

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Mauzoun

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Mauzoun¹ is a for-profit creative establishment founded in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in 2018. The organization offers a variety of writing services, including creative copywriting, book editing, and translation, with the hopes of becoming a publishing house in the future. Mauzoun, whose name from the Arabic translates to “poetic balance,” aims to “reflect the richness and versatility of both the Arabic and English languages, the ingenuity of our writers, and how powerful and seamless good writing should be.”² They emphasize the importance of taking sufficient time to work on projects to produce quality work and thus operate on a project-by-project basis. This slow approach counters the fast-paced and profit-driven tendencies that can often characterize creative copywriting agencies. The business’s clientele is varied; including smaller businesses like We the Loft,³ digital platforms like Mauj,⁴ and large-scale clients like Spotify and the Saudi Ministry of Tourism.

The diversity of Mauzoun’s client base necessitates a writing approach that marries corporate considerations with creative flair, while acknowledging the beauty of language. The team undertakes significant research into the brand they are working with, putting themselves in the client’s shoes, and using a collaborative effort to produce elegant content. According to the survey, the team implements a four-day work week because they believe it cultivates a culture that elevates “creativities and productivities up a notch, providing the space and time needed to bring a fresh outlook to [our] workplace and projects.”⁵

According to the survey, the Mauzoun team frames their work as “reviving the . . . literary movement in Saudi Arabia.”⁶ In a follow-up interview, the founder and creative director, Layan Abdul Shakoor, explained that publishing houses in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf more generally are often “transactional,” only taking on authors with sufficient capital to publish their work and receiving a significant cut in the process. Shakoor identifies this as one of the main reasons the literary movement is stagnant in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Instead,

¹ See <https://www.mauzoun.com/>.

² Layan Abdul Shakoor, Mauzoun, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

³ See <https://www.wetheloft.com/>.

⁴ See <https://www.mauj.me/>.

⁵ Shakoor, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

⁶ Shakoor, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

she highlights the need for publishing houses to invest in authors they believe in—something she hopes to achieve soon with Mauzoun. “This would involve us taking on authors from the start of their journey, including marketing, branding, printing, and sale based on a share of profits rather than a lump sum.”⁷ For Shakoor, creative content writing is a means to achieving the dream publishing house—because it provides financial support, but more so an opportunity to hone writing skills, in a way that is captivating and combines linguistic beauty with professionalism.

Mauzoun’s work covers a range of topics that are largely related to Saudi Arabia and are relevant to the region. Although the organization has a rather small team of six to ten employees located between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, the scope and depth of their work is steadily growing. One project provided the curatorial text for an exhibition honoring the work of the late Madani Sindi, one of Madinah’s most reputable photographers. Other projects include copywriting for the Saudi Tourism Authority campaign to encourage domestic tourism, as well as a regional campaign for Spotify translating slogans into Egyptian and Saudi Arabic. In addition to showcasing their work, Mauzoun often offers detailed explanations of their creative process on their Instagram page. For the Spotify campaign, they published a post detailing the important research they did, testing regional relevance of phrases, and explaining the significance behind the chosen translation. Furthermore, Mauzoun’s regional commitment is not just in relation to content produced but also to social responsibility. Following the August 4, 2020, Beirut blast, the organization dedicated a space on their platform to write the stories of people in Lebanon who were affected by the tragedy.

Mauzoun’s social media presence is an essential part of its work, as it helps shape the brand’s identity and creates room for public discourse. This is not to adopt a technological-determinist argument that overstates the importance of social networking sites; however, it highlights the important role of Instagram in Mauzoun’s work. One post discusses whether we can celebrate fascinating historical works like filmmaker’s Lotte Reiniger’s *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) even if it is Orientalist? Another discussion they opened up is on the beauty of languages, asking whether one language can be more beautiful than another, using an Arabic poem by Joseph Harb and its English translation as a case study. By creating such a space, Mauzoun is bringing important subjects to the fore in an accessible manner.

It is important to note that Mauzoun’s discussions are not limited to the digital

⁷ Layan Abdul Shakoor, personal communication, April 2021.

sphere; they also include public events. In 2019, they held a series of talks titled “The Myths in Our World and around It,” which sought to unpack famous legends such as that of Thul Qarnain, a Thousand and One Nights, and Hijazi myths. According to Shakoor in a follow-up interview, these talks “are a way to engage with the audience and to remind people that although we are currently in a literary slump in general as Arabs, we have a wealth of narrative history to be inspired by, both old and contemporary.”⁸ Furthermore, they address topics that are often seen as taboo or controversial in the Arab world, such as female sexual health. One of their projects is content writing for Mauj, a sexual and reproductive wellness platform by and for Arab women, which has charted the path for open and honest conversations about women’s bodies and sexual rights.

In discussing the humanities landscape in the Arab world, Tarek El-Ariss notes that “to support the humanities, it’s crucial to identify the organizations and sites that are producing them and creating new meaning and knowledge. The translation and publication projects are a major part of this process.”⁹ Mauzoun is one such organization that is producing and creating new meaning and knowledge, in a “poetically balanced” and innovative fashion.

⁸ Shakoor, personal communication, April 2021.

⁹ Tarek El-Ariss, *Humanities in the Arab Digital Age* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 9.

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