AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

WORKING HARD TO BE FUNNY: LEBANESE COMEDIANS' LABOR, GENDER AND THE PURSUIT OF AUTHENTIC CELEBRITY

by
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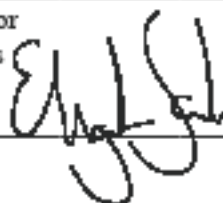at the American University of Beirut

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ABSTRACT
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Title: Working Hard to be Funny: Lebanese Comedians' Labor, Gender and the Pursuit of Authentic Celebrity

There is a thriving comedic scene in Lebanon where online and standup comedians have used their skills in humor both to entertain and to critique their social, political, and cultural experiences. In this thesis, however, I go beyond the role of humor as a powerful means of communication and focus instead on the hard work, the compromises, and negotiations behind the humorous content produced and disseminated by both online and standup comedians. My aim is to explore the labor of these Lebanese comedians and how their creative work shapes their content and subjectivities. I build off of Brook Erin Duffy's elaboration of aspirational labor and Angela McRobbie, Kylie Jerrett, and Isabella Lorey's critiques of the gendered nature of creative labor within a neoliberal and postfeminist frameworks. I interrogate how this framework is implicated in the creation of the celebrity and the application of micro celebrity practices. Based on qualitative interviews with a dozen online and standup comedians I argue that comedy is a gendered form of aspirational labor that has inherent tensions between the comedians' creative work and their sense of authenticity. This tension is heightened within the digital market economy as comedians apply micro celebrity practices that dilute some of the transgressive and queer qualities of their comedic content

Keywords: Comedy, humor, aspirational labor, gender, authenticity, precarity, neoliberal, postfeminist, cyborg, queer, micro-celebrity, celebrity culture

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure

INTRODUCTION

I recall the first time I attended Fady Raidi's comedy show in the summer of 2017. It was very funny and timely. I remember leaving the show with my friends with the shared feeling that a heavy load had been lifted off our shoulders. Fady's comedy spoke much about our political and social frustrations. His humor dissipated a built-up tension in our bodies and left us feeling mirth and a sense of relief that we weren't alone. In a nostalgic moment I went back online to check some of his comedy on YouTube. I found a few recordings from 2011 and 2009, and I was struck by two profound observations. First, watching his show online may not have had the same affective jolt that struck me when I had shared laughter with others, but I still felt that sense of delight that comes along with chuckling. Second, and most ironically, his narratives and his sarcastic critiques on politics and society still resonated. I had a hard time believing that the very topics he had covered were not commentaries on the malaise that is afflicting us today. Fady's onstage performance as well as his online archive both underscores the valuable role of comedic work in narrating the cultural and social relations in society. It also highlights the ubiquitous role of mediated technologies in communicating these relations so that they become part of our daily encounters. But more importantly, Fady's staged and mediated performances shed light on another, often invisible ocular; his creative labor. This dissertation will attempt to untangle the relationary and economic bonds that structure the work and lives of funny people whose labor has become an intricate part of how we translate our world and society.

The role of humor and the work of comedians are more important than simply entertainment. Humor, in all its forms, has an important role in narrating the social and cultural conditions that shape people's lives. Humorous critiques address audiences by calling into question beliefs and challenging norms (Lee, 2019). Ultimately, both comedians and their audiences are complicit in the practice of breaking social standards, either through "language, visual art, or other modes of representation" such as memes or caricatures (Lee, 2019, p.2). Their moment of shared understanding is often transgressive because of its position at the boundaries of what may be taboo or politically forbidden (Graefer, 2016). Because of its transgressive quality, comedy cannot be relegated to the trivial and the unessential. It is implicated in how people deal with pain, with oppression, and even with their understanding of who they are. Humor, therefore, is tied to "embodied beings, those who perform it and feel it" (Graefer, 2016, p.147). Humor's multifarious approaches and affective reach within the region have received attention as modes of transgression and resistance (Armbrust, 1996; Wedeen, 1999; Kraidi, 2019; Kishtainy, 2009). And while there has been a lot of Arab scholarship on humor through science, literature or arts (Alhigaz, 1991; Al-Khatib, 1999; Abd Al-Hamid, 2003; Fashoukh, 1989; Frayha, 1988; Khouri, 2007; Nilsen and Nislen 2000), very little work was published on Lebanese humor (Kazarian, 2011). But what is mostly absent in the conversation about humor, is a scholarly and focused study of the very producers who create this humor.

A. Working Hard for the Laughs

To produce and mediate humorous content means to be committed to a profession. And those that claim the profession of comedian declare that the skills of

narration, articulation, and acting in a humorous tone and mood are vocations and not recreational pastime. So while much has been said about the importance of humor, the labor of comedians has been sidetracked in most of this regions' literature (Kazarian, 2011). This omission is critical because it leaves invisible the economical, political and sociological structures that shape the creative humor produced. More pertinent, is the transformative nature of such creative work under new capitalism (Banks, Gill & Taylor, 2014; Bauman, 2005; Sennett, 2007). Terms like the new economy, the creative industry, cultural economy, or knowledge economy have become buzz words for the intersection of cultural production such as comedy and economical processes (Adkins, 2005; Du Gay and Pryke; 2002; Gibson and Kong, 2005; Pratt, 2007; Shorthouse and Strange, 2004; Wu, 2017). All these processes are hinged on the comedians' creativity, skill and talent that produce cultural products. But the current logic of neoliberalism which celebrates workers' embodiment of self-discipline, personal development, independence and flexibility (Guarriello, 2019; Humphreys, 2018; Taylor, 2018) also obscures increased inequalities (Hodson, 2001) and heightened precarity (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013). It also shifts the risk from capital to the workers with the seduction of freedom and personal entrepreneurship (Duffy, 2016; Neff, 2012; Sennett, 2006).

My focus, then, in this thesis is divergent from investigations on Lebanese humor's role in society. By looking at comedy, not only as an art form, but as labor I am attempting to illuminate a view of creative labor from within the Lebanese context. Since most of the scholarship on labor has had a Euro-American focus (Alacovska & Gill, 2019; Curran and Park, 2011; Hanitzsch, 2007; Sreberny, 2000; Wang, 2010), my investigation on the creative work of comedians in Lebanon presents a much needed

intervention that de-centers the scholarship from its hegemonic Euro-American focus (Alacovska & Gill, 2019). This is especially pertinent because there is very little financial or governmental support for the Lebanese creative industries (McKinsey, 2018, Najjar, 2007). As such, and without a national strategy for the harnessing of the arts, most of those who work within the creative fields are in fact informal workers whose labor is outside the framework of the formal labor market (Antcliff et al, 2007; Menger, 2006). While this informality is often liberating because it is distant from the clutches of governmental and economic oversight, it puts the informal laborers under precarious social and economic conditions that demand elaboration.

This de-Westernized study then aims to destabilize the normative notions of creative labor and highlight how creative workers in Lebanon and their informal industry operate from the periphery of the global economy. I focus on the hard work, the blood and soul, the compromises and the negotiations that bleed into the humorous content that is produced and disseminated by both standup and online comedians. My objective is to uncover the lives of those camouflaged behind the funny punch lines, mimes, and laughter. In this thesis, I attempt to break down comedy to uncover who the comedians are. How is their labor embodied? And how is this labor shaping their work and their subjectivities? I argue that comedy is a form of creative labor that offers rich insights into the creative process, the construction of gendered subjectivities, and the strategies and practices that laborers use to manage the informality of their work.

B. Setting the Scene

There is a burgeoning comedic scene in Lebanon. Today the Lebanese mediascape is witnessing two growing comedic movements; an online explosion of

9

comedic content producers paralleled by a grassroots standup movement in the back alleys of Beirut.

Both forms of comedy highlight two different modes of work that share common patterns and divergent practices. As an American adopted form of creative work, the Lebanese standup comedians have appropriated some of their western counterpart's approaches[1]. But the performances and productions are uniquely Lebanese with the comedians' use of their personal experiences, colloquial dialects, and vernacular expletives that culminate into entertaining and engaging live performances. Conversely, Lebanese online comedians, inspired by the lure of global stardom, use their wit and comedic talents as a way to navigate through the various social media platforms in their quest to become influencers. They maneuver the volatile landscape of online performance to create a niche space made up of short skits, social commentary, and memes. Together, both forms of comedians constitute a distinctly Lebanese comedic scene and a creative labor force that this thesis aims to untangle.

C. Reviewing the Literature

My thesis is built upon three important claims that are interlocked within the overarching focus of labor. The first looks at comedic labor as a creative form of work that is aspirational. The second asserts that this form of labor is gendered. And the third states that comedic content is a queer contestation of norms. I build my argument upon the work of Brook Erin Duffy's (2016, 2017) elaboration of "aspirational labor." Duffy argues that there is a cultural shift from aspirational consumption that induces self-expression through consumerism, into aspirational labor where self-expression is now

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[1] Standup comedy, as it is commonly known, is an American invention. While its history goes way back to American popular culture, its modern manifestation began in vaudeville and burlesque theaters, night-clubs and resorts (Mintz, 1985). These early beginnings evolved into comedic clubs and open mic nights.

articulated through individualized and value-generated activities that are mostly uncompensated work. This form of labor shifts the producer's focus from the present to the prospects of future material or cultural rewards. I expand her argument by looking beyond the highly gendered work of fashion bloggers and into today's comedic performers. Rather than limit my focus on the online platform, I aim to widen the scope of her concept to incorporate all creative workers. After all, the enactment of creativity in the pursuit of a passion is hallmark of creative labor (Gill & Pratt, 2008 ; von Osten, 2007).

Today's creative producers encompass a demographic that is young, energetic, and entrepreneurial and they constitute every facet of the economy (Florida, 2012; Hartley, 2013; Landry, 2012). Labeled the creative class they were a unique and privileged segment of society whose creative labor has a positive economic impact on the urban and regional economies (Landry, 2012; Florida, 2012). More importantly, their skills were based on flexible, project based structures that are often part-time, temporary or freelance (Scott, 2006).

This view of creativity and the creative labor force has been heavily criticized. The operationalization of the creative labor force into the economic system ignores the "intrinsic value in culture" (Pratt, 2008: 108). It also glazes over the complexities of cultural production reducing all its contradictions into a numerical scale (Gibson & Kong, 2005). Marxist and feminist scholars have further drawn attention to the role of laborers' subjectivities and how the notion of work transformed within the neoliberal economy. Terms such as immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1964), affective labor (Hardt, Negri, 2000), and emotional labor (Hochschild, 2001) highlighted the 'informational content' relating to activities that produce culture which involves defining and fixing

cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically, public opinion" (Lazzarato, 1964, p.132). It is also usually unpaid, and outside the control of capital (Terranova, 2013). This form of creative labor therefore "taps into the inherent human ability that comes from the faculties of thinking, perception, language, money and feeling" (Brouilette, 2009, p.45) and which are part of the "biological configuration" that results in an unlimited potentiality or "virtuality" (Brouilette, 2009: 146). So while creativity has become vital for the new economy and a major source of its continuous expansion and growth (Florida, 2012), they warn that government policy which aims to expand and invest capital into these creative contributions is commodifying these very human faculties and abilities into the marketplace (Neff, 2012). Furthermore, these new workers not only produce immaterial, informational, and cultural products but are also consuming it, thus becoming subsumed within the capitalist production (Flew, 2009).

But what immaterial labor and its offshoots, such as precarious labor, and affective labor omit in their critique, is the gendered dimension of this affective work. Debates on gender and work have taken up issues within domestic labor and patriarchal regimes which render 'women's work" invisible and less material than formal workplaces (Gregg, 2009). Few of these conceptualizations of 'women's work' though take on issues of subjectivities of gender and femininity (Duffy, 2016) resulting in 'gender blindness' (McRobbie, 2010). This omission diminishes the implications caused by the hierarchical division of labor (Acker, 1990) and the power structures that control this type of work that includes sectors such as service, entertainment, and hospitality (McRobbie, 2010). This form of affective labor is also visible within digital economies (Jarrett, 2014). Narratives of self-branding with postfeminist empowerment

(Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2008) become interlinked within the digital market place. But these narratives are problematic because the postfeminist ideals of flexibility and empowerment that underscore women's work from home, or combined with multiple familial duties reveal many inequalities and hierarchies in the digital sphere (Proctor-Thomson, 2013). This thesis adds to these contributions by looking at how comedians embody gendered discourses that produce and reproduces patterns of domination that structure performers' work and creative content. The affective mantras of intersecting labor and leisure normalizes precarity and the creative competition that comes along with informality in pursuit of self-branding (Duffy, 2016).

The nexus of gender, labor and technology cannot be complete without adding the role of the celebrity culture that is propagated within the digital economy. Studies on the construction of the celebrity conceptualize the "demotic turn" or visibility and commodification of ordinary people (Turner, 2013). But this democratization of celebrity, conceals the great inequalities that provide certain individuals who have resources such as wealth, education, or looks with more opportunities than others (Marwick, 2015a). It also demonstrates how the celebrity can operate as a "pedagogical tool and pedagogical aid in the discourse of the self" (Marshall, 2010, p. 36). The literature on celebrity culture further elaborates on the role of authenticity in self-representation, and intimacy within digital spaces (Baym, 2015), as well as the commodification of these interactions through sponsorship and brand endorsements (Abidin, 2016). Ideologies of self branding, empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and the labor of visibility reiterate postfeminist discourses that include the expression of heteronormative sexuality and the idealization of beauty, body and lifestyle (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004, 2009).

This thesis will further this dialogue by filling a gap in the literature that links aspirational labor in the pursuit of celebrity status through drag performance. Building on Butler's Gender Troubles (1990) and her elaboration of the performative nature of gender and sexuality, I elaborate on the transgressive camp comedy of camouflaged queer celebrity comedians. The role of the camouflaged queer subjectivity provides a site to explore the roles of authenticity in the analysis of representation within contemporary society (Dyer, 2002). Camouflaged online identities are part of a collective that Haraway termed the cyborg which stitches a hybrid identity that is both human and technology and where fantasy turns into reality (1991). This form of bodily transformation can be similarly paralleled with other forms of physical modifications such as tattoos, plastic surgery, or piercing (Atkinson, 2003; Holliday and Sancheze Turner, 2006; MacCormack ,2006). Haraway's optimism about the libratory potential of the cyborg shaped much of early feminist that theorized on the implications of new technology (Dugdale, 1990; Halberstam, 1991; van Zoonen, 1992). This postmodern cyborg thus can produce a new kind of politics that draws people together (Haraway, 1991). But critics find this kind of 'affinity politics" suspicious because it re-legitimates identity categories that have been repressive to queers and marginalized groups (Carlson, 2010).

As celebrities, these cyborgs reflect multiple discourses that are often contradictory as they are subversive (Dyer, 2013). Within this celebrity culture (Marwick, 2015a) these subjectivities employ microcelebirty practices (Senft, 2008) that appeal to followers (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) through many strategies (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2013; Mavroudis & Milne, 2016; Usher, 2015). Their interpretation of their identity comes through relations to others (Page, 2012) as well as sharing

information (Marwick, 2015b). Other studies highlight how the use of multiple platforms offers the celebrities a way to expand their audiences (Marwick, 2015). The ultimate commodification of their fictional identity then embodies the ambiguity that lies between authenticity and artifice (Dyer, 2013). So the intersection of the cyborg with drag performance in the pursuit of celebrity becomes a space of interrogation

D. Methodology

I employed a qualitative researched method to investigate the work, lives and comedic content of both standup and online comedians. As a comparative study my aim was to discern different social and economical structures that frame each form of work. As such I relied on various tools to unveil these important structures which includes textual and discourse analysis, interviews, and participant observations.

