

From Cultural Tales to Digital Realms: The Evolving Landscape of Media & Entertainment in the Middle East



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Introduction

The media and entertainment sector in the Middle East is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by **strategic government initiatives, private sector investments, and a growing focus on creative industries.** Governments in the Middle East are actively supporting the growth of the media and entertainment industries through comprehensive strategies and initiatives **such as infrastructure development, talent training programs and incubators, funding support, and tax incentives**. Countries such as **Saudi Arabia and the UAE** have invested heavily in their media and entertainment sectors, aiming to increase **GDP contributions and create more job opportunities.**

The region's shifting market dynamics and emerging trends, such as the **rise of digital entertainment, growing appetite for local content, and increased demand for live entertainment and experiences**, have expanded the media and entertainment landscape. However, there is still a **significant opportunity** to capitalize on this growing demand and unleash the full economic potential of the sector, **positioning the Middle East as a global destination for media and entertainment**.

This report explores **government initiatives** in the media and entertainment industry and highlights **notable public and private collaborations** that are boosting the industry. It also examines the current state of the media and entertainment sector in the Middle East, with a focus on **film production**, **OTT platforms**, **music**, **cultural heritage**, **and prominent entertainment parks**. It then offers insights into **emerging trends** and **potential opportunities** within the media and entertainment industry and its verticals in the region.



Government incentives and international collaborations

Middle East countries are centering media and entertainment in their strategies, offering funding and incentives

The media and entertainment sector in the Middle East, particularly in the GCC countries, is undergoing a major transformation. These sectors are now being prioritized and promoted as drivers of economic growth. This strategic shift aims to reduce dependence on oil revenues, promote economic growth, and enhance citizens' well-being.

Strategies, investments, and regulations

- Middle Eastern countries are embedding culture into their strategic visions, like Oman's Vision 2040 and Egypt's Culture Strategy 2030. They are investing heavily in the sector and launching infrastructure projects to enhance cultural experiences and drive economic development
- Following recent shifts in the Middle East's media and entertainment sector, there have been revisions to regulatory frameworks and cultural policies. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for instance, have updated their entertainment license regulations to align with national standards

Media and film incentives

- ME countries are developing their film infrastructure, providing training initiatives, and establishing talent incubators to support filmmakers and their projects. For example, Qatar's Doha Film Institute offers training programs such as "First Cut Lab" and organizes festivals like "Ajyal" to promote local and global productions
- Middle Eastern governments are also offering cash rebates to boost film production, with Jordan providing a 25% cash rebate on qualified local expenditures

Cultural heritage initiatives

- Middle Eastern countries are actively engaged in cultural preservation efforts, supporting projects like:
- The renovation of cultural heritage sites such as Kuwait Municipality investing USD 180 million to develop AI-Mubarakiya area
- The development of new cultural museums and galleries, such as Egypt's investment of USD 1 billion in the Grand Egyptian Museum

Entertainment parks incentives

Middle Eastern nations are **investing heavily in mega entertainment projects** to boost tourism and cultural experiences such as **Oman's USD 103 million Spray Boulevard** and **Saudi Arabia's USD 13.3 billion SEVEN entertainment destinations**

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are leading examples of investment and incentives for the media and entertainment industry in the Middle East

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates stand out for their extraordinary efforts in the development of media and entertainment in the Middle East. These countries are investing heavily and implementing various initiatives to increase spending on entertainment and leisure.

Saudi Arabia

Strategies, investments, and regulations

- The general entertainment authority has pledged to invest USD 64 billion by 2028 to support the entertainment industry, targeting a 3% GDP contribution and 100k jobs creation by 2030
- In 2021, the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) revised entertainment license regulations, prioritizing Islamic and cultural norms
- Saudi Arabia launched the ignite program in 2022, aiming to triple the digital content market size through a USD 1.1 billion investment

Media and film incentives

- Saudi Arabia's Cultural Development Fund has launched a USD 234 million Film Sector fund, accessible to local and international film companies
- The Film Saudi Incentive Program offers up to a 40% cash rebate

Music incentives

- The Music Commission aims to surpass a 1% GDP contribution from the local music sector by 2030 by setting up more than 130 studios
- It has also launched "San'ah" training in 2021 to support local talent

The UAE

Strategies, investments, and regulations

- The Department of Culture and Tourism (DCT) in Abu Dhabi announced its goal to create 16k jobs with a USD 6 billion investment by 2026
- Dubai aims to increase the creative arts contribution to GDP from 2.6% in 2020 to 5% by 2025
- In December 2023, the UAE introduced the Federal Decree Law No.
 55/2023 to oversee global media activities, addressing licenses and compliance with national standards

