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GRANT PROJECT LESSONS AND OUTCOMES

Ahlan Simsim

Optimizing the use of mobile phones in Sesame Workshop's early childhood development program in the Middle East

GRANT PROJECT DATES

October 2019 to March 2021

Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit organisation behind *Sesame Street*, has a mission of helping children everywhere grow smarter, stronger, and kinder. Sesame Workshop partnered with the International Rescue Committee to create Ahlan Simsim ("Welcome Sesame" in Arabic), a groundbreaking initiative that delivers early learning and nurturing care to children and caregivers affected by the Syrian conflict.

MORE DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT:

As part of the Ahlan Simsim initiative, in February 2020, Sesame Workshop launched *Ahlan Simsim*, a localized version of *Sesame Street* for broadcast across the Middle East and North Africa with a particular focus on children affected by crisis and displacement. *Ahlan Simsim* aims to address social-emotional needs of children, while challenging gender assumptions and modeling new paradigms for children's emotional expression. The team received a grant from the GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation Fund to add a mobile-enabled component to their work. Through the development of a suite of mobile-based multimedia content, Sesame Workshop planned to extend the existing Ahlan Simsim initiative, targeting parents and caregivers with regularly distributed content via social media and mobile based platforms. The project intended to allow Ahlan Simsim to deepen engagement and interaction with existing audiences while also extending reach to new individuals, not only including parents and caregivers in the project but enhancing the likelihood of children engaging with the content.

Sesame Workshop used GSMA grant funding to develop and test a series of 25 mobile-optimized *Ahlan Simsim* videos, which they shared via WhatsApp, YouTube and Facebook. This approach meant that they were able to reach caregivers in hard-to-reach contexts, could test the appetite for mobile-enabled content and could also test 'trusted messenger'[1] personas.

The objective of the project was to support parents/caregivers with social-emotional learning, via specially designed mobile-enabled digital content, to ultimately improve the lives of children affected by crisis and displacement. The content focused on the importance of play, empathy, early brain building, understanding stress, nutrition and gender equality. The content was also adapted to include specific guidance for caregivers and children on a range of issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The team exceeded their initial target to reach 100,000 people with this new mobile-enabled content. Ultimately, the videos were viewed over 39 million times and by 8 million unique viewers during the grant period.

KEY STATS

MOBILE-ENABLED AHLAN SIMSIM CONTENT RECEIVED MORE THAN

39 million

VIEWS

By an estimated[2]

8 million

UNIQUE VIEWERS

25 new pieces

OF MOBILE-FIRST CONTENT

95%

OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS AGREED THAT MOBILE WAS THE RIGHT CHANNEL TO RECEIVE THE CONTENT

99%

OF CAREGIVERS BELIEVES THAT THE 'EXPERTS' IN THE VIDEOS ARE 'VERY OR SOMEWHAT INFORMATIVE'

86%

OF CAREGIVERS NOW REPORT THAT THEY REGULARLY TALK TO THEIR CHILDREN ABOUT STRESS

(UP FROM 67% BEFORE WATCHING THE CONTENT)

93%

OF CAREGIVERS SAID THEY NOW REGULARLY THINK ABOUT THE BRAIN DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD THEY CARE FOR (UP FROM 73%)[3]

DATA SOURCES

- *Sesame Workshop reporting and monitoring: Project data and documentation*
- *Project evaluation conducted by D3 Solutions: The sample for the evaluation included longitudinal diary studies with 75 displaced caregivers in various city and camp locations across Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon[4]. The evaluation was conducted from January to March 2021.*
- *It should be noted that caregivers needed to have regular and easy access to a smartphone in order to be included in the evaluation, which will skew results linked to engagement with mobile-enabled content.*

1. 'Trusted messenger' - a figure/person who shares information in a trustworthy way. Sesame tested 3 types of messenger in these videos - a doctor, a social worker and a caregiver.
2. Ahlan Simsim content was viewed over 39 million times in total during the grant period. Given the multiple channels the content was shared over it wasn't possible to track unique users, and as such a conservative estimate puts unique users at 1/5 of total views; 8 million.
3. ibid
4. Iraq - Erbil and Qushtapa Camp; Lebanon - Beirut and Beqaa Camp; Jordan - Amman and Zaatari Camp



Miriam* Female, Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan

Miriam is a working mother who cares for her children in Zaatari Refugee Camp. Miriam enjoyed the Ahlan Simsim videos so much that as soon as she received a new one on her smartphone, she would begin downloading it and invite her children to view it with her. Despite worrying that phones distract parents from their children, Miriam felt that the expert advice she received from the Ahlan Simsim videos was useful, particularly the early brain development ideas and 'belly breathing' technique for stress management. Miriam uses her smartphone daily for instant messaging and sharing funny content over WhatsApp with her sisters.