1. *Textual and Discourse Analysis*

For the past twelve months from November 2019 till November 2020 I have been investigating eight main online comedians and nine standup comedians. While I looked at about dozen comedians that inhabit the digital sphere I selected the following online performers: @el_3amaa, @ja3danista, @adeelaofficial, @bloggerwanabe, @mawtoora.official, @farixtub, @hajje_emm_Ali, and @emKenofficial. I required two criteria for choosing these eight online identities. The first is their content's utility of one or more forms of humor including the performance of comedic skits, the use of irony or sarcasm, the recycling of jokes, or the performance of slapstick comedy. The second is a high number of followers that indicate a level of online visibility. As for the standup, I had access to six standup comedic shows that were featured on Cinemoz, an

online video on demand streaming site. While I engaged with all the comedians'

content, I chose to conduct a thorough textual analysis of Wissam Kamal, Nour Hajjar,

Hussein Kaouk and Shaden Fakih's content because their performances contained a

wider girth of subjects to explore.

As a first step, I conducted a textual analysis that investigated each performer's

content and the meanings they construct through their work. I looked at how the content

is constructed, disseminated and repackaged with ideas about masculinity, femininity,

and the various points of view the comedians were pursuing. The research process was

"unobtrusive" (Leavy, 2011) because I examined non-interactive texts that were

available through the online comedian's platforms and live feed, and the stand-up

comedian's recorded performances. The objective was to draw attention to the

mediation of the comedic content and the process of its production without the

influence of interpersonal judgments and intrusions. Some of my audiovisual texts

comprised multiple components for analysis including the medium, language, sound,

dialogue, as well as representation. Through the deconstruction of these components,

with a feminist point of view, I can uncover the distorted and stereotypical

reproductions that are propagated or resisted in these comedic productions (Irigaray,

1985). Through a feminist epistemology I can look in depth at the motivations and

behaviors of my interlocutors in order to isolate their objectives and any stereotypes,

generalities, and social norms they were trying to challenge or reinforce.

The second step was to put these creative producers in conversation with one

another and conduct a discourse analysis. Skits, mimes, commentaries as well as

personal narratives are "social events": meaning they are a function of a social process,

and a means for constructing a view of society or a particular "social perspective"

16

which constitutes the "bodily performance as well as linguistic performance" of these online performers (Fairclough, 2003, p21-22). Both online and standup comedians' performances and their textual content are shaped by four elements that include the social structures, social events, social practices, and social agents (Fairclough, 2003). By looking at elements that highlight the relationship between these cultural producers, how this content is mediated, and the various styles and genres used, I had a better understanding of how these seemingly different comedians meet and diverge.

2. *Comedian's Interviews*

To foreground the working lives and subjectivities of creative people within the Lebanese labor market, I had to rely extensively on semi-structured interviews. I started the process of recruiting my subjects between the periods of March 1, 2020 to October 1, 2020. Since both online and standup comedians have social media platforms, I directly messaged them on their platforms. Consequently, a convenient meeting point was chosen to discuss their work. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and shelter-at-home orders, much of the later interviews were conducted over the phone. This has reduced the efficacy of the interviews as observational notes were omitted rendering the interview more formal.

Before conducting the interview I offered all my subjects an online or in-person consent form to validate their participation in this research. Of the twenty-two subjects interviewed, eleven are professional comedians who have used their skill in comedy and satire to perform either live or online to audiences, and thus produce a form of work that has material as well as social rewards. The remaining interviewees are heavily involved in the comedians' work either directly or indirectly and added a third person perspective

to the investigation. They included managers, theater specialists, staff, fans, and marketing specialists. Some of these interviews were more informal and aimed to shed light on the digital industry and the standup comedic industry as a whole. It also helped to elaborate on some of the economic or structural issues that face this form of creative labor.

Since some of my online subjects are camouflaged and chose to maintain their anonymity, most have accepted to receive an emailed questionnaire that contained between fifteen to twenty-five questions depending on each comedian's specific portfolio. One had forwarded me to her manager who spoke on her behalf. The questions were pertinent to their work, creative inspirations, and aspirations. Because some rely heavily on their public representation, I asked if they could share images from their platform which they deemed the most accurate representation of their identities. These images helped to shed light on various gendered elements that were important to the subjects' online identity construction.

I also had to rely on supplemental research that was available through published and televised interviews for several reasons. The most urgent was the fact that two of my comedians were already well recognized celebrities in their field, and they did not accept my offer for interviews. Secondly, these outside sources offered a dynamic way to read the comedians as they wished to portray themselves publicly. It was also a comparative tool to see how these comedians' older interviews measured with my own investigations.

3. *Participant Observation: Stand-Up Comedian Routines*

Because the work of standup comedians is highly embodied as a live form of performance, I attended many of my subjects' showcases. I went frequently to KED Theater in Karantina where the weekly showcases were scheduled on Tuesdays with a line of old and new comedians performing live for around 10 minute. I also attended some of these comedians' one person shows mainly in Metro Medina[2] stage and occasionally in special events. The nearly two hour shows included an opening act by another up a coming comedian with a short interlude. The visits were helpful to locate the moments of transgression and affect that constitute comedic performance. My objective is to be placed "where the action is" (Bernard, 2011, 343) so that I can record the forms of cultural artifacts, ideological references, power relations, and physical performance of each of our comedians. Through a "thick description" ethnography (Geertz, 1973), I attempted to draw out the relationships between the audiences and the comedic performers, how their humor transcended differences or negotiated similarities.

The culmination of these techniques facilitated a holistic view of the business formula for both forms of comedic labor. It also enunciated much about the social, cultural, and political influences that shape these funny subjectivities on the stage and online.

E. **Chapter outlines**

The intersection of literature on labor with topics of gender, queer theory, subjectivities and the celebrity culture is the foundation of this thesis. Tracing how these cultural studies and media theorist articulated the role of these elements in the daily

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[2] Founded by Hisham Jaber, Metro Medina is an independent theater company located in Hamra. Metro is famous for its eclectic and edgy theatrical and cabaret shows.

lives and works of comedic performers, I aim to fill some gaps in the literature and illustrate the formative role of labor in the construction of both comedic identities and their content.

In chapter one, I deconstruct the tension that exists between comedic labor and the market economy. I first trace the aspirational labor of online and standup comedic personalities by highlighting how they work, the various challenges and obstacles they must manage and the practices they use to mitigate their potential negative implications. I then investigate their interpretation of their authenticity and how they negotiation this identity in public. I isolate two kinds of authenticity; a branded externally reflexive authenticity for the online comedians and a performed internally reflexive authenticity for the standup comedians. Negotiating the tenants of their visibility with their desire for an authentic brand shapes the comedians' subjectivities and content.

In Chapter two, I take a narrower focus to look at aspirational labor's intersection with gender. Investigating online and standup female comedians I look at the ideological and symbolic meanings that these comedians produce and the social relationships that frame their work. As a feminized form of labor, my thesis reveals the concealed limitations of online creative work which leads to women's self-precarization and the propagation of postfeminist ideals of women's representation. Stand up comedians' transgressive comedic performances though enjoy the protection of subaltern public spaces that shelter the comedians.

In Chapter three, I take a deeper dive into the comedy of camouflaged identities I called cyborg queens. This chapter links the first two in its exploration of gender and labor in a cyberqueer space where these fluid identities can express themselves through their transgressive comedy. But when linked to commerce, the agency that is allotted

20

them through their camouflage is neutralized because of the microcelebrity practices they must use to reach and maintain their star status.

Finally, the conclusion synthesizes these three comedic personalities to uncover the inextricable role of labor in suturing subjectivities and their creative production within the market economy. The comparison facilitates a view of the neoliberal governmentality that shapes comedy and the comedians.

CHAPTER I

AUTHENTICITY IN THE LABOR OF ONLINE AND STANDUP COMEDIANS

In a 1960s black-and-white Lebanese commercial, an old man with an extremely thin mustache is lovingly touching his white sleeveless undershirt as he stands proudly with his high-rise white briefs and sings with an ironic and exaggerated voice: "BVD, BVD…I am wearing BVD" The peculiar underwear commercial was performed by the famous songwriter and comedian Philemon Wehbe. Wissam Kamal posted this archival footage in order to see how today's contemporary comedians would perform that advertisement today. Wearing the white flannel undershirt, he began his first rendition with Mario Bassil's interpretation. Mario was a famous '90s Lebanese standup and theatrical comedian known for his brash and vulgar comedy. He then performs Nemr, an American-Lebanese standup comedian who has made his mark in the Diaspora. He then emulated two more comics and when his turn came to introduce his personal version an invisible producer asks "who told Wissam Kamal to come! I asked for a comedian, a comedian!"   Wissam leaves the set despondently (Kamal, 2020a).

Wissam Kamal's little parody is an ideal introduction to this research because it highlights the complex relationship between humor, media, commerce, and the performers' creative work. In this skit, Wissam introduced a chronological snapshot of Lebanese comedic personalities that have popularized media. The characters that Wissam had emulated constitute a small part of the Lebanese comedic scene. And in this pastiche they were all employed to market, in their own style, cotton underwear

called BVD[3]. What this skit highlights is the important role of comedy and comedians, not only in the entertainment business, but also in the consumer market economy. Their brand of humor is not only employed to make people laugh, it can also sell products. The performance also highlights the importance of mediated technologies in making both the entertainer and the items they are advertising more visible. So while, Philmeon Wehbe used his comedy to produce an ad on the then-innovative medium of television, Wissam's comedic imitation used the internet. These media, as the skit shows, are a linear extension of old technologically mediated modes of communication. The exposure that Philemon Wehbe got through television, the internet is now providing for Wissam. But despite his seventeen thousand followers on Instagram, Wissam identifies himself as a standup comedian rather than an online performer. His online comedy was a way for him to sustain his visibility during the COVID lockdown. This demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between creative content producers and social media. As they provide it with much-needed content, they garner visibility to either market a product or themselves. This reflexive relationship is liberating for many creative content producers, because it gives them the control they need to express themselves. But social media are not an altruistic space of equitable exchange. It requires becoming a commodified presence that can attract views, likes, and shares. It is therefore important to draw the distinction between the labor of creative producers who perform outside technologically mediated spaces while also benefitting from its communicative powers and those who exclusively work to provide creative content that has an exchange value sold for marketing purposes.

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[3] BVD is a brand that was founded in 1876 by Bradley, Voorhees & Day. They are now owned by Fruit of the Loom.

In this chapter I interrogate the inherent tensions that exist between comedic production and the market economy, whereby the "economic is represented through cultural media of symbols, signs and discourse" and the "cultural is seen as materialized in the economic" (Crang, 1997, p.4). By shifting the lens from the performative art of comedy, into creative labor the aim is to highlight the process that goes into producing creative content, how it disseminates, and ultimately sustains the comedians' livelihood. This raises important questions about how humor is embodied in the labor of standup and online comedians. I question how this comedic labor becomes imbricated in both media and its market economy? What is the function of humor within divergent production systems? What are the challenges and negotiations that both online and standup comedians contend with in order to succeed and thrive within their chosen platforms? How is that creative process shaped and molded by these challenges? And how does it affect the comedians' aspirations for the future?

To answer these questions, I must deconstruct the work of online and standup comedians. Scholarship has activated a number of concepts that discuss creative labor, including terms such as invisible, immaterial, affective, emotional, and hope labor, or feminized and relational work (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt & Negri; 2000, Terranova, 2013; Weeks, 2007; Kueh & Corrigan, 2013). These terms all participate in critiquing the tensions between creativity and commerce and the conditions that characterize creative workers' experiences. When discussing the work of comedians, I find that Duffy's elaboration of aspirational labor the most salient. Duffy's investigation of fashion bloggers theorizes a new mode of mostly uncompensated work wherein laborers face many conflicting demands with an "incentive of future reward systems" (2017, p.7). Her subjects have no qualms about working long and stressful hours in pursuit of a

dream with little or no remuneration. Their careers are built upon future material and social aspirations (Duffy, 2017). Duffy's work also elaborates on several patterned contradictions that structure the work of aspirational laborers. Her observations of fashion bloggers reveal the paradox of maintaining a sense of authenticity where narratives of realness are superimposed by the logics of self-branding. Aspirational workers also must juggle their desire for creative self-expression with the pressures of commercial profitability. And finally, these creative laborers must vacillate between the world of professional entrepreneurs and that of dedicated amateurs that hide realities of intense strategic planning and collaboration behind the façade of spontaneity and leisurely pursuits (2017).

While Duffy's work focuses on the digital labor of creative producers, I expand her concept to argue that all creative work, especially that of online and standup comedic subjects constitute an embodied form of aspirational labor. Moreover, her observations are situated within a very westernized view of creative work. In fact, most literature on creative labor studies has its foundation rooted in a Euro-American viewpoint. By attempting an "ex-centric perspective" on creative studies I can explore a de-Westernized lens (Alacovska, 2019; Curran and Park 2000; Hanitzsch, 2007; Sreberny, 2000; Wang, 2010) on the aspirational labor of comedians. This view will account for the diminutive role of the creative and cultural industries in Lebanon[4]. Creative producers often find themselves alone as they attempt to fund their projects. This lack of formal structure means that most of these comedians in fact operate informally. This informality is the norm for the Lebanese creative scene where much of the funding and sponsorship of creative work is relegated to international organizations

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[4] The industry contributes to merely 5 percent of the Lebanese GDP with less than 1% of the country's budget relegated to its growth (Hariri & Kassis, 2017, Mckinsey, 2018). Consequently the value chain of creative production does not figure highly or visibly within the economic structure of the country.

and NGOs (Hariri & Kassis, 2017; UNIDO, 2015). Most scholarship expounds on the "soul-corrupting and exploitative effects of informal creative work (Alacovska & Gill, 2019, p.197). In Lebanon the multifarious and relational characteristics of this informality make the possibility of any authentic and creative work even possible. As such viewing the aspirational labor of creative producers is to unveil a critical analysis of the working and worker's conditions as well as their subjectivities within the Lebanese context.

As aspirational laborers, Lebanese comedians share a common profile. Most of them are middle class Millennials who have a college education and are very skilled with technology. Both standup and online Lebanese comedians enter this industry with a deep-rooted sense of obligation to pursue a passion and love of humor. Because of the country's economical precarity and persistent political upheaval, they feel empowered to share their observations and critiques in a way that can both entertain and educate, often with little financial reward. Being a voice of the people resulted in their accidental entry into the comedic world. Equipped with wit and a natural skill for gab, these young creative producers' desire for personal autonomy, flexibility, and independence become career mantras. And as narrators of their world's experiences, they naturally became implicated within the fabric of society. Their creative content is sutured within the country's cultural and political scene. The idealized notion of "getting paid to do what you love," in which compensation is accepted at an undefined point in the future, also became part of their optimistic aspirations and future planning (Duffy, 2017, p.5). And while Duffy's paradoxes also inform Lebanese comedians' work and structure their subjectivities, content, and aspiration, for the Lebanese comedians, authenticity is a

central and over-arching desire. Authenticity is a guiding objective that frames these two forms of comedic work.

Online and standup comedians take divergent approaches as they build up their comedic personas and future careers. Both use comedy to sell a product. But in the case of the online comedians they are selling themselves. By that I mean they are selling the branded personality that has garnered a strong fan base. On the other hand, standup comedians sell their comedic content. So effectively audiences gravitate to those comedians that make them laugh despite their personal or public attributes. This nuanced difference is guided by how these two forms of comedians interpret their authenticity which transcends their content and their public image.

