

DRESSED IN HIS PRISTINE WHITE kandura – the traditional Arab ankle-length robe – and red-striped ghutra headdress, 12-year-old Mansour strides into chemistry class. He and his excited friends mix solutions, and are so proud of their new formula, they decide to take the creation home.

But when a drop spills into a bowl of harees, disaster strikes. The reaction makes the traditional Arab dish of cracked wheat and minced lamb expand rapidly, and it soon bulges out of the windows and doors.

Mansour, and his eponymous cartoon series, are the brainchild of Rashed Al Harmoodi, Vice President of Corporate Communications at Mubadala Development Company – an Abu Dhabi government-owned institution with assets of more than

\$63 billion. Mubadala – Arabic for “exchange” – was established in 2002 to drive economic diversification in oil-rich Abu Dhabi. It has invested globally to become a force in several sectors, including aerospace, aluminum and semiconductors, with a view to creating high-value employment in Abu Dhabi, and the wider United Arab Emirates federation.

But ensuring that skills, especially among the young, increase at the same pace as investment is a challenge.

“In 20 years, when these new industries are firmly established here, who is going to lead them?” says Al Harmoodi. “We always knew we had to invest in human capital, and we also realize that we have to start talking to children now. My son is 5, and I want him to be part of the shift in Abu Dhabi. The only way to truly engage with very young children is through animation.”

Enter our hero, Mansour. Science geek; Emirati inventor; loyal friend and relative; sporting hero; mischief maker.

A role model for young Emiratis, Mansour was inspired by a hero who lived 8,000 kilometers east of Abu Dhabi. Captain

SOVEREIGN WEALTH

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Brunswick’s **DOMINIC WHITING** and **FATEMA MAHMOUD AL KHATEEB** explain how cartoons are serious tools for engaging youth in the Middle East

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Now take up two drops of Chemical X and put them in the test tube

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Scene 21 - Panel 4



A storyboard sketch (above) of the popular cartoon "Mansour." Research by Turner, a division of Time Warner, found that 75 percent of children in the UAE, and 65 percent of children in Saudi Arabia, tuned in to watch the show's first season

Mansour reaches 130 million homes across the Middle East and North Africa region

Tsubasa, a “manga” cartoon soccer player, made a generation of Japanese children fall in love with the sport in the 1990s, paving the way for Japan to host the FIFA World Cup in 2002.

Al Harmoodi was looking for similar impact from Mansour, but in the rapidly changing world of work. Once an exporter of dates and pearls, Abu Dhabi became an oil heavyweight in the 1960s and today commands 6 percent of the world’s proven reserves. But with tourism, aviation, financial services and energy-intensive industries taking hold, the emirate has increased non-oil activity to over half of GDP, from 41 percent in 2008.

BLUE COLLAR LEADERS

“MY GENERATION WAS THE FIRST TO GRADUATE from university, my father and grandfather didn’t have that opportunity,” Al Harmoodi says. “Now we need to move on even further. We need blue collar Emiratis, who want to put on overalls and fix airplanes or manage aluminum production.”

“Mansour” was born out of a serious desire to evoke interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) among children, while teaching practical lessons. The show also looks to reinforce Emirati culture and Arabic language in a context of rapid socio-economic

SPEAKING ARABIC

MORE THAN HALF OF THE POPULATION IN THE Arab world, a region comprising 22 countries with a combined population of more than 390 million, is below the age of 25 – 20 percent are between 15 and 24 years old. According to *The Economist*, the region is set to grow by 110 million people by 2025, a pace almost double the global rate.

This exploding demographic presents a challenge in the Arab world: the region’s youth unemployment rate is double the world average, and the lack of job prospects, combined with frustration at political intransigence, has created a volatile mix.

One should be wary of grouping all Millennials in the Arab world together. While most speak a common language, belong to the same religion and live in nations that share borders with one another, there are important distinctions between countries, especially along cultural lines.

Still, broad trends are emerging. More young Arabs today are connected than ever before. They get more of their news online than from TV or print media, and countries like Saudi Arabia enjoy the highest Twitter penetration and per-capita YouTube consumption in the world. Last year, the Middle East’s internet penetration jumped by over 21 million users, or 17 percent. According to Google, the region saw an 80 percent spike in hours of YouTube footage watched.

Some progressive business, government and nonprofit leaders are experimenting with how best to engage these young people, employing a blend of digital and traditional communications – inviting their involvement through new media, supported by influencers who broadcast via Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.

The UAE’s Minister of State for Youth, 22-year-old Shamma Al Mazrui, has launched Youth Circles across the country to involve young Emiratis in debates and brainstorming on issues that matter to

IN 2015 THE MIDDLE EAST REGION WATCHED **80** PERCENT MORE HOURS OF YOUTUBE VIDEOS

Source: Think with Google, “The rise of YouTube in MENA”

them. Explaining the appointment of Al Mazrui, the youngest minister in the world, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Prime Minister and Vice President of the UAE, said, “Youth represents some half of our Arab societies, so it is only logical to give them a voice and role in governing the nation.”

