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Queering the Lebanese Instagram: Reimagining Futurity

L'Instagram libanais au prisme du queer : réimaginer l'avenir

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Introduction

- 1 In 2019, 85% of Lebanese opposed homosexuality (Pew Research Center, 2020) in a country where same-sex attraction is still conceived as a deviation, sickness, and moral corruption. Nevertheless, more queer initiatives are rising, particularly within the virtual world, as the Internet altered how do we view the whole world, insinuating more tolerance towards non-normative gender identities (Correll, 1995; Campbell, 2004; Fox, 2007; Light, Fletcher, & Adam, 2008; Mowlabocus, 2010). For Chaarani, the Lebanese queer community exists more as a virtual crowd than a concrete physical group. (Charani, 2009)
- 2 On Instagram, a growing number of accounts come to challenge the heteronormative power reclaiming queer representations and voices. Mathew Gagne describes being online as the “beginning of a meditative process in the consolidation of queer self where digital media and queer culture intersect and produce each other.” (Gagné, 2012)
- 3 As the line separating the virtual world from the physical one has become blurred, merging both online with everyday identity (Fox, 2007), I analyze how the accounts contribute to the construction of the Lebanese queer identity.

Contextualizing Beirut

- 4 Institutionally, article 534 of the Lebanese penal code punishes sexual acts that are “contrary to nature” up to one year in prison. Although several legal wins were recorded in the Lebanese courts ruling in favor of sexual liberties and equalities (The

Legal Agenda, 2017), the state still relies on the above article to brutally crackdown on queer spaces and events, limiting queer presence and resistance. (Human Rights Watch, 2017)

- 5 Moreover, the existence of few gay-friendly spaces in Beirut has been misinterpreted by Western media, which portrayed the city as “the gay Arab paradise” (Healy, 2009). Such labeling does not only dismiss the daily struggle that Lebanese queer face (Moussawi, 2013) but serves the state semi “Homonational” (Puar, 2007) policy in spreading the narratives of Beirut exceptionalism. (Moussawi, 2020)
- 6 As modernity has been linked to sexual freedom (Butler, 2010), and gay visibility turns to be an essential indicator of liberties (Manalansan, 1995; Duggan, 2020; Butler, 2010), the Lebanese government promoted Beirut as the place of sexual freedom to attract capital money, foreign investments, and tourism to rebuild the country after the 15 years of civil war. (Masri, 2010; Moussawi, 2018)
- 7 Bringing these neoliberal policies into action, the system permitted the existence of queer places and spaces, mainly clubs and pubs, which mirror such exceptional image while securing the limitation of any kind of activism that might disturb the heteronormative patriarchal nature of the system.
- 8 In the streets of Beirut, the LGBTQ community still faces various kinds of harassment, making them one of the vulnerable groups in the country.

Methods

- 9 I choose to focus on Instagram and not another social/dating app that is catered specificity to the LGBTQ community due to the fact that while the latter is much safer, choosing to advocate on platforms that are public, openly accessed, and predominated by heterosexuals and normative codes insinuates the binging of a new queer era that diverts from the long hiding history. It signals a change that breaks free from fear, taboos and stigma.
- 10 I closely examine two Instagram queer accounts: *Artqueerhabibi* and *Takweer*, locating how the content of their posts contributes to the construction of the new Lebanese queer identity. My selection was primarily based on the different strategies each account employs to address its audience and secondly on the content. Although more queer artistic Instagram accounts continue to appear, ArtQueerHabibi remains distinct due to the highly imaginative and creative standards where its contents bravely and unapologetically mirror queerness.
- 11 To fully comprehend how the two Instagram accounts are contributing to the Lebanese queer identity modulation, I conduct a content analysis of the posts analyzing the meanings and implications they are producing.
- 12 I move beyond both the traditional mainstream representation of queer victimization, which depicts the daily queer struggle in the Arab World, and the White Western narratives of queerness and modernity, presenting a de-colonized reading of the effects that both Instagram accounts are creating. I also depart from the homonormative (Duggan, 2020) binaries of pride vs. shame and out vs. the closet. Instead, focusing on how the posts are negotiating cultural realities to produce queer futurity.