The "ideal of authenticity" is not a new phenomenon. In fact it has become part of an emerging contemporary culture where the central theme is the narration of the self (Taylor, 1992). The desire to create a discourse about an authentic identity is prompted by an urgent need to bind a shattered modern life into a meaningful one (Taylor, 1992). Ultimately the crafting of the authentic self becomes a calling in its own right, and a movement in contemporary life where everything from politics to consumer products seek to portray and to promise a return to the 'real' (Spicer, 2011). Critiquing authenticity entails a careful crafting and manufacturing of this ideal where the industry, coaches and motivates others to 'be themselves' (Fleming, 2009). For the Lebanese comedian, this crafting is a personal mission that demands constant negotiations resulting in two varying interpretation for what it entails to construct, maintain, and exude authenticity.

There are two important kinds of authenticity, the branded authenticity of the online comedian, and the performed authenticity of the standup comedian. Branded

authenticity means the construction of a personal brand that is an 'adjustment of one's personality to external market requirements" (Varga, 2011, p. 5). In this case, authenticity is not something that is intrinsic or internal. Rather it is a quality that can be strategically developed to become authentic (Varga, 2011). The online comedians' communication is therefore externally reflexive because it is an endless circular movement of commenting, hashtagging, and liking that bring in new fans. In other words, the online comedians, as they produce viable and humorous content to fill their online platforms must constantly gauge their fans' reactions to their postings. This leads to a reactionary back and forth reflections in order to keep the momentum of the post. Both negative and positive responses garner visibility for the comedian because ultimately other people will wade in and increase the platform's activity. This reflexive and reactionary process also means that the comedians must constantly discipline themselves in order to keep their platform attractive not only to fans but to the marketing industry which are always scavenging for influencers who can sponsor their commodities. This self disciplining mechanism ultimately means that the content of the online performer is highly affected by outside and external forces that can tweak it into a shape that satisfies fans and the market economy. This tweaking hinders the value and efficacy of the content, rendering the humor often mellow and less confrontational.

On the other hand, the performed authenticity of standup comedians attempts to depict the self as a 'coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narrative' that through an internal reflexive ritual disentangles the authentic self from its inauthentic other (Giddens, 2010, p.5). In this sense, the comedians' content and performance is a cathartic experience that involves a personal and often libratory narration of their experiences and personal struggles. This view of authenticity is, often times, raw and

unfiltered. Mixed with humor, the comedians' content becomes a pungent and occasionally transgressive and brash exploration of the self that can produce affective responses with audiences. Whether fans appreciate or reject this form of comedy can be directly experienced during the live performance in the form of either laughter or heckling. In either case, the comedians rarely modify their performance to accommodate the attendees, rendering the comedy a more profound and genuine narrative. With such clear divergence in the way comedy is presented I thus argue that comedy is an embodied form of aspirational labor that involves constant negotiations of the performers' authenticity. Online comedians, on one hand, work individually to produce mild and entertaining content that is in line with a self-branded identity. Standup comedians, on the other hand, labor within a community that nurtures the articulation of comedic content that is performed based on the comedians' life experiences and observations.

A. Aspirational Labor and Online Comedy

Farid received a call from his friend "Hi! Nooo I am so tired. I took my sister's kids to Bustan el Hor. They were so happy!" at this point we see Farid with his niece in the park. He is describing the events of his day as the viewer is watching what had actually happened. "We saw the animals" and the viewer sees him feeding the animals and ducks. "they rode horses. I didn't do anything just watched them." While we actually see that he had removed his nephew from the horse and proceeded to take a selfie with it. " I fed them delicious food!" the viewers see that Farid is having a huge meal while his niece has a plate of fries which he was stealing from as well. "Oh, and the zip line, Yay they enjoyed the zip line" here we see Farid, in fact, zipping through. "Finally the

pedalo! That was the last thing they did" we see the back of his niece as she waves at

Farid who was pedaling away. "The day was perfect". The viewer is transferred back to

Farid's call as he ends it with an offer to take his caller's kids next week. "What can I

do I will sacrifice" (Hobeish, 2020b).

Farid Hobeish, is a funny burly man who is all over the Lebanese social media. For

every social, political, or cultural event, Farid, or @Farixtube, is there to make a witty

or ironic commentary. His comedy is light and mellow, and it nearly always hits the

spot. The above example is a sample of some of his most popular work, in which he is

seen talking to someone on the phone in a short skit that relates to some topical subject.

That particular example was humorous and garnered him nearly seventy thousand views

with many hashtagging other uncles and aunts with similar experiences. But what this

example conceals is the fact that Farid was advertising a brand new park called Busten

el Hor. This double-edged purposing of humor with marketing is hallmark of the work

of online comedians.

Farid's beginning in social media like most other aspirational laborers is accidental.

He became famous for his commentary on the 2015 garbage crisis. In that Facebook

post, Farid was discussing how he took some French visitors to enjoy some garbage

tourism around Lebanon including sliding on a sea of garbage bags, throwing waste at

each other, and sniffing stink on a rooftop (Zabetne La Zabtak, 2019)[5]. Other online

comedians similarly entered the world of comedic performance as an outlet to protest or

critique the social and political events shaping their world. Ghayd Chammas, like Farid

Hobeish, is another famous online comedian. His site called el3ama uses the Lama as a

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[5] The 2015 garbage crisis was the failure of the government to find waste solutions for the closure of the
Beirut and Mount Lebanon region waste dump in Naameh. The result was the accumulation of litter on
the streets of all the cities. Many activists and residents took to the streets to protest the government's
failure to address the waste-management crisis.

symbol because of its homonym with the Lebanese colloquial for "what the hell!" "What the hell" or el 3ama is a comment that follows any acts of stupidity or in reaction to events that exhibit anger or frustration. As such, he often uses short and funny skits that highlight the quirks and frustrations of the Lebanese and usually ends his post with his famous el3ama comment. Satirical, and parodic, Ghayd is not shy about commenting on current events or highlighting their anomalies. Clearly both comedians use Lebanon's precarious living conditions as fertile ground for joking material. It is therefore their drive for social and political commentary that has transpired into their accidental entry into the business of comedy. Ultimately, the "meaning-making potential" that these comedians have provided their fans resulted in the accrual of an exchange value which has driven up their popularity (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013, p.200) and has turned them into online personalities.

As aspirational laborers, these comedians must juggle multiple contradictory practices in order to sustain their newfound visibility and build their business potential. Both Farid and Ghayd were successful in tackling the various challenges that face them in their new venture. After all, both were successful advertising and marketing executives respectively. When I first med Ghayd he had just quit his lucrative managerial job in Qatar to concentrate on both his Instagram and Facebook accounts. When I asked him about the amount of time he works he was unsure how to answer. "In the beginning it took me a lot of time. Now I am much faster, I can make a video and post it in less than an hour. I do have to constantly keep up with my fans and that takes time. I am also always on, because I have to keep watching everyone so I can get inspired to get new posting ideas." Certainly when one looks at Ghayd's posts they seem quite spontaneous and natural, but they mask a great deal of precision, repetition,

31

tagging, circulating, editing, clipping and replying to each and every post. Every day, Ghayd, like Farid, and most other social media influencers, posts something. It could be an original creation or a recycled material. But he makes sure to post daily. He also replies to most of his comments making sure to keep up the conversation running on his page. In fact, while we were discussing his work, Ghayd's eyes kept drifting back to the comment section on his page. He had just posted a skit and was keeping tabs on the fans' reactions. But it isn't enough to follow the commentaries; he must also keep tabs on their demographics. He checks his analytics daily to evaluate his followers in order to gauge what works and what doesn't. One of the most important data he keeps tabs on is the total number of followers, because that is a direct signal for prospective marketing companies who want to tap into his fan base. Furthermore, by following the likes and the comments he can detect what trajectory he must take to keep his followers happy or to push his boundaries with more audiences. This labor takes a large chunk of his daily routine. "There is never a quiet moment! I am always online" he told me when I asked him about his down time. His constant online presence is a hallmark of the aspirational laborers, where private and public space and time bleed into one another leaving the worker constantly connected.

But being connected is only one of the constant struggles that an online comedian must negotiate. Online comedians must also make sure that their content can maintain a sense of spontaneity while exuding the airs of individuality. For example, Ghayd's most laborious work is those that demand collaborations with others including his friends or some of his family members. One of Ghayd's posts features his dad performing a dozen takes discussing the childhood Pacman game (Chammas, 2018). In the skit, Ghayd and his dad repeat one sentence over and over again with Gayd's

interjections: "You were too slow!" "Repeat!" "After Pac you start…" Gayd strategically posted the final copy with background applause at the final result. This small skit's objective was to be funny and to mirror the close relationship that bonds boys with their aging fathers. But it also demonstrates the amount of labor that goes into perfecting one post which might be uploaded to appear as an impromptu conversation. While the viewers enjoy the humor in the short video, what is concealed is the dialectic between a very spontaneous performance, and an orchestrated professional act. This dialectic is typical of aspirational laborers who must constantly present an air of amateurism mixed with the precision of professional acumen. Furthermore, this collaboration accentuates the role of realness that marks Ghayd's brand as genuine in the backdrop of a branding strategy that aims to accrue more audiences and market Ghayd as the good guy next door. This brand is attractive because it fits the products that Ghayd is also marketing in his other posts such as Sandwich w Noss, ABC Lebanon, and Tommy Hilfiger, as well as his Dewars sponsored talk show on YouTube.

Although Ghayd's content is filled with sponsored material, he is very keen to keep those references subliminal. Most of his skits incorporate whatever he is sponsoring within his seemingly natural performance. When I asked him how he achieves this balance, he recalled the time he refused to take a three-thousand-dollar deal with the laundry detergent Persil because it demanded that he would perform a skit with a dirty shirt. Knowing that his fans would not believe or respect his image as a slob, he refused the offer. "They would call me a sell out! I have never been in public or even stay in private with a dirty shirt. They will know I am not being myself" So Ghayd must always negotiate his creative expression with its commercial value. He must

constantly weigh in the benefit of selling his content versus preserving the integrity of his personal brand.

Ghayd's aspirational labor, unlike many in his field, has clearly paid off. His free labor in the first few years has garnered him around three-hundred-thousand dollars from sponsorships and special appearances. He confirmed that he averaged around sixty-thousand dollars in income yearly. But to stay on top of his brand, Ghayd has to juggle continually between keeping his creative expression real while maintaining its commercial profitability. This juggling game is not easy, and it demands from the aspirational laborer a lot of hard negotiations and compromises. Ghayd admitted to me that this is easier for him that other people because he had already acquired such skills on the job as a marketing manager. "Not everyone can do this!" he insisted "you have to have talent, skill, and be business savvy, too!" This triple entanglement that demands the creative producer to balance creativity, realness and natural amateurism, with self-promotion, commercial viability and professionalism is the hallmark of the patterned contradictions that aspirational laborers must constantly contend with to be successful.

But framing these paradoxes that online comedians must negotiate is their interpretation of their authentic public subjectivity. Like Ghayd's dirty shirt example, online comedians cannot compromise how they perceive themselves in public. After all, their most valuable commodity is their own authenticity. This means that they must constantly self-discipline themselves and their content in order to sustain the proper balance for this authenticity. The following is an example that Farid Hobeich had to contend with:

A team is meeting on a Zoom conference call with three people: a woman, a man with a beard wiping dandruff from his shoulder, and their boss. While the boss is discussing

the company's low sales, the bearded man's window is replaced with him in his swimming suit holding a Head and Shoulder's shampoo in his hand. The boss is in shock, the girl is giggling and the man explains "Hi guys, sorry I approve all the decisions you are making, but since I filled my pool in my previous posts I ran out of water to take a shower, so I need to go" The attached comment to this sketch was... Don't allow dandruff to embarrass you. 100% without dandruff!! @headandshouldersar #dandruff_is_embarassing (Hobeish, 2020a).

In this sketch, Farid was advertising Head and Shoulders anti-dandruff shampoo. What is interesting about the sketch is not just its comedic value but rather the fact that he was called out by one of his fans alice_el_sibai, who criticized him by saying: "I get disappointed when I see even you are getting commercialized!! I honestly believe you should stay as authentic as possible and this post is the wrong route to authenticity!"(2020a). Farid justified his work by responding: "It is very normal to add branded content to my page as this is my only income. The difference is that I choose brands that I feel comfortable with and the right frequency. All across the world content creators are making millions but in Lebanon as soon as we see a branded content *deghre bahdaleh* (an immediate scolding)." Farid's justification of his work reiterates the intense scrutiny and negotiations that online comedians must endure. As an aspirational laborer, he must constantly embody an identity that accentuates a branded form of authenticity. When asked, both he and Ghayd insist that their online comedy is successful because of its authenticity. But there is a hidden price to pay for this quality. To be visible online means to be constantly present with material that is fresh, commercially viable, as well as real. But this "visibility mandate" means to "put oneself out there" (Duffy & Hund, 2019) in a way that is everything but inauthentic. This form

of branded authenticity, in fact, is structured within the internet's ethos (Gehl, 2011; Marwick, 2013). It demands that popular personalities display sincerity while keeping the basic principles of self-branding (Abdin, 2016; Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Duffy, 2017). In order to balance these two tenants of visibility and authenticity, a reflexive communication must constantly circulate between the comedians and their fan base, thus turning authenticity into a calibrated and calculated performance (Abidin, 2016; Pooley, 2010). Some have even dubbed this form of authenticity as "aspirational ordinariness" (MacRae, 2017), because it highlights the strategic appeal to the notion of being real and ordinary in the aspiration of garnering audiences, who they themselves, as Farid witnessed, engage in 'authenticity policing' (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Another form of self-disciplinary practice that online comedians engage in is their need to sculpt their content into a proper and marketable product. The struggle to churn funny content along with maintaining the brand means to recycle much of the material that is circulating in the media sphere. This also means to produce mainstream comedy that would not offend, but rather becomes part of what can be termed the digital mundane (Wilson & Yochim, 2017). The digital mundane is the "banal entanglement of media and everyday life" (Wislon & Yochim, 2017, p 15) where media become embedded in the humdrum of daily existence and where "sensibilities are shaped, worked on, intensified, assuaged and attenuated" (Wislon & Yochim, 2017, p 17). Effectively, the content that these online comedians produce and disseminate becomes part of the plethora of messages and exchanges that inhabit the digital sphere and constitute the circulating mendacity that fills people's time online.   Unlike their initial objective as comedic activists, their branded authenticity when mixed with the demands

of the marketplace turns their humor into a tepid and often passive version of their previous creative intentions.

Despite the diminutive affective power of their comedy, online comedian's branded authenticity remains a mandatory and inescapable practice if they wish to sustain their online comedic business. Navigating through the paradoxical demands of online work, it is their portrayal as 'real' and 'authentic' that is the most imperative for their survival. In fact, their work is shaped by this authenticity bind (Pooley, 2010), whereby creative producers must stay within the limitations of "realness" without overstepping their boundaries into the "too real." The role of projecting authenticity and approachability becomes a complex task that demands continuous external reflections and negotiations both from audiences and market forces. Ghayd presents a perfect example of the price that one incurs when "realness" is incorrectly gauged. As a political commentator, Ghayd's comedy was acceptable when he kept his content constrained to satirical and ironic narratives. Yet, the minute he crossed the line between satire and activism his audiences accused him of being inauthentic. I interviewed one of his fans, who told me "I used to find his content funny, but now it is too preachy. He is a comedian, and his job is to entertain and make us laugh." Ghayd, in fact, admitted that some of his sponsors have abandoned him, and in order to provide some stability in his life he is now looking for a part-time job as a marketing consultant. Ghayd has, therefore, overstepped his allocated boundary for self-expression and miscalculated the perimeter of his authenticity. His political activism, although inherently part of his subjectivity and authentic representation of himself, has been deemed overwhelming for audiences and thus his use-value decreased significantly.

Therefore, Ghayd's embodiment of his true subjectivity through his political performances became a liability.