Media and film incentives

- The government provides free zones for media content creation such as Dubai Media City, Dubai Studio City, and twofour54 in Abu Dhabi, offering facilities and backing for media ventures
- The Abu Dhabi Film Commission provides a 35% cash back rebate for eligible production expenses

Media companies in ME have been actively partnering and investing in global firms to boost the region's entertainment industry

Over the past few years, leading media and entertainment companies in the Middle East, a notable example being Saudi Arabia's SRMG, are actively forging collaborations, offering licensing agreements, and making strategic investments in international firms. These initiatives aim to either make content accessible to Middle Eastern audiences or drive innovative growth within the region's media and entertainment sectors. Some noteworthy deals include:





Media and entertainment current landscape



The MENA TV market has been going through a transformational shift towards OTT platforms, leading to a surge in regional content production

- The MENA TV market is rapidly evolving with new technologies and diverse content genres. While TV remains important for shared experiences, OTT platforms* are gaining popularity for their flexibility and personalized content. This shift has impacted content creation, moving away from traditional TV adfocused production towards more diversified approaches
- Consumers in the MENA region turned to platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and regional services such as Shahid, resulting in a 20% growth in OTT platform users from 2021 to 2022. The entry of new players like Disney+ in 2022 highlighted the diversification of the OTT landscape
- By 2023, Saudi Arabia had emerged as a leader in OTT adoption, boasting a 41.8% user penetration rate and surpassing the GCC average of approximately 25%
- The significant growth in OTT users prompted production companies to adapt, sparking a surge in regional long-form content creation. The accessibility of top-level equipment and skilled artists, and heavy investment from OTT platforms such as Netflix contributed to the thriving content production industry in the MENA region

Number of MENA OTT subscribers by platform (in millions)





The MENA cinema industry is seeing a rise in box office revenues and local film production, driven by the cinema ban lift in Saudi Arabia

- The MENA region is experiencing a significant increase in box office revenue, reaching approximately USD 800 million in 2021. These revenues are projected to rise further, reaching an estimated USD 1.3 billion by 2024
- One of the key drivers behind this surge is the lifting of the cinema ban in Saudi Arabia in 2018. It has driven a surge in box office revenue to USD 238m in 2021, marking a 95% increase from the previous year.
- This growth trend continued, with annual Saudi Arabia box office sales surpassing USD 240m in both 2022 and 2023 (28% increase in Q2 of 2023) and over 17 million cinema tickets sold in 2023 alone
- In terms of cinema ticket price, Saudi Arabia had the highest average cinema ticket price among GCC countries at USD 18 in 2021, driven by high demand and elevated sales taxes. However, in 2024, the Saudi Film Commission announced a 16% reduction in ticket prices compared to 2023
- Driven by booming box office, youth engagement and ample funding, cinema chains are partnering with production companies to promote local content. For instance, Muvi Cinemas has partnered with Chakra in Saudi Arabia, while Vox has struck deals with regional developers such as The Big Picture Studios, Blue Engine Studios, Sirb Productions, and MBC Studios.

MENA box office revenues 2021 in million USD



Average Cinema Ticket Price 2021 in USD





The MENA region recorded the world's third-largest growth in music revenues in 2022, supported by local music

- In 2022, recorded music revenues in MENA surged by 24%, establishing the region as the world's third-largest growth market. This substantial growth was predominantly driven by streaming, occupying an impressive 95.5% share in revenues
- Recorded music revenues in MENA grew by 24% in 2022, making it the world's third-largest growth market. This growth was mainly driven by streaming, which accounted for an impressive 95.5% of revenues.
- Anghami's data highlights the growing importance of digital music and streaming in the region. The MENA-focused music streaming service saw a 17% year-over-year rise in subscribers
- Hip-hop is gaining dominance in the region, backed by Spotify data showing a significant surge in consumption. Egypt saw a 479% increase in hip-hop consumption from January 2020 to August 2023, while the UAE experienced a notable 143% rise
- Simultaneously, music originating from the MENA region has seen remarkable growth, with the genre popularity surging by 170% from 2019 to 2022. Spotify also recorded nearly a 40% annual increase in global streams of MENA artists during this time

Revenue growth of the recorded music market in 2022



Estimated digital music streaming average revenue per user in USD





Middle Eastern countries are investing heavily in restoring and preserving their rich cultural heritage.

Countries in the Middle East are recognizing the importance of promoting their abundant historical legacy and cultural heritage. They are actively working on restoring their cultural sites and developing new institutions to preserve and showcase the region's rich history and traditions to both locals and visitors.