- 13 I rely on Michael Warner's (2002) analysis of community constructions through texts and productions, as readers associate and identify with each other, forming a new bounding and a sense of belonging (Warner, 2002). Wendy Chun's "Homophily" also remains important as she refuses the claim that the Internet is an open space where everyone connects; instead, she argues that similarities are what breeds connections.
- 14 It is also important to clarify that although the radical visibilities that the illustrations suggest are still far from being present realities, I conceive the posts according to what Sara Ahmed refers to as "marks" and "traces" as they allow the viewers to "associate the experience of having an emotion with the very effect of one surface upon another, an effect that leaves its mark or trace." (Ahmad, 2004: 6) These traces accumulate to build "queer worlding" that is "not a state of being, but rather one of becoming" (Manalasan, 2013: 571).

Artqueerhabibi

- 15 With 90,000 followers and 107 posts, as of May 2021, *Artqueerhabibi* relies on the medium of arts illustration to reimagine a queer version of the Arabic cities. The artist who keeps his identity hidden for safety reasons said to Plastik magazine that his primary purpose is to spread love and acceptance through raising awareness, breaking stigmas, and pushing queer visibility forward (Plastik, 2019). The illustrations mainly depict famous locations, such as the Egyptian pyramids, a metro station, a famous restaurant in Beirut, with a queer twist through adding people, actions, and objects that defy gender binary and compulsory normativity.
- 16 Inspired by his own experience as a queer person residing in Beirut, his friends, the Lebanese revolution (2019), Beirut Drag queens, and other famous queer figures in the Arab world, the artist fills his page with pictures depicting queer romance, sex, desire, and non-normative bodies. In his drawings, we see men sharing flirtatious gaze, women hugging, men kissing at the airport, same-sex romance, and same-sex sexual encounters.
- 17 Navigating the public sphere has always been surrounded by difficulties and fear, especially for non-normative bodies and trans women who are ridiculed, harassed, and excluded. (Merabet, 2014; Moussawi, 2020) *Artqueerhabibi* comes to mess things up, distrusting the normative coding of the bodies, objects, and spaces. It defies the geographical, safety, and cultural limits where queers unapologetically take the streets, expressing their presence, affection, and erotic desire. The pictures recall Michael Warner's definition of queerness that is to be conceived as what "let loose the rather wild smell of sexual rut to permeate, invade and stink up." (Warner as cited in Manalansan, 2013)

Figure 1. - Love (Artqueerhabibi, 2018).

- 18 Through kissing, romance, the gay gaze, the fetishized gaze, the artist is constructing what Martin Manalansan describes as “queer worlding,” which “involve the creation of material and semantic knowledge about space that is dependent on structural locations and power locations.” (Manalansan, 2013: 569) Sexuality, especially same-sex desire that has permanently been restricted to the private sphere is now the city’s primary residence where bodies, identities, and both queer sensuality and sexuality are unchained.

Spaces as the extensions of the bodies

- 19 The streets, the train station, the airport, the sidewalk, and the nightclub are now taking a new life as queer subjectivities manifest themselves within. Sara Ahmed describes the space as a “second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body.” (Ahmed, 2006: 5) The proximity and distances between the bodies and both the objects and the places reorient spaces with new meanings.
- 20 The terror that continuously escorts queer bodies had collapsed. There is no need anymore to adapt strategies to pass safely within the public sphere (Moussawi, 2020). On the contrary, the queer inhabitation is creating a new time and space outside the constraints of heteronormativity. The “here” and “now” are packed with happiness, love, eroticism, and desire. Queers bodies are not anymore the strange aliens that make heterosexuals look more humans (Ahmed, 2000); they are organically harmonizing with space, re-identifying the new cities that are free from exclusion.
- 21 Filling spaces with love and desire projects hope. Both feelings promise safety, security, and connection pushing the body into new directions within the space. Projecting queer love means overcoming the impossibility while defeating the cultural barriers,

homophobia, and patriarchy. To perform romance is to counter the heteronormative interpretation of queerness as deviation and sickness where there are no happy endings. The posts mirror happy stories that are craved by the silence of the image, “the many silence that are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse” (Sedgwick citing Foucault, 1990: 3).