In contrast, Farid is more keenly aware of this balance: "Ghayd made a tactical error," he explained to me, "he became too involved in the Lebanese politics and that will inadvertently alienate his sponsors." Farid, like Ghayd, continues to churn content daily, but his is placid and poised. He constantly tries to embody the ideals of a down-to-earth and approachable personality who is unimposing and relatable to his audiences. Most of his performances are done in the vicinity of his home and using props that are easily accessible, thus bringing his fans within his private space and personalizing their connection with him. This is matched by content that parodies Lebanese practices and social anomalies that have already been circulating in the Lebanese mediasphere. His content is amusing and entertaining; it does not aim to teach, nor does it elaborate on any specific ideology or doctrine. In other words, any one of his performances will conjure up a smile or a chuckle. It most likely will be shared with others as well. But, it is not likely to change any minds or leave affective traces behind. For audiences, it is safe and comforting, and for sponsors it is attractively neutral. It fits within the definition of the digital mundane that characterizes most online content. Farid's future aspirations are slowly materializing into financial and social capital. His branded authenticity has not been tarnished, and his balanced online comedic content is traversing the internet with ease. Once he has established his brand, it is maintaining this mode of work that becomes the next challenge.

B. The Aspirations of a Standup Startup

Standup comedians, like their online counterparts, also embody a form of aspirational labor. As talented millennial, they have substituted their secure jobs with the insecurity and precarity of creative work. While their performances earn them some money it is rarely enough to sustain a living. But for the standup comedian, it is all worthwhile for the joy of doing something they love and are passionate about. Similar to all aspirational laborers, standup comedians must also negotiate conflicting demands on their work while maintaining their authentic performance. But there are a couple of structural differences that render their labor different than the online comedian. Most importantly, the work that standup comedians do while seemingly individualistic, is in fact part of a collective effort and a community that mitigates some of the paradoxes that challenge aspirational labor. Secondly, standup comedians perform to live audiences and the little income they earn is from ticket sales rather than product sponsorship. These two structural dynamics frame the comedians' work and creative content resulting in comedic productions that are very different from their online counterparts.

To understand how these structural differences influence comedic labor one must first explore the system that nurtures these comedians. While comedy and comedic monologues have historically been a vibrant part of the Lebanese cultural scene, standup comedy in its Americanized format is a relatively new movement. This standup comedic scene began sporadically with a handful of ambitious and talented young comedians who convinced small pub owners to allow them a space to perform. But in 2018, the entrepreneurial spirit of three young and energetic Millennials took up

the mantle and opened a comedic community they called awkword[6]. For them, it was a

cultural revolution against what they considered "a very stale comedy scene in the

country, and as a reaction to its outdatedness" (awk.word, 2018). One of the awkword

owners, Dany Abu Jawdeh, talks of his community as a startup where he and his

partners can provide a space where comedy can disrupt normative standards: "We don't

have a comedic scene in Lebanon, nor do we have a system built into the industry to

make comedy. In Lebanon, comedy is born out of chance. You make a video and

become viral so you become a comedian! Comedy is more than that," At awkword, the

comedians have an outlet for free speech, in which they can raise awareness and push

the boundaries of society and the state's censorship. As a startup, it is a collective effort

that encompasses the labor of the owners, comedians, staff, and even the regular

audiences who support the nightly shows.

Most importantly, in that format, awkword works under what can be termed a

"stealth mode" that builds up a creative and reproducible future business plan which

they will constantly test, assess and then re-implement based on customer and audience

feedback (Blank, 2013). The reflexive relationship that is characteristic of aspirational

online comedians is now between audiences and the whole awkword community. This

collective effort is not supported by a formal industry that can fund and guide its

members. This informality in fact is value added because it facilitates much flexibility

and agility in building the business and nurturing its talents. Discussing the difference

between the standup comedic scene and its closest art form the theater with Raffi

Feghali, a theatrical actor and writer, he contends "stand up comedy, unlike theatrical

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[6] Dani Abou Jawdeh, Andrew Ghraiz, and Paul Alouf initiated the startup awkword in Feb 2018

productions is still a grassroots movement. It can fly under the oversight of government agencies. They don't know they exist outside the idea that some kids are congregating".

Like their counterparts in the online comedic scene, the aspirational labor of the standup industry demonstrates spontaneity and agility in their work. They maneuver around the city showcasing comedians and exploring talents in obscure set ups that protect their clandestinity. But their professional acumen keeps their fans in the know and expands their reach within the same demographic. With deep-rooted commitment to the venture, the community works collectively to reach their future aspiration. Their in house photographer, Lama Samaan, expressed that same passion: "I am a volunteer, I did a project at university on comedy and I got hooked. I come here to help out and make sure the shows are well documented." Lama uses her artistic background and her passion to supplement a part of the startup's infrastructure. Unlike the online comedian who works alone to build up his business, within the standup comedic scene the community as a whole becomes aspirational laborers who dream that their startup will develop into a global comedic-content producing hub.

But this dream cannot be realized without the nurturing of the talent. So training prospective comedians is one of the most important roles of the awkword startup business. Before they can even be called comedians, aspirants must develop their content. It all starts with open mic nights. Quite daunting for first timers, the open mic night is an event that happens around the city arranged by awkword in some local, often obscure pubs, such as Offrecord in Monot, or Café Vèrt in Ashrafieh. Prospective comedians lineup for a three- to five-minute skit in front of live audiences who assess their content. After working through various open mic nights, those who can build their content up to twenty or thirty minutes are allotted a spot in an awkword showcase. The

showcase at awkword is usually set on Tuesdays and consists of a lineup of comedians

that perform for around twenty to thirty minutes and are paid $10 a minute. At these

events, the comedians are still harnessing and perfecting their content through constant

feedback from audience responses and their peers. After about a year, they can have an

hour feature, where they are paid either a bulk fee of six hundred dollars or if they have

established a good fan base, a fifty percent partnership with awkword's selling of their

tickets priced at around twenty thousand Lebanese pounds[7].

Awkword's work behind the scene is manifested in their weekly showcases.

Attending one of these shows is a fraternal form of congregation and a unique

experience for visitors. Like western based standup shows they are located in obscure

locations and employ a variety of protective measures to safeguard the comedians'

content. Awkword holds most of their events at KED, a multi-functional venue in

Karantina near the Beirut River. A minimalist structure made of concrete it is a fitting

location for the grassroots movement that is building inside its square form. Before

passing through the red curtains, every ticket holder must cover their phone's camera

lens with a small sticker to preventing taking photos and videos. This extra security

measure is not only to preserve the comedic content for future use, but more

importantly, it is to prevent its censorship from governmental and social agencies. This

measure is particularly important because few public performances in Lebanon facilitate

for creative producers the same amount of freedom to express any and all opinions.

Nothing is off limits and all styles and formats are permissible including what some

may consider brash, vulgar, or unmentionable. During these showcases, the most

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[7] Since the Lebanese economical malaise and the degradation of the pound, most exchanges are in LBP with a fluctuating rate. These prices and dates were standards for awkward before the COVID pandemic and the ensuing shut down of all theatrical and entertainment venues.

successful shows are those that tackle all subjects including politics, religion, sexuality, and culture.

This liberty is the very element that attracts audiences. Mostly young millennial as well, they come in groups because they are friends of the comedians, or have heard of them from social media through the awkword platform. As such, they know what to expect and are thus bound to the showcase in an affective sense of allegiance and acceptance which permeates the room. Being outside that dynamic, when I first visited the show, I detected a friendly comradery seeping across the hall as comedians, fans, and the staff circulated with familial ease. It is only when the Master of Ceremony comes up to the stage that an air of earnestness diffuses through the room as audiences prepare themselves for the affective comedic surge to embrace them. Not every performance is good, and certainly some are at the start of their comedic journeys. But while heckling the comedians is a common practice, outright attack is rarely witnessed. There is never a sense of audience entitlement which can accompany staged performances whereby audiences expect and demand to be properly amused. The young attendee's appreciation for moments of authentic levity outweighed any misses or failed launches. So clearly, the most significant divergence between the two forms of comedic work is the communitarian atmosphere that frames standup performers. The challenges of aspirational labor are mitigated by the collaboration of a community of equally passionate and dedicated aspirational workers as well as the fans that come to share in their humor.

There are many interesting comedians to discuss, but the three chosen for this section share a loyal following and the most eclectic and pungent content. Nour Hajjar, Wissam Kamal, and Hussein Kaouk are all highly talented comedians. Deconstructing

the work and content of these comedians reveal common patterns and characteristics. They are mainly middle-class individuals with highly intelligent and intuitive observational skills. They also have a knack for translating these skills into vernacular speech inflected with colloquial expletives and regional enunciations. None live exclusively on their work as standup. While all of them dream to make money exclusively from this line of creative work, most of them in fact have other sources of income. Some work as copywriters, screenplay writers, or take up freelance projects in the advertising industry. That said, most still live with their parents or share an apartment with multiple roommates. Clearly, and despite the protective measures that working as a community allots them, the living conditions of standup comedians are fraught with material difficulties that are commensurate with other aspirational laborers within the creative industries. Networking together provides them with some semblance of security especially as they occasional congregate formally in workshop arranged by awkword. They are also together informally. I have seen them in groups on more than one occasion participating in the Lebanese protests. And when interviewed they admit that they see each other frequently to share ideas and advise each other on their work. But with all this collective support, they all contend that it is their own personal style and authentic delivery that distinguish each one from the other.

Cognizant of their individuality, standup comedians embody their authenticity in their performances through very personal narratives. Hussein Kaouk, for example, is a stage performer and theater actor, whose standup routine centers on a narrative of a Shi'a boyhood in Dahiyeh. In one of his skits he narrates his move to the Beirut suburbs after the Israeli bombing in the south and the threat on the Dahiyeh in 2006[8].

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[8] Dahiyeh is a southern suburb of the Beirut district. It is inhabited by predominantly Shi'a Muslim, and is recognized for its poverty and anarchy. Most of its inhabitants arrived for the south of Lebanon after

"Dad, Israel is threatening Dahiyeh" starts Hussein with panic in his voice. He then takes on his dad's confidence posture by hunching and looking ironically at his audience. At this point he also changes his accent to take on his father's southern intonations. "Husseeeein" he begins "if they hit us!.... We hit them back!" Hussein looks at the audience with extreme frustration "who are you!" he shouts at his invisible dad. "Who are you to hit back! What do you have in your hands to hit back" the audience is now laughing loudly as if engaged in a familiar debate. Hussein continues "and he says 'we' who is we, what does he mean by we, there are me, you and mom, so who is 'we'". Continuing his rendition he explains "I kept arguing with him about fleeing, but again he takes on the confidence posture and tells me". Again Hussein changes his accent "Husseeeein, If Israel was to strike, they hit roads and bridges, they don't damage houses, so don't worry." Hussein now talks to his audience raising his finger in clarification "let me tell you a bit of information. When we were young, our parents forbade us from going to the balcony because if we were to extend our arms, a car can tear our hand away…so our house is in fact part of the bridge" the imagery culminated with Hussein's ironic elaboration make the audience explode in resounding laughter and applause. (Kaouk, 2020)

Hussein's performance is an articulation of a specific Lebanese identity. As a Shi'a southerner, a Lebanese refugee, and a millennial, his characterizations embody many dialectical relationships. His narratives elaborate on complex identities that illustrate a view of a Southern Shi'a that is much more complex that stereotypes wish to represent. The struggles of survival, culminated with generational conflicts profile a fluid and evolving personality that is real, believable, and even vulnerable. The

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the invasion of Israel in 1978. The area is governed by ruling parties such as Amal and mainly Hezbollah. The Palestinian refugee camps of Burj al Barajne and Chatila are also located in Dahiyeh.

generational struggle between the young Hussein, and his more conforming parent, reveal the schism that the millennial feel as they face off old doctrines of courage and faith, with contemporary concerns of daily survival in poverty stricken and often precarious conditions. Hussein's personal reflections gravitate between internal negotiations and conversational inquiries with his audiences. Because of this internal reflexivity between narration and direct conversation with his audience, he produces a relational bond with them. These bonds are a combination of sympathy to his vulnerability, relatability to the historical context, and amusement at the funny way he had weaved all these elements together. Stitching those facets together provides the audience with the "illusion of intimacy" (Chirico, 2016). It is an illusion because the audiences are witness to a public persona juggling a conflicted private self in a performance of authenticity.

Similar to Hussein, all the other comedians use these autobiographical revelations to display a performed authenticity on stage. The comedic devices that these standup monologues employ, including self-deprecation, status-changing humor, mimicry and irony to name a few (Chirico, 2016), illustrate the power of the 'naked self (Marc, 1997, as cited in Chirico, 2016) that is put on display. This nakedness conveys the aura of knowingness and intimacy that permeate affectively with audiences. Authenticity for the standup comedian therefore is something that reflects a personal self-conception and self-values that provides a "sense that one's life, both public and private, reflects one's real self" (George, 1998, p.134). This true self emerges in relation to others through discursive dialogue (Harter, 2005, Taylor, 1991) that is often raw and transgressive. This "real self" though, could be a complete fabrication. But its performed authenticity can hide the artifice of its narrator behind the comedic mask of

fragile vulnerability or fiery defiance. All the comedians I interviewed insist on the importance of authenticity in their performance, but when asked about their private persona some conceded they are not one and the same. Nour Hajjar reiterated that very point "what you see on the stage is me, but that is only the one for the stage. I am darker and more serious in real life." This separation between the real self and the publicly perceived one is liberating. As such, the production of the standup comedians' aspirational labor is their creativity, while for the online performer it is the very identity they have cultivated into a brand.

But for the standup comedian, their aspirational labor leads them back into the digital sphere just like their online counterparts. Every standup comic I asked reiterated their aspiration to perform standup forever. This dream facilitates for them a space for expression that is not found in any other platform. This dream may be realized through the performance of comedy in the Lebanese Diaspora which can garner more income for the comedians. But most likely it is the digital sphere where they will manifest their future aspiration for both material and cultural capital. Wissam Kamal's eclectic comedic portfolio is a great example of this shift. He has active online accounts on Instagram and Facebook which he uses to publicize his standup shows. He was also one of the first to start a successful regional presence with his highly successful show Shashma in Dubai. He worked in many of awkword's showcases and built a solid fan base as a standup comedian. But after the COVID pandemic and the eventual closure of all venues he shifted all his creative production online. When asked how he rates his online work with his staged comedy, he admitted "I have yet to accept the sponsorship of a product. I had only worked with Dewars, who sponsored my show Crash the Mic. That relationship was successful because I had full artistic freedom to do and say

whatever I wanted. Other brands will put limitations on my work, and that would be a sellout!" Similarly Nour Hajjar, reiterated this aspiration. His show on the Arab streaming site Cinemoz garnered him enough attention, but he performed for free in order to open up a market for his content. "Standup comedy is raw and honest, you are listening to my thoughts and the intimate relationships I have experienced" he elaborated. "I can't compromise that!" Nour as political satirist dreams of producing an online satire show, but when asked if he aspires to reach a wide audience through mainstream television he rebuffed that notion. "Mainstream television and media won't allow me to speak my mind" he explained. "Other than live shows and tours in Europe and the gulf, I am working with investors to sell my content to a wider online audience through streaming sites. Already shows like Jo show in AlAraby are producing very critical and edgy material". But Nour is keenly aware that his content is very niche, so he explains "We cannot do comedy in Lebanon without the online platform, It is impossible! I must try to expand my reach and make my comedy more global though. So I have to find a balance. Investors don't care about the small population that understands my humor, I need to turn it into relatable content for a wider audience but still keep it real."