Restoring cultural sites



Middle East countries are actively restoring their cultural heritage through a combination of traditional conservation methods, community engagement, digital technologies, and strategic partnerships. Examples include:

- Kuwait restoring the Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber Palace
- Egypt currently working with the World Monuments Fund to restore and preserve Takiyyat al-Gulshani
- Jordan recently inaugurating the restoration of Beit Eidis

Developing new cultural institutions



A range of initiatives led by both the public and private sectors are dedicated to establishing and expanding cultural institutions like museums and exhibitions. Examples include:

- Egypt constructing the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), the world's largest Egyptology museum
- Saudi Arabia developing Al Ula's open-air Arab civilization and culture museum
- UAE inaugurating the Museum of the Future in 2022
- Oman opening the Across Ages Museum in 2023

Middle East countries offer various cultural training programs to artists to support their development and creativity. Examples include:

- The Craftsmen Apprenticeship Training Program (2021) in Bahrain to transfer expertise to younger generations
- Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture launching the Industrial Heritage Program in 2022
- UAE offering Bait Al Khatt for Arabic calligraphy



Providing cultural training programs



The Middle East's event landscape is thriving, with Saudi Arabia witnessing a surge in both the number of attendees and artists

- The Middle East has seen a rise in events and festivals, with notable instances such as the Abu Dhabi Festival drawing 20,000 visitors in 2023 and Egypt's Alamein festival aiming for a million visitors the same year. It showcases significant growth in the region, especially in Saudi Arabia
- The GEA has attracted over 120 million attendees since 2019. In 2023 alone, it granted more than 6,000 licenses, aligning with Saudi Vision 2030. Moreover, the number of performers registered for events within the Entertainment Portal surged by 300% from 2021 to 2023
- Among these events, the Saudi seasons remain one of the largest globally. Launched in 2019, this initiative aimed to host 11 seasons across various regions of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh Season, the most prominent, exceeded its 2023 target by attracting over 18 million visitors
- Saudi Arabia has also established the Events Investment Fund (EIF) to further boost FDI in this sector. The EIF will oversee the development of over 35 worldclass venues nationwide, enhancing Saudi Arabia's event infrastructure



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Several large entertainment parks are currently underway in the Middle East, and are set to revolutionize the entertainment industry

The Middle East is spearheading the development of world-class themed entertainment destination parks, with Saudi Arabia at the forefront. This innovative approach aims to redefine the entertainment landscape in the region. Major upcoming mega entertainment projects include:



King Salman Park

Set to open in 2024, King Salman Park will be a 16.6 km² public park and urban district, offering museums, an arts library, and a theatre.

By 2024-25, the park would welcome 400k visitors annually and create 57k jobs

SEVEN's entertainment destination

Seven's latest addition to its 21 entertainment destinations plan is the upcoming destination in Aseer, scheduled to open in 2025. It will cover 64k m² and offer activities like indoor golf, live entertainment, futuristic bowling, AMC cinema, and more.

→ By 2030, the park would contribute up to USD 1.1 billion

Spray Boulevard

Expected by 2027, the 470k m² Spray Boulevard project will feature a grand market, restaurants, a botanical garden, theaters, exhibitions, and events.

Upon completion, the park can reach 800k visitors in Khareef Dhofar season



Qiddiya Entertainment City

Qiddiya, the world's largest entertainment city, will span 320k m² and feature 28 rides. Set to open by 2030, it will include 22 rides, nine of which will be world-firsts.

By 2030 the project can contribute USD 4.5 billion to GDP and create 57k jobs



The Red Sea Project

The Red Sea Project is a tourism initiative spanning 28k km², equivalent to the size of Belgium. Set to open by 2030, it will offer diverse hospitality options and leisure facilities.

-> By 2030 the project can contribute around USD 6 billion to GDP and create 70k jobs



Entertainment City

The redesigned New Entertainment City, spanning 2.57 km² along the coast, will include outdoor and indoor theme parks, aquariums, museums, and more.

→ By 2035 the project can contribute USD 26 billion to GDP and create 4k jobs



Trends and growth opportunities



The increase in demand for OTT content and the growing potential for CTV advertising are creating more room for growth in the Middle East's TV/OTT market

- The MENA region is witnessing a rise in innovative OTT business models like Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) (e.g., Shahid, Weyyak), Advertising Video on Demand (AVOD) (e.g., Roya TV, Awaan), and hybrid models, adapting to digital trends and welcoming new OTT platforms
- The Free Ad-Supported streaming (FAST) model holds the highest potential in the region, prompting numerous operators to launch their own services in MENA. This capitalizes on the ability to attract new viewers and offer tiered services at a lower budget
- The MENA region is also experiencing a notable rise in Connected TV (CTV) advertising, with 13 services with CTV Apps by 2022 and a striking 22-fold surge in CTV ad expenditure from 2019 to 2022 in the EMEA region. It is mainly driven by a growing interest in premium video ad propositions and the shift towards OTT streaming
- The emergence of CTV is expected to lead to an increased reliance on highproduction value TV commercials, offering detailed targeting capabilities, personalized viewing experiences, and higher ROI compared to traditional TV advertising