In Saudi Arabia, the Deputy Crown Prince’s non-profit MiSK Foundation sends Saudi graduates to leadership courses at prestigious universities like Harvard and collaborates with major corporations like GE, organizing fairs where young Saudis can sign up for workshops in video journalism, creative writing, animation and graphic design.

Non-alcoholic malt beverage Barbican won acclaim for its online and offline engagement as a result of its “Bro Challenge,” which took young Arab men around the world on extreme sports adventures.

There are also increasing numbers of vocational training schemes and online academies with international partners, offering programs entirely in Arabic that help bring recent graduates and non-university-educated individuals up to speed with “fourth revolution” skills.

Multinationals have an opportunity to learn a great deal from these efforts. They can make campaigns in the region successful by listening to what young people want, using language and tone they can relate to, and collaborating with their celebrities and established role models.

Although continued unrest in the region’s most populous countries remains an obstacle facing active engagement with young Arabs, a significant number of them are less of an enigma – and far more connected and reachable – than the news cycle might lead one to believe.

WAJIB HALAWA is a Director in Brunswick’s Dubai office, specializing in corporate reputation.

transformation and migration. UAE nationals now account for 11 percent of the country's estimated population of nine million.

But an overly earnest cartoon was never going to catch the imagination. Al Harmoodi recognized that those who set out to teach are often ignored by kids, while those who set out to entertain are seen as fun and are able to teach. So when Mubadala began to work with Cartoon Network, the brief was to make "Mansour" as funny and exciting as possible, while taking into account cultural sensitivities.

"For this to work, it had to be an entertaining show that sits comfortably on Cartoon Network's Arabic channel," says Adam Khwaja, General Manager and Creative Director of Cartoon Network Studios Arabia. "So we worked closely with Rashed and his team, absorbing ideas and cultural touchpoints. People who like animation are in touch with their inner child. They are the most passionate artists and storytellers."

Mansour's chubby friend, Obaid, supplies many of the laughs with his hapless adventures. In one dream, he eats his way through a "candyland", highlighting an important issue in the UAE, where the obesity rate is double the world average and one in nine people suffer from diabetes.

Mubadala has since created a game in which Obaid runs to shrink a "diabetes monster." The more fruit Obaid eats, the faster he runs. The app has been downloaded 1.5 million times.

Meanwhile, Mansour's grandfather, Saqer, is a gentle reminder of UAE heritage, giving advice and telling tales of old. Emiratis were largely itinerant Bedouins until 70 years ago, building few permanent structures, and alternating seasonally between pearling in the Arabian Gulf and farming at inland oases.

Although Mansour is the hero, his studious female cousin, Shamma, often outsmarts him. "Shamma is a key character because we know that Emirati girls and women will continue to play an important role in the coming generation," Al Harmoodi says. In the UAE, women account for just over 70 percent of students in government universities, and two thirds of public sector employees are female.

HAVE COMEDY, WILL TRAVEL

EMIRATI ACTORS SUPPLY THE VOICEOVERS IN their "khaleeji", or Gulf Arabic, dialect, giving Mansour and his friends a very firm UAE hue, while the scenes of aqua seas, squeaky sand beaches

and gleaming high rises hint at modern-day Abu Dhabi without explicitly stating it.

This pseudo-anonymity is necessary because "Mansour" reaches 130 million homes across the Middle East and North Africa region, and is particularly popular in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Across the region, "Mansour" is the third most popular Cartoon Network show among children aged 10 to 14, vying with international favorites such as "Ben 10" and "Powerpuff Girls."

Mubadala is now capitalizing on unexpected commercial opportunities, with "Mansour" merchandise being stocked at leading global toy retailers Toys R Us and Mothercare. Counterfeits



are even starting to appear. With a third series in production, Mansour may soon travel further, perhaps to Indonesia and Malaysia, given their cultural affinity with the Arab world.

Khwaja believes it could work. "We created a comedy with tons of adventure, which is a format that is very universal for the 6-to-12 age range," he says. "Mansour's ability to invent stuff usually drives the story, and this dovetails with values that come across in all our cartoons – teamwork, good friendships and loyalty."

Back at Mansour's harees-filled neighborhood, the young hero comes to the rescue. After working with his teacher to concoct a new "shrinking" chemical, he commandeers a helicopter from a TV news crew, promising to give them the exclusive coverage. To disperse the antidote, he leaps into the expanding harees-blob armed only with the shrinking formula and a snorkel. "Collaboration is the secret to success," Mansour concludes.

DOMINIC WHITING is a Director specializing in financial communications. **FATEMA MAHMOUD AL KHATEEB** is an Account Director focusing on campaign planning. Both are in Brunswick's Abu Dhabi office.

Mansour, on his bike, is surrounded by family and friends. Furthest right, arms folded and wearing a yellow kandura, is Obaid, one of Mansour's closest friends. Food and candy are almost as important to Obaid as Mansour's friendship. The character is used to warn children about the dangers of obesity and diabetes