C. Conclusion

Ultimately both the online and standup comedians struggle to stay real. They must keep the balance between producing authentic content that is relatable and funny, while finding someone or a source to pay for it. The market's demand for creative content that is entertaining and can attract audiences is the ultimate goal for both forms of performers. But it may compromise the ideals of authenticity that comedians strive

for. As online comedians attempt to maintain their branded authenticity, their standup counterparts struggle to convince their fans of their performed one. The tensions these aspirational laborers endure are all born out of a need to be profitable while maintaining the airs of this authenticity in their performances. They are constantly juggling the multiple challenges and paradoxes that place them in a continuous cycle of negotiations and compromises.

Aspirational labor shifts the focus of the creative producer from the present to the future. But this future is not a guarantee nor is it always going to materialize all their aspirations. Online comedians' labor, as a unitary and individualistic endeavor, may not be sustainable for too long. Effectively, both Ghayd and Farid changed their online strategies. Ghayd reduced his comedic performances to a minimum and has now concentrated on his true passion; activism. He changed his description from comedian to public figure, and in his latest post he conducted an interview with Pierre Issa, a political and environmental activist (Chammas, 2020b). Farid also reduced his posting significantly from nearly daily posts to twice a week. While advertising his content production services on Omneeyat, a job site that advertises the work of other creative producers, he is also involved in a few film projects. When asked about his online work he contended "It can bring you revenues for a few years but on the longer run it is very risky. You have no guarantees that it will remain profitable" (Zabetne La Zabtak, 2019).

Standup comedians' collective work as a comedic community, on the other hand, shelters most of these creative producers and reduces the precarity of their circumstances. The support they get from their expanding network which includes their fans mitigates the most difficult challenges of aspirational work. During the COVID pandemic and its ensuing quarantine, most of the standup comedian's shows were

canceled and they all shifted their work online in order to keep their visibility. In October of 2020, nearly all of them were advertising new shows in various locations around Lebanon. Their aspirations for the future are not secure, but as a community they stand a better chance.

The informality of aspirational labor in Lebanon is a chosen path or is it? The ministry of culture supports syndicates for artists, but to enroll there are rules that demand government oversight on the work of staged performances and contractual agreements that prove 'viable' cultural production (Legal law, 2008). Both online and standup comedians either cannot or will not implicate the government with any of their creative work. But what is most concerning, is the naturalization of this insecurity in all of these creative producer's mindset. This is typical of neoliberal and postfeminist doctrines where creative producers must be rational and self-regulating actors that can narrate their life as a deliberate outcome of their personal choices. Neoliberalism's "persistent promotion and reproduction of an ideology of competitive individualism" (Gilbert, 2008, p 13) naturalizes the ideas of individuality over collectivism, precarity over security, aspirational labor over fair compensation. The Lebanese comedians have demonstrated through their aspirational labor, how difficult it is to extricate oneself from the material conditions that structure your world. The closest they could do, is to attempt, as the standup comedians did, to practice the art of fraternal collaboration.

Lebanon's fertile grounds for political, social and cultural upheaval facilitate an attempt at legitimizing a new social project: a new collective ideal. The October 2019 protest in Lebanon culminated with the quarantine during COVID pandemic exposed people's underlying isolation. Both standup and online comedians as a community took over social media to cure this isolation, and society's malaise with an unwavering sense

of public citizenry. Evidently, comedy remains the narrator of time, the barometer of

culture, the articulator of pain, and an affective instrument to bring people together

CHAPTER II

FUNNY WOMEN: FEMALE COMEDIANS' PERFORMANCE OF GENDER

There was a girl sitting next to me wearing a tight fitting dress. Her mother next to her is instructing her to 'get up and dance!" why? Because there's Patrick, He just arrived from Dubai." (Karam, 2018)

You are supposed to laugh now! While I didn't particularly find the idea of mothers goading their daughters to sexually attract 'wealthy' prospective husbands, the audience in the first ever Netflix production in the Arab world actually smirked. Netflix's venture into the Arab entertainment market is banking on this brand of comedy, which is an "Arab blend of smart, sarcastic humor" (Persaud, 2017)[9]. The show was performed by Adel Karam, a well-known dramatic and comedic performer who has become prolific after staring in the globally successful movie The Insult. Known for his stereotypical, racist, and misogynistic jokes, Karam is unapologetic about his brand of comedy and has explained that Netflix was in fact attracted to the colloquial manliness that peppers his comedy (Salem, 2018). Of course, it did not matter much if most local critics couldn't find humor in Karam's performance, even calling it "crude and unintelligent" (Aymjoe, 2019) or "overused and unoriginal" (Farah, 2018). Karam represents a normative way of looking at Arab humor, which has been contingent on a masculine default. This assumed masculinity has thus

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[9] Netflix has since invested in four Middle Eastern standup comedians from Palestine, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The Jordania Rawsan Hallak is the only female comedian.

marginalized women's comedic narratives to the realm of the unfunny or even vulgar (Hogan, 2018).

This paradox is particularly important because it reveals the highly gendered nature of this form of creative work. Comedic performances demand the domination of audiences' attention with funny and engaging narratives which assert the supremacy of the performer over his/her audiences. For female comedians, this very power dynamic is an emancipatory experience because women have usually only been allowed to exhibit their lived experiences and personal narratives within the private realm (Thomson, 2003; Ftouni; 2011, Zaatari; 2015). This is particularly salient for Arab women whose cultural isolation and marginalization from political and public life remains an unresolved struggle until today[10]. Female comedians attempt to push these boundaries by embodying their subjectivities through their personal narrative. Their labor becomes an optic into how gendered practices can further subjugate women within a neoliberal governmentality.

This chapter aims to intersect labor studies with the role of women as creative narrators of their own lives. Using critical analysis of gender as a "constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" (Scott, 2007, p.1067), this chapter focuses on the labor of female creative producers. It attempts to locate the relations of power that shape subjective identities and accounts for the structural, social, and cultural limitations and boundaries that define their comedy. It further situates the discussion within a critical analysis of neoliberalism as the current

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[10] The early 20th century's gendered public sphere had witnessed a surge of women's presence as a state mandated project for modernization (Göle, 1997) that demanded the emancipation of women through their education and their unveiling (Amin, 2000). It was eventually met with contestation by an Islamic movement in the region that grew as a counter-public to this "western influenced" project (Göle, 1997). This Islamization culminated with the 'modern' state's failure to provided its citizens with security and justice resulting in a nostalgic search for the 'anti-modern' hero in the shape of an idealized masculinity that promotes the domesticity of women, the reinvigoration of the private sphere at the expense of women's visibility and public access in order to narrate, defend and advocate their rights (Zaatari, 2015).

economical logic and social order (Phelan, 2014). As an ideology, neoliberalism has important implications on gender and sexuality as categories of analysis in understanding the "common sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (Read, 2009, p. 25). Exploring how the transgressive quality of comedy is employed by both stand-up and online, female comedians raise important questions about the role of the female comedians in deconstructing the male dominated spaces where they have chosen to perform their creative work. As content producers and laborers within the creative industry, how do they embody their work within public spaces? What is the shape and form of the regimes of power that structure their work within the two platforms? What are the social roles and relationships they are producing and reproducing through their creative content? And how are these roles instrumental in constructing their subjectivities as contemporary women within a neoliberal and postfeminist order?

Answering these questions reveals how gender becomes interlinked with commerce and the marketplace in the creation of gendered subjectivities that normalize their precarization and shape their affective work. Gender is not a fixed or static category; it is comprised of complex systems of meaning, practices and subjectivities that encode norms which are, in turn, historically, culturally and socially contingent. Thus, gender systems are discursive formations that are shaped by matrices of power that are constantly being negotiated, produced and reproduced into patterns of domination (Butler, 1990). To analyze the gendered constitution of comedic labor is, therefore, to look at the ideological and symbolic meanings that these comedians produce, as well as the social roles and relationships they reinforce as they narrate diverse and often transgressive lived experiences.

This exercise is also important because it highlights the many concealed limitations that shape the creative work of women. "Women's work" (Jarrett, 2014) or feminized labor underscore any form of work that is characterized as a "service, a dedication, and a natural extension of one's body and emotional capacities" (Mayer, 2014). It also entails affective performance that is often invisible within the labor economy because it is considered part of women's biology (Otis, 2012). Highly gendered, devalued and outside the framework of capital, women's work is rendered a form of invisible or immaterial labor (Terranova, 2013). Theorizations on women's role as immaterial labor have been elaborated on as a form of affective labor which is defined as the "labor that produces and manipulates affects" (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 108). But this view had subsumed gender within class relations and hierarchies, resulting in a form of "gender-blindness" (McRobbie, 2010). This abstraction is problematic because it hides the centrality of gender and sexuality in shaping the use-value of women's work leaving it trivialized, un-commodified and ultimately omitted from the circuit of capital (Jarrett, 2014).

This precarious nature of feminized work leaves its workers scampering to mitigate adverse conditions. Creative producers must balance the need for flexibility, adaptability, and an entrepreneurial spirit (McRobbie, 2011a; Duffy, 2016) against the backdrop of extreme or "pathological precariousness" (McRobbie, 2011a, p.33). Duffy (2017) argues that creative producer negotiate these precarious conditions and low remuneration with the aspiration of accruing material and social capital at an unknown future time rending their work a form of aspirational labor. Their investment in the future means they must brand their work in the aspiration that they can attract audiences and eventually capital. As such, the product of their aspirational labor is content that is

imbued with relationary communication that can trigger affect through laughter, but more importantly it is embodied with the comedian's own subjectivity. This embodied work must be constantly branded in order to attract capital and provide the producer and her content with a positive and commodifiable use-value that can be sold to market forces.

Creative producer's aspirational labor then is also a form of self-governmentality. Foucault's (1991) elaboration of the 'art of governing' consists of an inward process of self-analysis and self-control that can generate the regulation not only of free subjects, but rather the relations through which these autonomous subjects are first constituted. The normalization of these self-regulating processes becomes a hegemonic view of the self as a coherent and autonomous being. It also means that these subjects voluntarily accept precarious labor conditions as the norm. These precarious labor conditions in the creative industries include highly volatile working practices that ask of the creative producers to accept low pay and long working hours for the liberty of flexibility and autonomy. Lorey (2006) terms the voluntary and normalization of these working conditions as self-precarization and are connected with feelings of insecurity and loss of control, as well as fear of failure and economical fragility. Ultimately, self-precarization, Lorey warns, leads to precarity in both production and reproduction resulting in the erosion of the lines that separate both (2006). Investigating these blurring lines in the embodied performance of female comedians unveils the disciplinary power structures that "explore the female body, break it down and rearrange it" (Bartky, 1990, 63), in order to produce normative femininity. They also elaborate on how these female comedians' aspirational labor and

affective performances as feminized entities redefines the public space they inhabit into a hybrid sphere of both their domestic lives and their public personas.

Accessing and performing in the public sphere also raises important questions about the shape and form of this public space. The idealized Habermasian model of the male dominated and patriarchal public sphere (similar to the one provided by Netflix's live audience), has been inaccessible to women and especially vocal female performers who aim to push forward their own narratives. Using Fraser's identification of this exclusion highlights the creation of a counter-public where marginalized groups can claim their own public spheres (1990). These female comedians can transgress the boundaries of their private domain and open discursive spaces that become a form of "subaltern counter-publics" which function as "bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Skalli, 2006). The opening of these subaltern spaces counteracts the repressive public's sphere's hegemonic domination on public discourse and pushes forward oppositional and transgressive interpretations, desires and narratives of the marginalized groups. But how does the internet as a seemingly democratic public forum operate in the work of the female comedians? Critics have alluded that the internet lacks the rational component for discourse and allows indiscriminate access which diminishes the possibility for reaching agreement with rational exchange (Papacharissi, 2002; Dean, 2003; McChesney; 2013). In fact, the internet's publicity is an ideology of communicative capitalism because while it promises its users full political inclusion, it is, in fact, the architecture for communicative capitalism where the democratic process is determined by the financial markets and the consumption driven corporate culture (Dean, 2003). Furthermore, the erosion of temporal boundaries between what constitutes work and leisure times as well

as the dilution of the private and public realms places the female laborer under extreme precarious conditions and undermines the quality and transgressive content she produces.

My argument in this chapter builds off of the existing scholarship in multiple ways. Incorporating the aspirational labor of gendered subjectivities within a neoliberal and postfeminist framework reveals fissures that render these subjectivities under the governmentality of a market driven system that demands disciplinary measures on women's bodies and voices. Comparing the aspirational labor of online female comedians with their standup counterparts is an important lens that sheds light on how female comedians access these public spaces and how they modify them. This comparison reveals much about how these two formats converge and diverge in expressing gendered issues. By looking at the work of female stand-up comics and their online counterparts, I argue that comedic work is inherently gendered and that female comedians embody these gendered discourses that produce and reproduces patterns of domination that structure these performers' work and creative content. While both kinds of comedic workers face limitations that censor their work, the creative content of the stand-up comedian facilitates more transgressive expression, which in turn mitigates the pressures to self-discipline and self-censor. On the other hand, by being part of the net's hybrid space, the online comedian constantly negotiates her narrative in order to maintain her brand while also reshaping her body and her subjectivity.

A. The Courage to Stand-Up

"Hi, first I would like to thank Elie Saab for dressing me today" she cheekily quipped to resounding laughter. Obviously, the heavyset female wearing her signature

black tee-shirt and baggy pants had little resemblance to Elie Saab's star-studded

clientele. "Elie, if you are watching! I love you" she blew a kiss to the invisible Elie,

sparking roaring applause (Fakih, 2019).

This is how Shaden Fakih started her stand-up monologue in her standup show in

Metro Medina. The imaginary dialogue with Elie Saab, a world renowned Lebanese

fashion designer, was a window to what has always been the Arab public's view of

womanhood; sexy and provocative femininity clad in plush apparel that signify the

ideals of Lebanon's elite. By starting her set in this way, Shaden dismantles an idealized

dynamic of public femininity with an edgy—albeit funny—critique. Her one-hour witty

showcase, was not only a critiqued on the representation of gender but it also defiantly

voiced women's narratives in public—a privilege that has historically been, exclusively

the domain of men. After all, Shaden, was the only female in a lineup of six comedians

featured by Cinemoz, an Arab based video on demand startup.

The sidelining of female comedians on the stand-up scene is not a new

phenomenon, and certainly not exclusively Arab. Stand-up as an art form has had an

illustrious history of being discriminatory to women (Russell, 2002). The comedic

stage was impervious to women's comedy with club owners and audiences alike being

weary of listening to female humor[11]. For the Middle East, and Lebanon specifically,

the role of women on the comedic stage has been marginalized because of a historical

intolerance to women's role as lead performers (Knio, 2008). Most theatrical comedies

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[11] There has been an imbalance in stand-up comedy bookings as evidenced by data collected from booking ledgers. (Kachel & Sheaffer, 2018). Currently there is the burgeoning rise of female American acts by the likes of Chelsea Handler, and Amy Schumer many more has leveled the field in stand-up comedy where female performances have become more acceptable. Even the Middle East has seen a rise in women's comedic narratives. But Arab women's voices have been heard on western based stages with the likes of Isabelle Farah (Lebanese-British), Jenna al-Ansari (Bahraini-Brit) or Leila Ladari (Swiss Tunisian) to name a few (Gill, 2020). With dual identities, these female comedians have made stride in showcasing Arab women's knowledge, but with a western flavor.

have featured females as sidekicks to male protagonists[12]. Today, in awkword, the first stand-up comedy platform in Lebanon, there is only three regular female comedians and only Shaden is a full time performer. This lack of female representation in Lebanon is often not only a structural one limited by clubhouse owners or media producers. Awkword owner, Dany Abu Jawdeh, insists that he is always on the lookout for female talent but complains that it is missing due to cultural and social limitations. This makes sense given that Arab societies still expect women's knowledge to be relegated to the domestic sphere (Göle, 1997). The visibility of Shaden and her female counterparts is an anomaly in a sea of silence that has been contingent on a well-established and hardwired patriarchal system that structures the social, cultural and economic visibility and accessibility of women in general and creative producers specifically.