- 22 The emotions the posts raise and expressed through the follower's comments are to be read as construction of queer embodiment and identity. Sara Ahmed stresses the impact of how emotions, along with repetition, create queer bodies. Hence, building on Butler's (1990) and Ahmed's (2004) narratives, I argue that through repetition; this account is not only reorienting the queer self but also normalizing the non-hegemonic gender concepts and performances.

Building one community

- 23 Wendy Chun's concept of “Homophily” counters the claim that the Internet is an open space that brings everyone closer. On the contrary, she shows that similarities are what breed connections and bonds in the name of comfort, predictability, and common sense (Chun, 2016). Homophily which she defines as “love as the love of the same” (Chun, 2016: 62), maps new connections based on resemblance making those who share common things “virtual neighbors” (Chun, 2018). For the oppressed queer minorities, such neighborhood acts as a vital resistance strategy opening up possibilities for social ties that breaks self-isolation while promising companionship, intimacy, reassurance, sense of belonging, self-esteem, and most importantly, improve mental health outcomes (Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010; Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Heaney & Israel, 2008; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).
- 24 *Artqueerhabibi* reinforces the love of the self, allowing its members to post comments, follow each other, share lived experiences and stories, and extend the social networks in a culture that teaches queers to hide and hate their stigmatized and shameful self/identity.
- 25 The post's emotional appeal generates a sense of belonging as it produces connections, common understanding, and empathy, specifically between members who share a common understanding of marginalization and dehumanization. (Cvetkovich, 2003: 38) Warner describes how the circulation of reflections and feelings produces what he calls the “public” and “counter-public,” which are organized entities that gather on the basis of common recognition, engagement, and interaction with the content. (Warner, 2002: 12) The public turns to be taking part in constructing and circulating the new uprising queer identity.

Demarginalizing the marginalized within their own community

- 26 Ghassan Moussawi (2018) argues that access to queer circles, spaces, and establishments is governed by exclusions based on class privileges, gender normativity, education privileges, and cultural capital (fluency in English or French) (Moussawi, 2018). Building on Chun's “Homophily” theory, I argue that the medium (Instagram) not only minimize such differences as the connections and the interactions are mostly

based on queer subjectivity and gender identity, but also erases additional limitations such as geographic locations, the fear of being outed or seen in specific locations, and cultural capital as the posts are written in Arabic and English.

- 27 Marginalizing the other within the community is also tackled within the content of the posts as they defy what Tom Roach calls the “ugly truth” of effemenophobia, racism, sexism, patriarchal masculinity, and classism that dominates queer communities. (Roach, 2015)

Figure 2. - Nezel el Samak (*Artqueerhabibi*, 2019).

- 28 Gay men remain occupied with traditional notions of masculinity to “pass” as “normal” males while expressing negative attitudes towards effeminate behaviors in other gay males. To be desired, the body must be inscribed within the heteronormative code or what Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990: 151) of masculinity or as repeatedly expressed on dating websites and applications: “straight-acting/non-feminine” (Clarkson, 2008).
- 29 In his ethnographic analysis of the queer community in Beirut, Sofian Merabet (2014) analyzes what he refers to as the “homosexual homophobia” that is practiced towards effeminate men and transsexual women inside gay places. (Merabet, 2014) Ghassan Moussawi also speaks of isolation that non-cis-males experience since being seen with a feminine body means being “dragged out” of the closet. (Moussawi, 2020)
- 30 *Artqueerhabibi* challenges this gender normative understanding breaking free from masculine toxic conceptualization of the male body through posts that celebrate the male femininity. Cross-dressing, male in a voguing position, male belly dancing, drag queens, and travesties are all illustrated, creating spaces for the followers to safely express emotional and embodiment vulnerability beyond the bounds of hegemony. It is mirroring a daily internal struggle that queer Arabs continue to live with as they

constantly practice “masculinity consciousness,” ensuring that they pass as “straight-looking men.” The fair presentation of everyone, including the most stigmatized and marginalized bodies within their community, projects a regeneration of a community that is free from exclusions. Warner writes: “only when this indignity of sex is spread around the room, leaving no one out, and in fact binding people together, that it begins to resemble the dignity of the human.” (Warner, 1999: 31)