Jiwan* Male, Qushtapa Refugee Camp, Iraq

Jiwan is a Syrian-Kurdish refugee living in Qushtapa Refugee Camp in Iraq. He works as a teacher and supports his wife and seven children aged 5 to 24. As an educator and active father, Jiwan appreciated the lessons in the Sesame videos, saying "Ahlan Simsim was like a school within my house for my children. They needed these videos, and I learned a lot more about how to raise my children." Jiwan said that the videos left him feeling more connected to his children and interested in seeking out additional parenting resources. Jiwan spends upwards of three hours a day on his smartphone. He enjoys sharing funny videos with his family over WhatsApp and accessing video content through the Snaptube app. He also uses his phone to help him teach his children new skills, like the English language. The pandemic negatively impacted his income, which he relies on to help support his family, meaning his internet consumption is most often limited to free public wi-fi.



Fatima* Female, Beqaa, Lebanon

Fatima has lived in an informal tented settlement in Beqaa, Lebanon, with her husband and seven children since 2011. She is a stay-at-home mother, and her husband has been out of work due to an injury for several months; accordingly, her oldest son has taken up work to support their family. She liked the Ahlan Simsim content as they brought her family together each week and each video was designed to teach her something new. She also enjoyed the familiar Syrian accent used across the videos. Whilst COVID-19 has been difficult for Fatima and her family, as lockdowns have forced them to be home more often in their small, tented shelter, and prices have gone up, Fatima happily reports that they have not had to limit their phone use. She feels that their phone offers the whole family reprieve from the stress of COVID-19 in the form of entertainment.

5. During the project evaluations, participants had the option to receive videos over WhatsApp, however normally viewers would watch videos on social media platforms.

*Names have been changed.



Project Outcomes & Lessons

OUTCOME

Ahlan Simsim mobile-optimized content was viewed over 39 million times, indicating a large appetite for Sesame's caregiver facing videos

The Ahlan Simsim videos were watched a total of 39 million times by an estimated 8 million unique viewers between December 2020 and January 2022, vastly exceeding the original target of 100,000. Virtually all viewers (97%) watched the Ahlan Simsim content on a mobile phone. This level of audience engagement indicates a large appetite for this type of caregiver-facing video content delivered through mobile channels and reinforces a lesson from the project evaluation (below), highlighting mobile as an effective channel to communicate with this group, especially as many caregivers in the evaluation said they already used their devices to engage with educational content for their children.

Whilst paid campaigns on social media platforms proved to be particularly effective in increasing the reach of the video content, organic sharing amongst viewers is likely to also be important; during the grant project's evaluation, many participants said they had often found the Ahlan Simsim content informative and engaging enough to share with family and friends via instant messaging.

"My son always wants to open games on my phone and watch videos. everything is on the mobile, even learning... I think Ahlan Simsim is very important for raising children... We also watch similar programs, like Karameesh and Toyor Al-Jannah, on the TV and phone."