This section, thus, will first outline the ideological and symbolic meanings that are imbued in females' stand-up comedy in order to highlight the gendered constitution of this form of creative work and enunciate the social roles that these women are reinforcing or contesting. It then reveals how female stand-up comedians embody their aspirational labor by revealing fluid subjectivities that are protected within a subaltern-counterpublic sphere that mitigates the heteronormative systems that prevent their expression. Thus, I argue that female stand-up comedians, as a subordinated social group, are aspirational laborers who bravely use their comedic voices to forge a new form of narrative on women's knowledge. This aspirational work allows for the discursive exchanges within a space that challenges the regressive regimes of power which censor and discipline their bodies and daily experiences.

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[12] In the past couple of years there has been a prolific rise of one women shows and monologues such as Anjou Rihan, Betty Tawtal, and Farida Ali as stand alone females in dramatic or comedic plays.

As a mode of discourse that constructs and deconstructs social roles and relationships, comedy is a great tool to understand the system of meanings that influence women's lived experiences. To listen to the narratives of the three comedians, Michelle Nehme, Stephanie Ghalbouni and Shaden Fakih, is to laugh at the trials and tribulation of very different and distinct people who have a unique view on society and their world in general. Their styles are different, but they all use their personal experiences and their own subjectivities to spin a unique outlook on the culture they inhabit. Michelle's content is subtle and often embodies the various roles she inhabits as a questioning Christian, a Lebanese female in the Diaspora, and a passionate advocate for feminist issues. Stephanie, on the other hand, pushes the boundaries of normative gender expression especially regarding her body as she had suffered from obesity for many years and is proud to demonstrate her physicality as she negotiates her struggles. Finally, Shaden is the most prolific and her profile the most eclectic. Her brand of comedy is not sweet and equanimous; rather she possesses her audience's attention with fierce and unapologetic narrative that leaves them gasping. She is the ideal subject for this research because her aspirational work and creative content demonstrates how comedy transcends categories of gender, sexuality as well as societal and cultural normativity. Her comedic labor is employed to create a subaltern public space for the contestation and reconfiguration of sexual and gender norms within Lebanese society.

Shaden has tackled many subjects with her brash and often radically transgressive comedy. Her journey to the stand-up comedic stage didn't come accidently. It emerged as a result of a constant search for her identity. Born to a non-conforming Shiite family, she came out to her family and at the age of nineteen, only to deal with another struggle; she was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder,

which she now treats with anti-depressant medications. Shaden's comedy ultimately represents these deeply personal, multilayered, and complex experiences. Her work as a comedic stand-up performer replaced a lucrative graphic design job and became a form of aspirational labor that went beyond the prospects of future fame or material gain. For Shaden, like Michelle and Stephanie, her work is an embodied struggle to create a dialogical space that disrupts the taken-for-granted and uncontested state of being in this world. Using the double-edged quality of humor, she commemorates the fluidity of her gender as she reinforces her authority over her knowledge as a political body.

Shaden's comedy is a symbolic rearticulation of her fluid subjectivities. She, in fact, is keenly aware of this complexity quipping when asked about how she defines herself and her work: "I am a million things! My identity is a woman, but I am not a woman. I am a gender, but not this gender either. I am not anything, and I am everything." Paradoxical and contradictory, witty and brash, she uses all her qualities and personal knowledge to spin a hilarious and edgy narrative for what is now a sold-out fan base. In one of her skits, she weaves all these skills and complex subjectivities in one performance.

"If I have a piercing, short hair, and have a tattoo, and love girls doesn't mean I'm gay" The eerily silence in the room signals the audience's confusion. She shrugs and smiles meekly "besides like my mom always says: it's just a phase! Just like the failure of the Lebanese government, it's also just a phase! She scrutinizes her audiences and continues It's not!!" (Shaden, 2020)

Nothing is off topic for Shaden, but sexuality is a particularly salient topic within her transgressive performance. One example of this transgression is

demonstrated in her discussion of Lebanese Tinder as she flippantly gives each religious sect its own tinder page.

"Muslim Tinder is the most populated! Not because we give birth to them by the dozen, but because the age range starts from nine years and up. What does one do at nine years of age? She pauses. Have sex apparently! The audience laughs nervously When I tell this joke the Muslims would laugh sheepishly and say: (she acts embarrassed) but we shouldn't talk about this in public!" She continues "You don't like this topic, change the law! It's very simple." The audience explodes into resounding applause (Shaden, 2020).

In this sketch, she is creating a hybrid space called Muslim Tinder where two contradictory ideologies meet; the conservative religiosity with its polar antithesis in patent sexuality. This is a transgressive attempt at deconstructing both entities by debasing the sanctity of the first through its association with the second, and lifting the indecency of tinder by turning it into a pious space. This play on both spaces uncover the sickening doctrine that tolerates child marriage while condemns adult female desire. The momentary silence that ensues reveals the fissures that plague these social calamities for which she then demand to fix through action.

Another example how she uses her comedy to contest sexuality's norms is her skit on the Lebanese's use of condoms, a subject that is often omitted from public conversation: "How can I buy condoms without people judging me as the global prostitute" she complained. She then began to list a few possibilities: "The first option is you don't go to buy it yourself, you send the valet, the concierge, the Philippina who is a Siri Lankan.. you just don't go," she then continues with the second option as she lifts her wedding band finger "you show your wedding band so that means you are

63

legal, religiously allowed to make love." And in the third "tell them it's for your dad" clearly some people began to cringe at the thought "so what if they think you are part of a dysfunctional family, as long as they don't know you are sexually active." The last option she begins by instructing us to wear a cap and belt bag "Now you look like you are working in an NGO" she then explains to the imaginary pharmacist "don't worry I am from an NGO and we are doing a campaign to distribute condoms to the Syrian refugees" the room is almost silent at this point "and because we are a racist society, the pharmacist will give the condoms to you at half price" the crowd explodes once again with both applause and laughter (Shaden, 2020).

Her above multilayered critiques uncover the many invisible gendered practices that structure the simple use of a condom. As a start, condoms connote sexual activity that is often pompously celebrated by men, but which require strategic negotiations and invisibility from women. Furthermore, the very act of unabashedly asking someone to buy these sexual objects reveals the clear social hierarchies that structure Lebanese society through its foreign workforce. Another layer is the role of the dysfunctional family within society; being abnormal within a normative framework she contends is much easier to tolerate than being judged as deviant for expressing normal female desires. And finally, her elaboration on the NGOisation in Lebanese society, which caresses airs of respectability, professionalism and generosity while concealing pervasive social and economical problems that cannot be resolved by simply showering them with international money.

The topics that Shaden chooses to narrate unveil the many invisible regimes of power that structures the Lebanese society generally, and women specifically. By vocalizing them, Shaden and other female comedians are brazenly and unabashedly

demanding a different interpretation of these pervasive sexual and gendered inequalities that structure their world and their society. While Shaden may have been the most outspoken and forceful, her counterparts highlight, in their own styles, all the constricting structures and ideologies that shape their lives. They all demonstrate an intricate elaboration of complex ideologies and hegemonic practices that imprison the Lebanese woman. Discussing both the controversial and the trivial leaves audiences in negotiated laughter that questions their own understanding of gender and sexuality. This laughter is the sound of the hierarchal echelon being dismantled by the roar of funny women.

Therefore, female comedian's stand-up acts, their narratives, and their body embody a radical effort to disrupt the normative order in the world. Their dialogue, as it makes people laugh, is triggering the activation of competing and opposing structures that defy the hegemonic dominance of social, political, and cultural norms. In the twenty minutes any one performer spends on the stage, their sweaty face, their animated movements, and their piercing eyes searching for dissent, are all actively dismantling the gender codes, the hierarchal orders, and political structures that constitute their public. In those minutes, they have created a subaltern counterpublics. This subaltern counterpublics represents the fans and audiences who follow these women's shows and are dedicated to their narratives. Shaden and Michele had performed frequently on the awkword stage, but their debut performance in Metro Medina signaled a new beginning with new audiences that may not be as sympathetic or accepting to their brand of humor. While Metro Medina is known for its eclectic form of theatrics, it nevertheless is a venue for an older and more established kind of audience who can afford to pay higher fees and who are also more demanding and less accommodating. As such it was

important for me to understand how shifting from the sanctuary of the awkword platform can affect both the comedian and her wider and incognizant audience. So I asked two male audience members what they thought of both comedians' Metro performance. They both reiterated that, as diehard fans, they knew the show by heart. But, though they heard the jokes a multiple of time they felt obliged to attend the Metro in order to show their solidarity. This solidarity is what solidifies the subaltern counterpublics' space that these comedians usually inhabit as they move out of it and into wider and less accommodating public spheres. But these women's feminist movement to re-write how gender and sexuality are viewed will face future struggles as they transcend their subaltern spaces into a wider audience. When I asked Shaden about her performance on Cinemoz, she had to concede that she self-censored some of her more politically and sexually aggressive content. The juggling act between being true to her transgressive narrative and being visible to a wider public is a strategy that plagues all comedians, but for Shaden and other female comedians it is imbricated within their own fluid subjectivities and thus very personal.

Female comedian's aspirational labor is an embodied form of work that uncover the many structural and social barriers that silence women's voices and sexuality. The transgressive comedy of these women is a clear contestation of what the norms that the Lebanese society with its sectarian divides has placed on women's knowledge, their bodies, and their visibility in the public sphere. These three brave women's prominence on the public scene is a brazen outcry against their historical silence. Their embodied and highly gendered performances highlight the important contribution they have in narrating women's knowledge that had been clearly omitted from public discourse. But this cannot happen without the support and affiliation of a subaltern counterpublics that

moves behind these women and provides them support and solidarity. Ultimately, time will tell if these brave female comedians can remain standing in the face of a normative society that shapes how they choose to perform their gender. But as long as they are within their protective spaces, their aspirational labor will continue to produce content that slowly accrues a wider fan base of supporters. Together the comedian and her army of supporters can hope to reach the goal of a more equitable future for all genders.

B. Online and Precariously Funny

"Guys I just got to Elie Saab's fashion show and I just saw my name! First row! We are so excited to be here today" she laughs sweetly and sits down with two companions waiting for the show to begin. A tall slender model wearing a regular white robe held by a black belt saunters ahead. It was the speaker herself trying out a mishmash of her own clothing pretending to be Elie's model (Zeaiter, 2020b).

The above actress, Sara Zaeiter, is an online comedic superstar. Her Instagram and YouTube channels have accrued over four hundred thousand followers. Her little online skit aims to critique fashion as an artifice elaboration of ordinary clothing articles made famous by its producer. Sara, or bloggerwanabe, is amongst a rising number of female online comedians who are making waves and raking in money and fame through laughter. But for the online comedian there are new relations of power that shape their online subjectivities and bring a different focus on gender and creativity. Unlike the stand-up comedians, the online comic's labor is directly linked to consumption-based markets, thus highlighting the formative role of neoliberalism and postfeminist sensibilities in interpreting and constructing both gender and sexuality.

The complex systems and practices that encode gender norms are implicated by new matrices of power that are equally influential as the patriarchal and traditional hierarchal systems of domination that traditionally control women's lives, bodies, and politics. These new matrices fall in line with market demands and consumer desires and is part of the neoliberal governmentality that discipline women's performances rendering them objects of these consumer-based products. As such, it is important to analyze the gendered constitution and ideological meanings in these female comedians' content. This exercise is important for two reasons. It first determines how these ideologies reinforce certain social roles and relationships. It also unveils affective content that conceals gendered practices associated with feminized labor or women's work. This work is designated as a form of social and reproductive labor that is typically outside the circuit of commodified labor exchange (Fortunati, 1995). But in order to tap into the economical and social capital, these aspirational laborers must brand themselves as highly professional, authentic and flexible entrepreneurs that can re-inscribe themselves as reliable commodities.

This balancing act between the production of affective content and the securitization of their brand results in the erosion of their temporal and spacial dimensions rendering them in highly precarious conditions. In this section, therefore, I will argue that online female comedians embody a form of aspirational labor that is under the governmentality of a market driven system that shapes their humorous content. These gendered practices result in the laborer's self-precarization within a hybrid public sphere that reinforces normative practices and hegemonic femininity in line with neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities.

As I will show, the aspirational labor of online female comedians operates differently from their stand-up counterparts. While both types of female comedians draw on their own lived experiences and subjectivities to produce and perform their content, online comedians must follow an almost formulaic trajectory in order to succeed. And unlike the rarity of female stand-up comedians, the internet is overflowing with female influencers who use comedy to enact this form of labor. There are two prolific female comedic stars. The first and most formidable is Sara Zaieter who has lucrative marketing accounts under her belt including Pepsi, Siemens, and Jamalouki. The other is Nathalie Hjeij, aka Ja3danista, whose income comes in a barter format from various female brands. Both women's fame has become well recognized with nominations as some of the funniest Instagramers in Lebanon in the online blog @961 (Mezher, 2019).

While their comedic styles are very different, they share patterns of behavior that are indicative of trends populated by fashion bloggers and influencers and which highlight a formulaic template for performing and succeeding online. This pattern includes both gendered practices and representations. Both, for example, began as critics of fashion blogger's performances. Bloggerwanabe was built on a premise that pokes fun at the daily lives and tribulations of Lebanese female influencers such as herself who are living it up (Cross, 2018). Ja3danista, means to blabber, and as with bloggerwanabe, Nathalie Hjeij contends that she likes to poke fun and "chat" like fashion influencers. Sara Zaeiter's alter-ego bloggerwanabe is that of a 'wanabe' fashionista and Ja3danista describes herself as "anti-*fazlakeh*- anti-fashionista." Both advertise salons, makeup brands, restaurants, and fashion stores—commercial entities identical to their so called antithesis. Furthermore, both enact highly gendered and

stereotypical roles of ditched girlfriends, cunning women, brash mothers, plastic surgery seeking divas, dieting anorexics, and every other stereotypical female representation that comes to mind. They are also both attractive women who fit the acceptable and highly sought-after representation of womanhood. Both are light skinned, extremely thin and tall, fashionable, multi-lingual, and visibly wealthy, Nathalie (Ja3danista) resides in a villa in the middle of Beirut, while Sara Zeaiter (Bloggerwanabe) is a jet setter between Dubai and Beirut. These patterns establish a kind of paradigm for access into the online market. The aspirational labor of these female comedians is indicative of a structural framework that demands both that the comedians be physically attractive and that they possess cultural and social capital that allows for internet marketability. This marketability is implicated, not only within the comedian's content, but also her subjectivity as a commodified brand.

To brand the online comedian is to commodify her body. This is evident in both comedians' obsession with their bodies. This embodiment is evident in most of their creative content. An example of this embodied branding is a performance by Bloggerwanbe and her plastic surgeon Dr. Toni Nassar. In the skit Bloggerwanabe is seen entering the doctor's reception room while complaining about meeting someone she knows.

"What are you coming to do at the doctor?" Her friend asks "Nothing, just Botox. I know that Dr. Nassar is famous for doing lots of surgeries on the body, but that is enough! All these women look the same. Let them go to the gym and fix their bodies." She criticized. The clip then shows her in front of the doctor telling him "Dr. I have been going to the gym for about a minute to take a selfie while squatting, but now I am ready to do this! I have no business doing sports, I want to do a butt surgery" the

skit continues with the doctor explaining to her the procedure of a Buttox implant (Zeiater, 2020a).