- 31 I read the posts as an open invitation to rethink the impact of masculine hegemony and evaluate the self while engaging the followers with an embodiment of unconstrained masculinity that deconstructs the source of toxic expression that limits them.
- 32 The positive comments posted on such pictures reflect the slipping of power (Kimmel, 2012) from the hands of hegemony and traditional notions of masculinity towards more liberal and unrestricted gender performances. The comments reflect potential new dynamics where cis-males and effeminate men are not relating anymore to each other within the term of dominant versus subordinate. On the contrary, the account reflects the construction of a holistic approach of masculinity that embraces a more affirming sense of self and embodies functional masculinity that operates outside the bounds of hegemony.
- 33 Deconstructing classism is also tackled within the posts. As I mentioned above, Ghassan Moussawi presents the importance of social classes in shaping access and experiences in queer spaces and circles. Some illustrations in the account mess up the long history of Lebanese classism and class demarcation. Here love and desire are what matters. The inter-class queer encounter becomes the norm. In one of the posts, a man is kissing a taxi driver, a “low-class” profession within the Lebanese socio-economical standers. Another post shows a man bringing a flower to his same-sex lover that sells Falafel, traditional food known as the “dish of the poor.” The posts are undoing classism, demolishing the continuous “White middle-class” understanding of queerness that dismisses the working-class experiences.

Takweer

- 34 *Takweer* is another Instagram account that was created on the the 11th of September 2019. In Arabic, *Takweer* means to make something spherical, as a new version of the spherical world that we live in. It also sounds the same as the English word “queer.” With 5.247 followers and 67 posts, as of May 2021, the owner describes it as a place to explore queer narratives in Arab history and popular culture. The posts document various practices and gender identities, uncovering queer historical figures, artists who defied gender norms, non-normative cultural habits, and homosexual TV and movie characters across centuries.
- 35 Posts of Effeminacy, non-binary, Transsexuality, Drag queens, cross-dressing, and homoerotics are all displayed. In an interview with *Huck* magazine, Marwan Kaabour, the founder of the account, stated that the main motive behind the account is to uncover queer Arabic experiences of those who came before us “shedding light on the pre-colonial narratives, so we can feel that our existence is a continuity of one that stretches way back.” (*Huck* magazine, 2021)
- 36 On the contrary to the previous account, *Takweer* takes us on a journey to the past as it relies on archiving strategies to bring queer rhetoric forward. Jack Halberstam

describes the importance of queer archiving writing: “Archive is not simply a repository, it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity.” (Halberstam, 2005: 169–170). For Foucault, an archive is not just a material site filled with documents but as a space of enunciation. (Foucault, 1972) To archive is to revive wiped realities that had been intentionally erased either by the European colonial past (El- Rouyaheb, 2005) or due to the rise of Islamist fundamentalism.¹ (Dalacoura, 2014) The images and videos posted turn to be “evidence of existence” of the long queer history and customary practices within the Arab culture. They counter the narratives around queer “alienated” origins and the claim that queerness is earthier a Western product imported to the Arab World to destroy Arab moral values (Whitaker, 2006; Habibi, 2007; Dalacoura, 2014; Amer, 2012), or even a new form of cultural colonization where gays are intruders and victims of Western Imperialism. (Massad, 2007)