Share of Ad budget shifting to CTV according to marketing professionals by December 2022





The Middle East aims to draw global film production and produce local content resonant globally for increased revenue streams

The Middle East is aiming to position itself as a key global hub for film productions, attracting attention from Hollywood, Bollywood, and Europe. Despite this focus on international projects, the region's film industry is also witnessing a rise in demand for local films. Discussions among Middle Eastern content experts highlight the opportunity to develop engaging Arabic content that resonates locally and globally, potentially leading to increased monetization.



- The Middle East film industry is transitioning from having established film industries (e.g. Egypt and Lebanon) and only relying on its beautiful scenery to offering incentives to attract international production companies
- Countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia are proactively creating productionfriendly environments by implementing cash rebates and investing in infrastructure
- Local studios like MBC Studios in Saudi Arabia are starting to offer production services and expertise to international companies, helping them overcome challenges such as sourcing local talent and navigating legal complexities
- Moreover, several international film festivals are held to further promote the region, such as the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) and the Red Sea International Festival



- As local production demand rises, the Middle East film industry is acknowledging the potential of Arab film production
- Audiences are increasingly demanding quality and culturally relevant storytelling in local cinema, favoring films that balance pertinent narratives with high production values and avoiding attempts to Americanize scripts
- The increased demand, coupled with significant investments and infrastructure development, has led to a notable increase in annual Arab film production. For example, Saudi Arabia's USD 130 million Big Time Investment fund aims to enhance local production and produce 20 Arab films by 2024
- Strategic nation branding through cinema and television can significantly influence global perceptions, driving tourism and investment



The opportunity remains for cinema infrastructure growth for several Middle East countries such as Saudi Arabia, Oman and Kuwait

- Compared to leading international countries with an average of 6.6 screens per 100k people, GCC countries generally have lower screen densities, except Bahrain. This suggests untapped market potential in the region for expanding cinema infrastructure and capturing a growing audience, especially in Saudi Arabia
- Despite the country's current low screen density, Saudi Arabia's rapid growth in cinema since lifting the ban in 2018 is remarkable, with the country surpassing Italy in annual box office revenue in 2021 and ranking among the top six markets in the EMEA region for the first time in modern record
- Saudi Arabia, with a projected population of 39.5 million, would need around 370 cinema sites with an average of 7.0 screens each to reach 2,600 screens by 2030. This aligns with predictions from the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) and plans from international companies like VOX to open 600 screens in the region in the coming years

Cinema Density - Screens per 100k people in 2022/23*



Sources: PWC "Cinemas in Saudi Arabia: A billion-dollar opportunity" (2020), Infomineo Analysis, Press Search



Social media's global reach and increasing demand for live shows are expected to drive growth in the Middle East's music industry

The music scene in the Middle East is undergoing a transformative change, with social media playing a crucial role in breaking down barriers and creating more opportunities for regional artists worldwide. This has sparked greater interest from international music companies in the region. Additionally, shifting societal norms have contributed to a surge in live shows, drawing in live entertainment companies and introducing tourists to local music



Social Media's impact on music discovery and promotion

- Social media platforms like TikTok have become crucial for music discovery and promotion, especially in countries like Saudi Arabia. Its algorithm favors engaging content, leading to the viral success of songs and encouraging users to explore songs on other platforms through user-generated content
- TikTok's collaboration with Rotana Music Group and its 'Add to Music App' feature showcase its dedication to Middle Eastern music promotion. The platform has greatly amplified local talent, propelling artists to recognition on both local and global scales
- Record labels and marketers are capitalizing on TikTok's popularity, and the introduction of app-specific music charts further emphasizes TikTok's transformative role in the Middle East music industry

Changing societal norms and surging demand for live show

- The Middle East is witnessing a growing acceptance of music, boosting musical entrepreneurship and live music scene demand, especially in Bahrain and the UAE. Musicians are not only finding opportunities to perform their music but are also starting to venture into entrepreneurship
- Fever, a live entertainment platform, has rapidly expanded in the Middle East, debuting in Dubai in 2022. It is capitalizing on the region's growing acceptance of diverse entertainment and aligning with Dubai's vision of democratizing access to culture and entertainment
- Currently, Saudi Arabia has also emerged as an exciting market for Fever's growth, with the country's entertainment sector projected to expand by 9 percent annually through 2028