Here, Sara's skit was interesting on more than one level. The content highlights the many layers of artifice that define Lebanese women, their interpretation of beauty, and how it is displayed publicly. So as Sara critiques this constructed image of the selfie or the friendly patient, she is also successfully advertising for Dr. Nassar's practice. The critical viewers can not know for sure if she had received any monetary remuneration, but many would guess that she may get free or discounted services. The fact that she embodies a well sculpted body and is possibly being reward for the skit only reinforces the practices she is critiquing. This ultimately makes her skit funny but devoid of a solid social or cultural punch line that is hallmark of the standup female comedian's content. Furthermore, this particular skit has since been removed from Sara's platform, indicating the likelihood that it was a form of sponsored content. Only the most authentically neutral posts remain archived within Bloggerwanabe's extensive platform.

Similarly Ja3danita did a promotion for Dr. Costi , a plastic surgeon, by barging aggressively into his clinic. He welcomed her in but she loudly interjected: "Don't call me Nathalie, nor Ja3danista…listen! There was someone with me at University who didn't recognize me and called me tant ![13] "She continued anxiously "I don't know what you want to do, do filler, dump all of these chemicals on my face! Whatever! Is it possible?! Me tant?" He calmed her down and started doing measurements to her face and by the end of the skit she said she looks three years younger and took a pose with perky lips (Hjeij, 2018)

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[13] Tant is a French term for aunt or a respectable appellation for an older female.

Here again, Ja3danista is performing a classically gendered construction of the ageless woman. The Lebanese's interpretation of beauty means a constant remodeling of the body. Nathalie's (Ja3danista) impeccable physique and her artificially sculpted features highlight this norm and reinforce it. While Nathalie did not delete the post, she did hashtag Dr. Costi's Instagram account along with other beauty experts. So clearly this was not a post inspired by the topic of beauty, but was also motivated by capital.

The central conundrum in these skits is not necessarily the idealization of the body as a source of its own agency. Rather the body is a simulacrum for the public's interpretation and judgment. The public in the case of the first (Sara/bloggerwanabe) is the female gaze, and in the second (Nathalie/ja3danista) it is the masculine one. In either case, the judgment of these subjectivities' is based on the perfection and sculpturing of her physical attributes. Beauty thus is a manufactured feature of the female subject (McRobbie, 2011b). And these manufactured features are in fact commodified as promotional ploys for the two plastic surgeon's ads. Even when the content was not intended for promotional purposes, it reproduced the same gendered practices.

Similarly, during the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, both performers used their body as a metaphor for the different ways women manage their ongoing struggles in isolation. Sara (Bloggerwanabe) performed a skit where she is wearing a nice sweater and full on makeup. When her friend asks her what she is doing. "I told you I have a date, do I look good? I don't care about the bottom, but I mean the top" And then she is seen on her bed looking at her laptop and flirting with an online date through the computer (Zaieter, 2020c)[14]. Ja3danista, also used the quarantine to perform a skit

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[14] Ironically, BloggerWanabe got much criticism about weight gaining rants when she was still visibly very slender. Female fans were upset that she kept harping on female body ideals that she advocates

72

where her buttock had grown and taken up the shape of the couch (Hjeij, 2020a). These are two examples of how the embodiment of humor was employed to highlight women's preoccupations and concerns. They are forms of self-discipline and censorship that reveal perpetual body insecurities that demand the reinforcement of normative standards of femininity through the constant monitoring and improvement of women's physicality (Bordo, 2003) in order to satisfy both the male gaze and the judgmental and competitive female gaze.

This focus on a woman's body is consequently paralleled with its sexualization. While Arab culture does not condone overtly sexual practices, both online comedians have employed sexualized practices either through provocative poses or lustful gazes in a way to reproduce desirable heterosexual subjectivities. All these disciplining and self-censorship practices are part of this postfeminist sensibility. It places aspirational laborers under the surveillance of a neoliberal dogma producing what McRobbie called a "double entanglement" (2004, p.255) where neo-conservative values that mold gender and sexuality into traditional normative formats is existing with liberalizing ideals of choice, agency, and empowerment. This double entanglement then becomes the common sense way subjectivities see and perform in the world. The aspirational work of these online female comedians therefore embody these postfeminist sensibilities as they suture these gendered performances into their subjectivities and thus reinforce these normative practices online to all their fans.

Both comedians' projection of highly gendered and embodied performances is culminated by practices that depend on building affective bonds with their audiences. These affective bonds are part of what is known as feminized work which is unvalued

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while not being sensitive to those outside that binary. Clearly some of the more critical audiences pushed back against these forms of posts that employ the body as an object to be censored and disciplined.

because it has an indirect relationship to the processes of commodification. This feminized labor is also marked by its self-disciplining practices and protocols that unknowingly and unconsciously shapes and interpolates the creative producers within contemporary capitalism (Jarrett, 2014). For example, when I first met Nathalie (Ja3danista) at her home, I noticed that she is constantly on her phone. Even while I chatted with her and her sister about her work, she was busy replying to her fans' messages. Yet when I asked her about the amount of time she spends working on her platform, she answered, "Not much." However, her sisters quickly interjected, "A lot! She works all the time, but she doesn't notice because it is now part of her life." The fact that Nathalie does not recognize her constant work, and her unconscious awareness of time spent on a particular post is a common response from most online bloggers. It underscores the normative notion of women's work where the dichotomies of labor and leisure, production and reproduction, public and private lives are blurred.

The work of successful online creative producers, like Nathalie, is therefore a nonstop performance of affective connections. But this work, it is not as simple as posting a witty comment or recycling a funny mime. Nathalie acknowledges that responding to her fans is stressful and takes up much of her time. But it is one of the most important elements of her popularity. Her connection with her fans is part of her appeal, as they become integrated within her family dynamics. "They know when I am not myself or am upset!" she told me. Her communication with her fans is an obligation akin to her mothering instincts: "One of my fans loves me so much," she commented, "I felt obliged to throw him a birthday party! He deserves it." Her community of fans is no longer an abstract entity; it has assimilated into her private world. Her familial connectivity with them, forces her to put in a lot of her skills in a feminized form of

work that is based on notions of caring, serving, and emotionally connecting with others.

Her audiences are no longer part of the public domain. In fact her constant work has transformed her fans within the public digital sphere into a community that has been domesticated within her private space which entail 'familial' obligations. Her free labor is employed to maintain the momentum of her platform and include keeping the connectivity, offering love and care, managing, coordination, and providing understanding and entertainment for no material gain. Nathalie's daily chores therefore are not very far removed from her daily routines as a single mother, care giver, manager, and entertainer. This domestication is evident in her and Sara's (Bloggerwanabe) live feed that usually begins at 1am, where both comedians chat with some of their more ardent fans. The chats are no different than idol conversations or even 'gossip'. This kind of communication does not add to their market value since it is done live and at a time when most of their network and the market are asleep. But it is part of what can be termed the "digital mundane" a form of "affective machinery of everyday life. It is where sensibilities are shaped, worked on, intensified and shut down" (Wilson & Yochim, 2017, p.17). The entanglement of banal communication with media technologies within the everyday private lives of these comedians results in temporal and spacial fragmentation that produces a framework of contingent vulnerability that is part and parcel of these women's daily lives.

This hybrid space, while comforting and lucrative for the comedian, is in fact a source of their own self-precarization. As the lines between both public and private domains fuse into this hybrid sphere, the potency of their comedic critiques is often diluted. Furthermore, the erosion of boundaries for work and leisure time, as well as

private and public spaces results in precarious conditions for these female creative producers. As these boundaries are shattered they are faced with a triple entanglement that reinforces their self-precarization. Their daily lives are entangled not only with the content they produce, but also with the audiences they entertain, and finally the capital they wish to harness. Balancing these three needs demand a lot of self-control, discipline, management, and even sacrifice of privacy and personal space. This balancing act is not accidental, but rather a self-inflicted decision based on these aspirational laborers' belief that they are free and empowered females that choose to do the things they love. But the result is a cycle of self- precarization within a neoliberal governing process. This process promises these women the prospects of future work and benefit but, in fact, impinges on their lives by keeping them working under unforeseen and contingent conditions. The erosion of these boundaries also gives rise to what Arendt had called the "rise of the social" which "has not only blurred the old borderline between the private and the political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the "individual and the citizen" (Arendt, 1958, p.38). Consequently, the work of these online comedian's feminized labor sutures the precarization of their work within the digital mundane and robs their creative content from expressing their true and authentic subjectivities outside the framework of vacant chatter.

C. Conclusion

Humor's illustrious history as a transgressive tool for political, social, and cultural critique remains animated through the gendered performance by female comedians. The choice of format for these funny women has important implications on the limitations

that demand women's self-disciplinary and self-censorship practices. As stand-up comedians, female performers use the stage and the protection of their subaltern counterpublics to break down society's gender norms and social hierarchies. They can express their fluid subjectivities in the hope of fostering transformative change in their communities. On the other hand, online female comedian's triple entanglement in producing affective bonds with their online fans while maintaining the airs of flexibility and professionalism has blurred the boundaries of their time and space and resulted in their self-precarization. This condition demands from female comedian the churning of content that reinforces highly gendered and stereotypical representation of women, while masking postfeminist notions of agency and empowerment. As such their work becomes a feminized form of labor that is highly undervalued and which reproduces social hierarchies and the gendered divisions of labor.

The disciplinary machination of neoliberal and postfeminist social and economic systems have also diluted comedians' messages, transforming their platform into "a pseudo-space of interaction in which individuals no longer "act" but "merely behave" as economic producer, consumers and urban city dwellers" (Benhabib, 1997, p4). The lack of action online highlights the effect of the online market and consumer economy on the efficacy of online comedy. So while the stage renders female comedians as social activists, the internet leaves the online performers as conduits for the normalization of society's hegemonic structures and practices. However, to denounce the internet and its socially mediated platforms as the adversary to social activism or even to laud it as the great social transformer is to fall into the pitfall of technological determinism. After all, there is a dialogical relationship between technology and culture. This relationship is shaped by how people use these technologies, social practices norms, and cultural

expectations (Susman, 1984). Television similarly had undergone these dialectical debates with many critics fearing the negative implications of, what was then, a new technology on the lives of people. Television, precursor to the internet, has also been installed within the domestic sphere. And it too domesticated female comedy into a natural formula that smoothed out the comedian's abrasive humor into "zany antics" that were "always tamed by the fact that they were also depicted as loving daughters, charming housewives, or working-girl formula (Spigel, 1992, p.153). The historical trajectory of mediated female comedy clearly reveals that, like television, the internet is not this democratizing savior for feminist ideals of emancipation. And while humor remains a great tool for the expression of women's knowledge and experiences, the intersection of commerce with mediated comedy unveil a tepid source of entertainment that leaves little traces of the power inherent in comedic performances.

CHAPTER III

CYBORG QUEENS: LABOR AND AUTHENTICITY OF THE QUEER MICRO-CELEBRITY

A veiled, bearded woman with a sinister smile enters the room holding a condom in her hand and asks her unseen interlocutor, "Hamoudy! What is this?" She bellows and then reveals a navy flip-flop, which she waves threateningly as she chases the invisible Hamoudy around the house. (@hajje_ emm_ali, 2020c).

This menacing woman is Hajje_emm_ali, the mother of Hamoudy and the alter ego of an online comedian. A Lebanese student pursuing a PhD in engineering, Emm Ali's creator is careful about keeping her identity camouflaged behind the filter of a highly embellished woman. And despite the presence of a bushy beard, her feminized performances caricature what she considers representation of a "middle-class Shi'a woman who grew up in Beirut." Emm Ali represents a new genre of online comedy that inhabits Lebanese virtual space. Behind Instagram filters and sexualized avatars, comedians such as Emm Ali reconfigure their own subjectivities by representing themselves as hyperfeminized public figures. Their online comedic material is nothing short of a drag performance, which uses exaggerated gender signifiers to narrate the comedic lives and tribulations of fluid identities within a queer virtual space.

Using these drag performers' comedic labor is a great transition to connect the two previous Chapters. The aspirational labor of comedians, which I describe in Chapter One, highlights the numerous negotiations that go into producing content that authentically represents the comedian's identity. I examine this authenticity further in

Chapter Two, which probes the inherently gendered nature of comedic work and explains how idealized notions of gender are narrated against the backdrop of highly precarious work conditions that demand constant self-disciplinary practices. In the present Chapter, I expand my investigation in order to consider the labor of drag camouflaged comedians whose fictional personas becomes part of the virtual world's comedic celebrity culture. My aim is to intersect queer and gender approaches with labor studies to interrogate how these virtual comedians' aspirational labor manufactures, packages and commodifies their fictional identities. I study the queer spaces that they inhabit and how they lure audiences and fans to become part of their virtual world. I will look at the work of both commodified and uncommodified cyborg queens and enunciate how their aspirational labor shapes their comedy, and their subjectivities.

There has been extensive work on the philosophy of the virtual body (e.g., Stone, 1996; Hayles, 2008; Graham, 2002; Ihde, 2002; Haraway, 1991). For the purpose of this research, I call my virtual comedic subjects cyborg queens because as cyborgs, they intersect technology with human subjectivity within a hybrid space that is both fictional and real (Haraway, 1991). As queens, their over-the-top comedic content and exaggerated female signifiers render their acts as a form of drag, which attempts to disrupt and reinterpret what gender is and how it is performed. As such, these laborers constitute a new online presence that inhabits a hyperreal world with a "postmodern fusion of remediated reality, simulation, fantasy and popular culture" (Cleland, 2008). This fusion makes cyborg queens a versatile strategy for the rearticulation of authenticity within neoliberalism's governmentality.

Cyborg queens are not a new phenomenon. Rather, they are an extension of an old and vibrant form of self-expression. Cyborg queens have substituted the usual makeup, props, and accessories hallmark of drag with technological aesthetics including filters, avatar shapes, and personalized emojis. Their corporeal portrayal is often a collage of an idealized notion of femininity, including impeccable body structures and facial features that conform to western ideals of beauty. It is important, though, to distinguish between the cyborg queens and their public persona. As queer subjectivities in search for a medium for the expression of their fluid identities, the characters they have created are an elaborate patchwork of both their multifarious selves and all their fantasies and desires. When I speak of the cyborg queens I speak of those complex subjectivities behind the façade of their camouflage. They are gender-queer persons that I have designated with the feminine pronoun, simply because their virtual creations are as such.

The cyborg queens' public characters interact and engage with their fans through their drag performances. These performances are a compilation of camp humor that includes theatricals, irony, and incongruities (Pearson, 2005). Camp humor is a form of expression that is "a way of making cultural, social and sexual critique under guise of harmless humor" (Pearson, 2005, p570). And this critique, according to Butler's assessment of Foucault, is one that does not fault or condemn, but is rather a way to suspend judgment and offer a "new practice of value based on that very suspension" (Butler, 2001, p.1). The parodic performances and over-the-top exaggerations of camp humor becomes a "way of dealing with popular culture that goes beyond either total assimilation or complete opposition" (Horn, 2017, p.4). It enacts "the lie that tells the truth…a moral anarchy which makes room for the self without altering the attitudes of

society" (Core, 1999, p.81). And by expressing the self, queer subjects can engage with popular culture without compromising their identity (Creekmur, Corey, & Doty, 1995).

Cyborg queens' engagement with popular culture ultimately turns them into aspirational laborers. For like their counterparts, they are all educated middle class or upper class Millenials who have technological savviness and business acumen that help them navigate the paradoxes and challenges of online creative work. Their initial aspirations were limited to the expression of their fluid identities. But, queering their comedy through camp humor, their content and camouflaged characters became the voice for a variety of fans that were attracted to this brand of comedy. Their popularity and creative success ultimately turns their aspirational labor for cultural capital, into a viable business platform for the marketing of themselves as self-branded celebrities. Cyborg queens' aspirations are thus a multifarious expression of a deep rooted need for self expression that can transcend the limitations of their fictional world into fame.