- 37 On September 24th, 2007, in a questions/answers session at Colombia University, the previous Iranian president Ahmadi Najad stated: “In Iran, we do not have homosexuals like in your country... In Iran we do not have this phenomenon, I do not know who told you we have it.” (Goldman, 2009)
- 38 The anthropologist Samar Habib explains the denial of the homosexual presence in the Arab World as it comes from colonial imposition in which Arabs define themselves through opposing the West. “So if the oppressor (the West) has gays, then we do not have them. If they do not execute, we do. That is how we define ourselves through the relations of the other.” (Salma, Nayrouz, & Ghaida Moussa, 2011: 10)
- 39 The posts “as evidence” also counter the Western “Orientalist” discourse (Said, 1978) of the “Homophobic Muslim” narratives depicting the Arab race as inherently homophobic and sexist and Muslims as direct threats to sexual freedoms. The evidences drop the Western conclusions that present Arab queers as not “queer enough” as they do not conform to the neoliberal codes of modern queerness, as well as their fate of living in continuous fear and oppression.
- 40 *Takweer* proves the opposite. In one of the posts, the creator presents a collection of pictures titled “The Khawal Dancers,” documenting the “*Khawalat*” or the male transvestite dancers who took part, until the late 1950s, in popular festivals and celebrations besides being a standard character in many films. Garay Menicucci coded their presence as “to imply the existence of a homosexual subculture or transgressive sexuality in general... They also often possess uncanny wit, a cynical sense of pragmatic realism, and personal integrity lacking in the conventional heterosexual characters that are surrounding them.” (Menicucci, 1998)
- 41 Portraying Arab local queer figures that the audience can culturally relate to in such a positive context leaves its impact on the viewer's self-perception. Kivel and Kleiber explain how queer individuals rely on various media sources to learn about their identity by searching for individuals to whom they can relate. (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000) Studies also showed how non-heterosexuals who model after successful media figures/role models they share similarities with, develop a stronger sense of self-efficiency. (Ochman, 1996; Cheung & Yue, 2003; Hammack, 2005; Lockwood, 2006)
- 42 One of the remarkable posts the account presents are pictures from “Miss Hanafi” (1954), an old black and white Egyptian comedy movie inspired by the story of the first Egyptian transsexuals. *Hanafi*, the main character, portrays a misogynist male authority controlling every aspect of his fiancée's life. Before the wedding, he was admitted to the

hospital where accidentally, the doctors perform a “sex reassignment surgery,” turning him into a female character named *Fifi*. The post comments on the movie writing:

The film showed a relatively progressive view of gender reassignment, as it did not criminalize it or poke fun at it, but rather show it as a “normal” issue, and was treated as such by the film characters. In a very insightful dialogue in the film, the x fiancé reminds Fifi: There is no shame in a man becoming a woman or a woman becoming a man. The shame is men's selfishness, how they deprive girls of education and turn their life into the prison that we live in. (*Takweer*, 2021)

- 43 These progressive archived materials are to conceived as essentials that secure meanings of the past (Derrida,1995) and as sites of knowledge and power that produce historical truths. (Foucault, 1972)
- 44 However, archives not only narrate the past but also inform the present as the content comes back to life through discussions and responses. For Derrida, Archives are sites to “question of the future itself, the question of a response, of promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.” (Derrida, 1995: 37)
- 45 Arab queer histories are the starting point for any future construction of local queer identities away from the Euro-American homonormative understanding of gender, queer liberation, and modernity. Pierre Bourdieu explains how history hunts us to become “inscribed in our dispositions: how we see ourselves and the extent we can envision alternative outcomes to those histories” (Bourdieu, 1990: 57); in other words, he suggests that our habitus/bodies are formed through the ways we embody history. (Bourdieu, 1990)

Conclusion

- 46 Both *Artqueerhabibi* and *Takweer* contribute to the construction of the new Lebanese queer identity moving the discourse from the private to the public sphere while raising a collective and wider sense for the “possibilities of being.” The representation that they suggest is rooted within the Lebanese local cultural realities and specificities breaking free from both the Western and global understanding of gender and the Western orientalist discourse that depicts the Arabic world as a place of total oppression.
- 47 The representation is complicating the understanding of identities that usually rest on the binaries of “in the closet” vs. “outside the closet,” “out” vs. “oppressed,” and pride vs. shame. The work created by queers to other queers who share the same struggle establishes a heteroglossic narrative that counters the normative discourse projecting a queer common futurist perspective.
- 48 Taking both Michael Warner's (2002) analysis of community constructions through circulating discourse and Wendy Chun's “Homophily” where similarities bring connections, as a focus of my analysis, I argued that the discussions, emotions, and the reactions the posts raise are producing an organized entity that shares new meanings, beliefs, and self-understanding. The uprising queer politics turn with time and repetition to form new normalities. What started as an artistic attempt had turned to be a site of collective activism and community building.
- 49 By examining *Artqueerhabibi*'s posts, I argued that the account is reorienting the public spaces by giving them new shapes and meanings that are packed with familiarities and safety (Ahmed, 2006). They end the long history of hiding and

escaping their ender realities while reimagining the city away from nostalgia, sadness, loss, and lust. The new realities are reversing the traditional queer immigration where queer Arabs are now moving towards their cities.