JOR-28, Mother, Jordan



LESSON

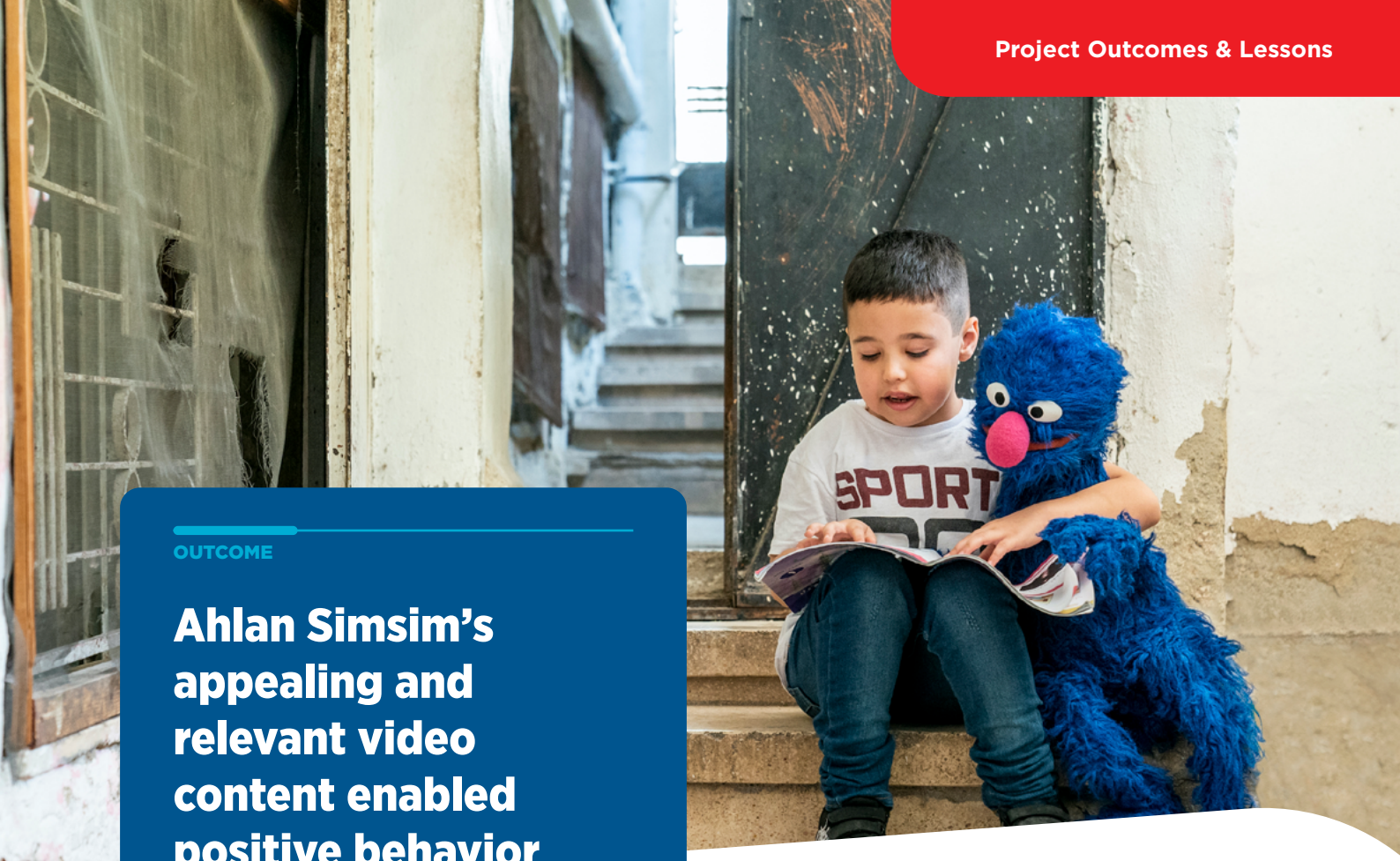
Mobile videos are an effective way of reaching connected Syrian caregivers because they meet caregivers' needs for flexibility in how they view and access video content

95% of caregivers in the evaluation agreed that mobile is the right channel to access *Ahlan Simsim* videos. Watching and sharing videos via mobile is already common among caregivers in their everyday lives and three-quarters of those included in the evaluation reported watching mobile videos daily.

Many caregivers reported seeing their phone as an important tool for raising their children. They spoke regularly about the utility mobile connectivity provides them, from being able to quickly search for information to answer to children's questions, to their mobile device serving as a platform for educating their children through online courses and videos. As such, mobile-enabled Ahlan Simsim content fits well into existing patterns of phone use.

A larger screen size was seen as a possible benefit of watching *Ahlan Simsim* on TV, as it would make it easier for several family members to watch all at once. However, for many the drawback of only being able to watch the videos as they are aired outweighed the screen size benefit. Caregivers liked that they could access the Ahlan Simsim mobile videos whenever and wherever they wanted, and as often as they liked.

> *"It [my phone] is very important. It is like a friend to me, to learn and gain information. I look for information on the internet on how to deal with children, for example."*
>
> **IRQ-9, Mother, Qooshtapa Camp, Iraq**



OUTCOME

Ahlan Simsim's appealing and relevant video content enabled positive behavior change among caregivers

Caregivers commended the videos for not only being appealing and relevant, but also for teaching adults valuable lessons about parenting and child development. Caregivers also liked that the videos incorporated characters and dialogue that was interesting to their children, so they could watch the videos together.

Caregivers said the videos encouraged them to think about their relationships and interactions with their children. Findings show that the biggest impact of Ahlan Simsim videos on caregivers was around the importance of play for brain development - 93% of caregivers said they now regularly think about the brain development of the child they care for (up from 73%)[6]. The video's messages around how to manage emotions, as well as empathy and stress were also well liked by caregivers. In fact, for some, the Ahlan Simsim videos were a gateway or catalyst to looking for other, similar types of educational content.