To realize the full potential of its cultural heritage, the region should continue to improve its infrastructure, cultivate talent, and foster partnerships

According to a report from the United Nations Development Programme, the culture and arts sector in the GCC countries has the potential to contribute up to 5% of a nation's GDP. However, recent data from the World Bank in 2021 shows that in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, this sector only accounted for 1.7% and 2.6% of GDP, respectively. In addition to ongoing efforts to revive cultural and artistic domains such as film and music, the region could increase its economic gains from its abundant cultural heritage by:

Creating a thriving environment for both local and international artists by building museums and galleries (e.g. UAE's "Year of Cultural Authenticity and Heritage"), coupled with a focus on cultural tourism (e.g. Saudi Arabia's 90-day visa program) will help increase the contribution of the culture and arts sector to GDP in the Middle East

Supporting local talent through education and training programs can also cultivate a thriving community of artists. Saudi Arabia's investment in developing cultural academies aligns with this strategy, aiming to nurture local talent Encouraging international collaboration is crucial, as exemplified by the cultural agreement signed in 2020 between the UAE and France aimed at enhancing cultural exchange through various events and exhibitions. The Middle East can tap into expertise and best practices, fostering a dynamic cultural landscape

Creating public-private partnerships and implementing funds similar to the US National Endowment for the Arts, which provided USD 155 million in 2020. Initiatives such as tax incentives, as seen in Canada and France, can drive private sector involvement



Entertainment parks in the Middle East are rapidly evolving, providing immersive experiences and growth opportunities in the region

The Middle East entertainment parks sector, especially in Saudi Arabia, is experiencing a significant shift driven by increasing tourism and cutting-edge technology. This change not only alters leisure perceptions in the Middle East, but also opens doors for entertainment and theme park firms to expand in the region and gain a competitive edge through offering innovative immersive experiences.



- **Increased** tourism is significantly impacting entertainment parks in the Middle East, leading to a surge in visitation. According to IAAPA*, consumer spending in the MENA region's theme parks is expected to grow annually by 10.9%, reaching USD 474 million by 2024, surpassing North America and Asia Pacific
- Another factor contributing to the industry's growth is the substantial investment in new parks and attractions. Saudi Arabia is at the forefront, with SEVEN planning to invest USD 13 billion to build its 21 entertainment destinations
- The UAE aims to boost tourism's GDP contribution to USD 122 billion by 2031 and attract 40 million hotel guests, creating an environment for the industry to grow



Innovative technologies integration

Innovation, including **AI and the metaverse**, is revolutionizing the entertainment sector. For instance, Universal Studios Japan integrated AR into attractions like Mario Kart: Koopa's Challenge, while Six Flags collaborated with Google Cloud in 2023 for an Al-driven virtual assistant.

The Middle East's entertainment parks, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, echo global trends by embracing these innovative technologies. Examples can be:

- In the UAE, noteworthy initiatives include AYA and House of Hype, providing immersive experiences, along with Yas Island, digitizing attractions for worldwide accessibility
- In Saudi Arabia, Riyadh Season provided USD 55 million to 'HyperSpace', leading to the opening of House of Hype during the fourth edition. AlUla City offers immersive virtual experiences to global tourists using the metaverse

Outlook

In recent years, the media and entertainment landscape in the Middle East has witnessed **remarkable growth and transformation**, positioning itself as a dynamic hub of innovation and creativity within the global industry. Governments and private entities in the region **have been actively supporting** the expansion of the media and entertainment sector through **infrastructure investment, regulatory frameworks, and initiatives to promote talent development**. Moving forward, stakeholders are encouraged to sustain momentum, foster creativity, and embrace collaboration:

- Regional media companies should focus on developing digital business models that balance between ad-funded and consumer-paid revenues, improving customer relationships, and assessing and enhancing their digital competencies. They can differentiate themselves by focusing on local content creation
- **Multinational companies** need to recognize the diverse markets in the Middle East, prioritize potential markets by their ease of entry, and navigate different local regulatory environments for media and entertainment
- Telecom operators can leverage their distribution capabilities and consumer data insights to venture into the digital media sector, aiming to boost their average revenues per user. This trend is evident as telecom companies are gradually introducing OTT services in the region
- Governments should continue to regulate content, protect data and intellectual property rights, and ensure media aligns with societal norms. Additionally, regional collaboration should be promoted to localize events and entertainment.
 By fostering a supportive ecosystem, the Middle East can pave the way for a vibrant and prosperous future for media and entertainment.



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