- 50 The content of the posts is also touching upon the collective being as a community that is free from oppression, hierarchies, and power dynamics based on an obsession with masculine normative performances and social classes that respectively control the accesses to queer circles and places. *Artqueerhabibi* resists the pressure to conform to normative and social class performances by empowering and celebrating effeminacy and anti-classism.
- 51 With *Takweer* I shed light on how archiving is reopening discussion around queer Arab history, leaving its impact on both the present and the future. The posts offer a new “structure of feelings” (Williams, 1977) in a crucial moment of queer becoming. They are the evidence of the long Arabic queer history challenging both local claims about the foreign origin of homosexuality and the Western assertions in which they conceive Arab/Muslims as not queer enough. Building on Derrida and Bourdieu, I also showed how reinterpreting the past that hunts shape the queer future embodiment.
- 52 In conclusion, the production of queer love and the archiving of queer historical power and success replace the long traditional “generative of failure” (Halberstam, 2005) by connecting, achieving, and reproducing power.
- 53 Both accounts move beyond “the promises of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010) to imagine the possibilities of being. The mess that they create is discomfoting heteronormativity constituting a new reading for potential queer Arab identity and community building.
- 54 As this paper was mainly interested in the production of Lebanese queer identity through Instagram’s posts, It remains important for future studies to investigate the reception within the Lebanese cultural context and between queer members paying more considerable attention to the subjectivities produced by the followers, mainly their comments and reactions on the posts.

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NOTES

1. Hamas Islamic resistance movement in Palestine, Al- Qaeda, the Egyptian Islamic Brothers, and the Iranian Islamic Revolution are the most famous Islamic fundamentalist groups formed in the 1970s and 1980s.

ABSTRACTS

Social media platforms have become an important arena for sexual politics equipping queers with safe alternative spaces while pushing their visibility and connectivity forward. My article examines two Lebanese queer Instagram accounts analyzing their contribution to the current construction of Lebanese queer identity. I examine how the tactic employed by each account is generating queer realities, meaning, and embodiment. While “Artqueerhabibi,” use the medium of comics, to reimagine a different queer reality creating a sense of belonging to the uprising community, “Takweer” archive queer Arab history and popular culture. The archive not only revives the long wiped queer history but also informs both the present and the future as the content comes back to life through discussions and responses.

Queer here is used both as an identity and an adjective to describe how both accounts are unsettling the normative understanding of sexuality and gender expression, besides raising new meanings and possibilities for local sexual politics.

Les réseaux sociaux sont devenus une arène importante pour la politique sexuelle. Ils offrent aux homosexuels des espaces alternatifs sûrs tout en faisant évoluer les visibilités et les connectivités. Cet article étudie deux comptes Instagram homosexuels libanais. Il analyse leur contribution à la construction récente d'une identité libanaise queer. Cette étude vise à montrer comment la stratégie employée par chaque compte génère des réalités queer et d'autres significations et incarnations queer. Tandis que le compte « Artqueerhabibi » utilise la bande dessinée comme moyen d'imaginer une nouvelle perception et projection queer dans l'avenir, le « Takweer » archive l'histoire du monde arabe à travers la documentation, l'art et la culture populaire. Ces archives ne font pas seulement revivre l'histoire de l'homosexualité, mais informent également le présent et l'avenir, car le contenu revient à la vie concrète grâce aux discussions et aux réponses.

Le terme « queer » utilisé ici renvoie à la fois à une identité et à un adjectif pour décrire comment les comptes Instagram perturbent la compréhension normative entre la sexualité et l'expression de genre pour soulever de nouvelles significations et possibilités pour la politique sexuelle locale.

INDEX

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