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"Before Ahlan Simsim, I did not watch educational videos, but after I watched these videos and noticed the improvement in my technique, I started watching more educational videos about my behavior at home and with children. I changed a little, so I prefer Ahlan Simsim."

IRQ-24, Father, Erbil, Iraq

6. ibid

LESSON

Trusted words spoken by 'trusted messengers' improved the effectiveness of the videos in getting important messages across to caregivers and promoting behavior change

Effective information programming is most successful when the viewers' trust in both the source and the content can be established and maintained. In times when opportunities for face-to-face engagement are limited (exacerbated further by COVID social distancing restrictions), and when there is significant spread of misinformation, Ahlan Simsim wished to understand who caregivers saw as the best and most trustworthy messengers of information regarding their child's development. Using the GSMA grant funding, Ahlan Simsim were able to test three different 'trusted messengers' figures in the form of a doctor, a healthcare worker and a caregiver.

Results showed that key attributes of an effective messenger included someone who knows the topic enough to speak about it with clarity, confidence, and ease as well as demonstrating a calm, humble, and patient attitude. Results also showed that the pairing of adult 'trusted messengers' with Muppets role-play and acting scenes was key to enhance engagement, because although 99% of caregivers found the experts informative, they were the least popular element of the episodes. Caregivers tended to prefer acting scenes over explanations provided by experts.

"I enjoyed them [the videos] because they are beneficial, really useful, they teach us the foundations of parenting. Even the clips were nicely structured, you have the experts speaking, the dummies and the other characters"

IRQ-18, Mother, Iraq

LESSON

Reducing barriers to accessing mobile enabled video content is key since many caregivers are conscious about limiting their data consumption

Cost of data as a barrier to consumption of video content on mobile phones must be taken into account, since many caregivers interviewed said they often try to download or stream video content when on Wi-Fi, even if it is sometimes slower, to avoid paying for mobile data.

For the less data-cost conscious, being able to stream Ahlan Simsim videos on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram or other video hosting platforms was convenient and made it easy to share the content with family and friends. Paid campaigns (on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram) were particularly successful in increasing the reach of Ahlan Simsim content, helping spread the videos to new audiences.

For more data-cost conscious caregivers, or those without a wifi connection where they reside, receiving Ahlan Simsim videos in small, compressed files via WhatsApp was ideal, since it limited their data consumption and could be rewatched as often as desired. Many also said they liked to share the video files with family and friends over WhatsApp. It seems that to reach last-mile caregivers, a content sharing strategy that minimises caregivers' data costs to a maximum will be key.

"The internet is the biggest barrier that I face to watching Ahlan Simsim on my phone...there are months when people finish the internet balance and does not have money to refill it, so they wait."

JOR-92, Mother, Jordan

Recommendations to innovators looking to leverage a similar model

- Using mobile-optimized video content gives end-users the flexibility to consume content in their own timeframes.
- Paid campaigns on social media can extend the reach of video content and the important messages to an audience wider than organic sharing.
- As well as publishing video content on streaming platforms like YouTube and Facebook, consider sharing video content in a way that is less mobile data intensive for the end-user, such as the sharing of compressed video files over instant messaging.
- Upload video content to streaming sites in both higher and lower qualities, to give viewers the option to consume less data whilst streaming.
- Increase the level of engagement with mobile operators to achieve more effective dissemination of video content.

What's next

Sesame Workshop continue to scale the parent and caregiver focused components of their work across a number of their programmes/services.

Sesame Workshop are working to scale up the base component of Alhan Simsim in Iraq, where an award from USAID Iraq will support the development of Ahlan Simsim Iraq, a unique three-year program that will create and deliver educational content for Iraqi children and families and build the resilience of youth, particularly those impacted by conflict and violence.

While the findings showed important potential for knowledge shifts and behavior change around play, empathy, emotion management, and brain development, the findings also indicated that certain topic areas, like gender equality, may require a greater dose and availability of messages.

Continue to use the power of the Muppets, combined with the expert guidance from trusted messengers, to provide caregivers with both the science behind the concepts discussed, as well as the informal language and modeling to apply these lessons with their children.

Opportunities to best leverage partnerships with MNOs are being identified, building on scoping undertaken during the grant process, and on experiences to date partnering with MNOs such as Turkcell, in Turkey. Sesame Workshop and Zain Group have partnered to host Ahlan Simsim on the Zain Kids mobile application which is available to users in 12 MENA countries. Zain included a 2-minute highlight reel of the season 1 episode "Piece of the Past" in their Corporate Sustainability video shared at their booth at the Mobile World Congress."