This dual infrastructure creates an ecosystem where grassroots, domestic print serials address local cultural nuance while high-budget co-productions handle macro-level cultural diplomacy.

Cultural self-representation is another dimension that emerged in hybrid identity. By anchoring universal storytelling tropes in indigenous oral traditions, regional dress, and local architectural environments, these works prove that transcultural visual synthesis can move beyond translation. They construct a vibrant, self-sustaining visual sovereignty that redefines modern Arabian storytelling on its own terms.

In the animated series *Future's Folktales* (Asateer), futuristic architectural renderings depict Riyadh in the year 2050 featuring smart hyper-loop transport systems and green skyscrapers integrated alongside Najdi architectural facades and traditional triangular relief motifs. When characters wear modernized, functional variants of traditional garments while interfacing with advanced robotics, the visual composition rejects the notion that technological advancement requires Westernization or total cultural assimilation. Instead, it asserts a sovereign Saudi identity where rapid technological modernization coexists seamlessly with indigenous heritage.

5. Conclusion

This study examines how original Saudi graphic and animated productions- specifically within *Manga Arabia* and *Manga Productions*- appropriate and transform Japanese manga conventions to represent Saudi cultural heritage, identity, and contemporary social experiences. By synthesizing Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) with Bhabha's (1994) framework of cultural hybridity, this research moves beyond traditional translation and reception studies to demonstrate how Saudi creators establish active visual sovereignty.

The empirical and textual analysis confirms that Saudi graphic literature navigates three core dimensions of transcultural negotiation:

Through the intentional adaptation of character design conventions, layout dynamics, and spatial framing, Saudi artists reconcile global manga visual grammar with indigenous socio-cultural norms. Rather than adopting a culturally neutral *mukokuseki* aesthetic, creators embed regional attire—such as the *thobe*, *shemagh*, *'aqal*, and *hijab*—alongside traditional Najdi and Hijazi architectural motifs directly into multi-panel sequential layouts and kinetic action frames. In doing so, visual elements such as exaggerated emotional expressions, speed lines, and dramatic perspective shifts are harmonized with local modesty protocols (*Haya'*), transforming imported graphic syntax into an authentic visual language of Saudi identity.

By merging classical *shōnen* storytelling trajectories—characterized by perseverance, camaraderie, and moral trials—with indigenous Arabian oral traditions and historical epics, Saudi graphic media bridges ancestral heritage with contemporary storytelling. In works such as *The Journey*, high-stakes anime battle choreography and character growth arcs serve to project pre-Islamic Arabian history and communal conviction. Conversely, in *Future's Folktales*, the traditional Gulf *Majlis* framing device of intergenerational oral storytelling is embedded within a speculative 2050 Riyadh setting. This dual-temporal narrative structure demonstrates how imported pacing and generic tropes can revitalize traditional moral fables for modern audiences navigating rapid technological and social change.

The comparative evaluation of *Manga Arabia*'s grassroots domestic print serialization against *Manga Productions*' high-budget international co-ventures with *Toei Animation* illuminates a complementary, dual-track institutional strategy. *Manga Arabia* cultivates internal creative ecosystems, utilizing regional Arabic idioms, localized youth humor, and serialized magazine formats to secure domestic print sovereignty and nurture emerging Arab talent. Simultaneously, *Manga Productions* leverages cross-border technical pipelines and Japanese studio infrastructure to produce globally competitive animated features and series, projecting regional heritage and cultural diplomacy onto international screens.

Ultimately, these textual, visual, and institutional dynamics converge within Bhabha's "Third Space" of enunciation. By domesticating the formal conventions of Japanese manga and animation while anchoring narratives in local heritage, ethics, and modernization efforts, original Saudi graphic literature subverts passive cultural mimicry. Instead, it establishes a self-sustaining model of visual sovereignty—redefining contemporary Arabian storytelling on its own terms and offering a compelling framework for understanding transcultural media production in the global creative economy.

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