In fact, the essence of the cyborg queens' labor is to turn their virtual identities into what is called micro-celebrities. Micro-celebrities are a set of self-branded practices that offer "a new style of online performance that involves people amping up their popularity over the web using technologies like video, blogs, and social networking sites" (Senft, 2008, p.25). These practices include the use of multiple media platforms to gain wider reach (Marwick, 2015a) in order to produce a commodity sign for the consumption of others (Hearn, 2008). This entails strategic forms of intimacy that can appeal to audiences and produce followers (Senft, 2008) thus turning those very audiences into fans (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This fandom culture is built upon a consumable version of the self (Gamson, 1994) in which fans can actively participate in the everyday lives and tribulations of ordinary people (Burgess, Mitchell & Munch,

2018). Consequently, maintaining an authentic and relatable persona across these platforms is essential to turning the self into a consumable product for audiences (Marshall, 2006; Turner, 2013).

Articulating this authenticity is therefore central to the micro celebrity's practices. To do so, one of the core tenants is the ability to share information that can reflect the true identity of the producer (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2015b). In light of such discussions of authenticity, how do these queens share information when, as a camouflaged personality, they have already veiled the truth through the artifice of their public-facing image? Their labor to produce fame then becomes particularly perplexing. This labor requires, from producers, the creation of believable characters with authentic narratives that can transcend the digital domain and touch audiences. They must mediate dramatic personalities (Hackley et al., 2017), who can gain visibility and promote public attention. And they must also maintain a constant online presence and interactivity in order to keep their fans engaged with their content and their daily activities (Marshall, 2006; Turner, 2013).

Once the queens have established an authentic online celebrity, they must navigate the demands of their celebrity status. One of the most important skills of the cyborg queens is their ability to embody the dreams, fantasies and aspirations of their fans. While their camp humor had brought on their initial visibility, it is by conforming to dominant narratives pertaining to sexuality, gender, class, and beauty, that they enact both their and the followers' chimera. As cyborgs, the queens are then a postmodern metaphor for "shapeshiting" subjects (Carlson, 2001, p. 305) who are stitched into an authentic identity that is assembled out of parts circulating in popular culture. So effectively the cyborg queens becomes a collage of a "postmodern collective and

personal self" (Haraway, 1991, p.163). To maintain the authenticity of these stitched characters, the cyborg queens must alternate between conforming to the ideals that their celebrity status exude, and the contestation of these very ideals through their camp humor. This cycle of incongruity with conformity is a digital version of drag performance and allots the cyborg queens much liberty in navigating the thorns of online celebrity culture while maintaining their private sphere intact. Consequently, their aspirational labor becomes an expression of this ambivalence, turning their content and their virtual bodies into marketable products. Their celebrity status becomes a branded entity that is the very cultural product people celebrate. Their virtual labor turns into the very thing that labor produces: a product of contemporary society's dreams and fantasies. Their online personas consequently enact people's aspirations, feelings, and behaviors (Dyer, 2013).

As these fictional characters reproduce the ideals of people within contemporary society, their camp humor questions the very dichotomies of these norms. Cyborg queens' drag performance means they construct gendered personas that reproduce exaggerated representations of femininity. While these representations have become normalized standards, their mimicry of these seemingly normal subjectivities resists their essentialization (Butler, 1993a). The cyborg queens' performances, therefore, dispute the role of authenticity as a foundation of identity politics and demands that one sees gender as a construct born out of imitation. This, Butler (1993a) would argue, destabilizes the fixed notions of gender and what constitute femininity. As such, the cyborg queens are also implicated with society's regimes of power while still opposing them (Butler, 1993b, p.125). They alternate between the personification of normative social values that reinforce understanding of gender binaries and their social and

84

cultural hierarchies (LeMaster, 2015), and contestation of these very ideals. This oscillation then between normative standards and its repudiation is the essence of the comedic labor of these virtual personalities. Their ability to sustain this queer space and keep the momentum of their visibility is central to their success as online influencer and cultural stars.

Consequently, as the cyborg queens labor to maintain their celebrity status, they must also work to sustain the queer space that inspired their entry into this digital sphere in the first place. With their true subjectivities hidden behind their chosen characters, the cyborg queens, unlike other online aspirational laborers, have the agency to express this hybrid identity within this cyberqueer space. The nature of online comedic labor usually undercuts the transgressive value of comedic content as online aspirational laborers negotiate their branded authenticity to find a balance between the demands of their brand, their comedy, and the market. But for the cyborg queens, their ability to oscillate between the polish of celebrity culture and the impudence of drag performance means that their very brand allots them the agency of such flexible expression. Their brand, their subjectivity and their celebrity status are hinged on this dissonance between conformity and contestation. That is not to discount the fact that the most marketable celebrities camouflage not only their true subjectivities behind fictitious characters, but also their most transgressive content. The luxury allotted to them cannot be taken for granted and celebrity cyborg queens often delete, or modify their most audacious performances behind the guise of fastidious respectability.

This conflictual position is the crux of the appeal and power of the cyborg queens' comedic production. Their self-branded celebrity and public visibility does not directly influence their camouflaged 'real' identity. As such, their camp humor can

oscillate between maintaining a branded authenticity that is commensurate with the external demands of society and often the market economy. Their avatar disguise renders them space to use their transgressive camp content in alignment with a self-reflexive authenticity similar to the performed authenticity of standup comedians. Thus, cyborg queens are not defined by any one of these binaries. In essence, they inhabit a hybrid space where, I argue their aspirational labor produces virtual celebrities who mirror the desires and malaise of life within capitalist society while critiquing these very elements with their transgressive camp humor.

A. Meet Lebanon's Cyborg Queens

Lebanese cyborg queens are a unique brand of celebrity. Their public representation is distinctly American or European inspired. With the exception of Emm Ali, most of local Lebanese cyborg queens have bodies and features that do not exemplify Lebanese beauty. Tall, slender, light skinned, and with perfectly chiseled features, they represent a stereotypical view of what constitutes beauty. Their representation is also a material construct of both technology and skill. This materiality is paralleled by social and cultural capital that cyborg queens use in order to produce their audacious and camp content. As such, and typical of aspirational and creative laborers, cyborg queens' creators often come from middle or upper- middle-class homes and have the skills, knowledge, and time to invest in a platform that began as a space for self-exploration (Duffy, 2017).

Cyborg queens typically employ one of two persistent characterizations that reinforce the centrality of gender to their identity construction. Both the sexy diva and the antipathetic mother provide the creative producers with the framework for dramatic

characters that can provide a diversity of thematic subjects that can be developed into authentic narratives and charismatic personas. These seemingly oppositional categories are often fused into one queer identity which attracts audience's attention and participation with some of its outlandish representations, and over-the-top performances. My investigation concentrates on the works of four cyborg queens who represent very divergent and unique online characters. Fictitious personalities such as Adeela and Mantoura have built their brand as mainly sex symbols. Their labor resulted in a strong and regional following which has turned their fictitious characters into social and cultural influencers. The other two cyborg queens are represented by Emme Ali and Em Ken. These two characters are framed around conflictual yet affectionate mothers who do not undermine their own sexuality. Because they have not reached the celebrity status of the first two cyborg queens, their content tends to be more transgressive. But these four characters have become samples of how camp humor becomes a versatile tool for the self-branding of micro celebrities, and the expression of fluid identities.

B. Drag Divas and the Celebrity Market

Adeela - عديلة
@AdeelaOfficial

رح اشتقلكم 🥺 في واحد اليوم عم يلحّم باب البناية عنّا 😂😭

I will miss you all! There was someone today who came to weld our building door.(adeelaofficial, 2020)

Figure 1 Adeela

عنا بلبنان بس تحكي حدا دقيقتين اذا ارتحلك بنزل الكمامة 😬

Here in Lebanon, If you talk to someone for two minutes, and he gets comfortable with you, he will take down his mask.(mantouraofficial, 2020)

Figure 2 Mantoura

Adeela and Mantoura are two of the premier influencers in Lebanon. The platform they inhabit is built as a site where fans and the cyborg queens exchange news, gossip, opinions, and commentaries on their favorite Arab singers and actors. While it was impossible to get any of these cyborg queens to divulge the material profit of their labor, the queens' high numbers of followers signal to marketing agencies a viable influencer with high reach. The queens' followers then become one of their most important commodities. Their online presence and activities indicate that they may have reached their aspirations for material reward outside their already well established social and cultural capital. As aspirational laborers their work relies on many strategies and practices that help them to make and market their online celebrity. As online celebrities they must maintain their authenticity through self-branding practices that help to highlight their well established influence. They must also sustain their fans interactivity by posting content that trigger audience response and engagement. And finally, they have to keep gauging their content's reach and engagement in order to sustain the use-value of their character and their platform.

One of the first attractions to the cyborg queens' platform is their ability to produce engaging content. Adeela's accounts have a reputation for their highly divergent topics that traverse many areas of culture and society. As an avatar who looks like songstress Adel, she has accrued more than two and half million followers. As a cyborg queen, her creator's passion for music and culture helped her enter the mainstream of cultural production to become a beacon for the very stars she so admired. Adeela's inauguration in 2016 brought in followers who enjoy fashion police posts that critique the latest Arab stars; mashups of American videos onto dubbed Arabic songs; doctored photos and memes; and witty commentaries on local and regional events. The

eclectic content has merged elements of both global and local cultures, creating humor

through their juxtaposition (Zidani, 2016). Her camp humor is often met with derision

but has also cemented her public persona as a notoriously entertaining and creative

celebrity.

The satirical work of Adeela's cyborg queen is successful in generating a lot of

reactions from her audiences; especially as she has a wide demographic that includes

Lebanon and the Arab region. Bringing content that can please all these backgrounds is

difficult, but this cyborg queen has been successful in mitigating the drawbacks of such

endeavor with her witty critiques. One example of these critiques is her post on

February 28, 2019. Adeela's creator posted a provocative image of the sexy Columbian

singer Maluma. Maluma had been visiting Saudi Arabia at the time, and the public was

celebrating his sexy image wearing the Saudi Kaftan and Keffiey (Lee, 2019). In

reaction to this version of masculine appreciation, the cyborg queen provided her public

with another version of Maluma's sexuality as he was seen posing provocatively for

Calvin Klein in tight red underwear. The explicit masculine sexuality was sarcastically

juxtaposed by the attached comment: "Aren't the stairs in the background so amusing."

The comment's attempt to distract from the model's physicality only accentuated the

latter, resulting in a barrage of responses and reactions. While many found the post's

explicit sexuality hilarious, others were offended. Adeela promptly put a yellow bird

emoji on the photo's offensive part with the equally patronizing comment "well look at

that cute bird." Of course, this further aggravated some, while others expounded on its

levity. But when the offended voices grew, the cyborg queen backed down by deleting

the offensive image and posting one of Adeela wearing the Islamic veil with the

attached comment "I feel remorseful and have repented!" Her repentance lasted all but

thirty seconds because she soon posted an image of herself in a tight-fitting denim jumpsuit with the attached comment: "Ouf, I got stuffy! What do you think of this look?" (adeelaofficial,2020).

Adeela's playful and defiant performance in the conservative Arab world was transgressive. Her post was a subversive act of insolence in public celebration of male sexuality. That she deleted the image to replace it with one of herself in the veil is another critique on religious piety where the veil becomes the symbol of chastity and honor that camouflage an ascribed perversity. Her attached comment is both ironic and contemptuous for it speaks to a conservative Arab base that accepts narrow displays of gendered binaries and is hesitant to sway from certain social norms. But as a branded commodity, the cyborg queen's transgression can prove to be financially risky. That is why the image and the ensued dialogue have been removed. The fantasy that was weaved with these photos was re-calibrated with an image of Adeela seductively, but unapologetically, staring at her audiences in a blue jumpsuit. Clearly, Adeela's body and content have become a discursive space where the character expresses the creator's agency through her pixilated mass, her texts, and her representations (Tofts, 2003). Because of her commodified nature, the cyborg queen quickly policed herself in order to conform to normative and often idealized standards of acceptable male sexuality which society and her community had deemed appropriate.

The notion of self-policing is an important strategy for successful cyborg queens. This practice is applied by most aspirational laborers in order to sustain the use-value of their brand, and to mitigate any negative implications that may come from their humor. Following their audiences' comments and reactions is the most obvious way to regulate their work. But keeping tabs on their analytics is by far the most effective way

to mold the cyborg queen's content into a shape that fits the market's needs. Mantoura, as a successful online brand, reveals another facet of the aspirational labor of cyborg queens. With 325,000 followers, her content is also based on the same celebrity model, which focuses on critiquing the newest television series and musical stars who populate the airwaves. Unlike Adeela who borrows Adel's form, Mantoura's physical portrayal does not mirror a particular personality. Rather it is a progression of constant modifications on what can be deemed a classical brunette.

Her creator describes herself as a "marketing consultant and an entrepreneur" who "has several professional commitments" with blogging as her most important work. As a marketing consultant, Mantoura is very familiar with the value of metrics in the navigation of public interaction, discoverability, and feed (Aminur, 2020). One of the most important analytics that these aspirational laborers must manage is their reach, which includes the number of accounts that have seen their daily posts. Another is the impressions, which include the total number of times that these posts have been seen (Jadczak, 2020). In the case of Mantoura, who has posted this data online to attract potential advertisers, her one million weekly reach and three million weekly impression signal to marketing agencies that her platform has high traffic and brand awareness (mantouraofficial, 2020). The labor of these cyborg queens is then not only to produce content. Much of this content is strategically molded to fit what insight the analytical data is providing them about their online performances and what audiences are interacting with.

Once cyborg queens reach celebrity status, sponsorship opportunities become easier to find and their labor includes catering to these sponsors. Mantoura's repertoire afforded her the luxury of posting her card rate on her website. She offers many

sponsorship packages but the cheapest one is called the silver package. At $550 it includes one Instagram and Facebook post, one Instagram and Facebook story, one tweet and an analytics report after seventy-two hours (mantouraofficial, 2020). These rates provide an accurate analysis of the cost that Lebanese cyber stars charge for their organic data that is coming from natural visitors and not sponsored traffic (Jadczak, 2020). For Adeela, with followers that are nearly ninety percent higher, her charges are substantially higher. Her marketing agent quoted me nine million Lebanese pounds for one still post and one story. A two to three frame story costs four million Lebanese pounds, while a post is around eight million Lebanese pounds. In dollars she is charging between $500-1125 for only one post versus Mantoura's package of multiple platform and post advertisements[15]. Clearly, then the price per post is directly linked to the cyborg queen's celebrity status and the number of followers she has accrued. But for both cyborg queens this celebrity status has provided them a lucrative businesses model which they must constantly cater to by reinforcing self-branding strategies to attract prospective clients. But these sponsorship opportunities are not always available. That is why these queens must sometime employ smart and entrepreneurial strategies to make money from their brand.

Adeela's fame is an example of how virtual divas can transcend the digital sphere to find new avenues to make money. The creator of Adeela has used her celebrity status to bypass the limitations of her virtual body, and to turn her fictitious character into the face of a new cosmetic line. This was a challenging entrepreneurial feat for an avatar based creative producer. But in December 2019, Adeela Glam's unique lipstick line was introduced to the Adeela platform. The campaign featured ten

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[15] These rates are at an exchange rate of 8000lbp to the $1

of the Arab world's premier young fashion and arts celebrities including the likes of

Zeinah Makki, Cynthia Samuel, and even Chef Leyla Fathallah. Adeela's fictitious

image was inserted with that of the other beauties with an empowering comment

"Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much!" (adeelacosmetics, 2020) . The

comment itself is quite ironic because Adeela's ability to sell physical commodities has

always been hindered by her lack of corporeal existence. And now with the support of a

legion of stars she can achieve that goal. While she cannot wear, touch, or sample any

of the products she is sponsoring, her celebrity female friends do, and their

collaboration has built a viable branding campaign for the lipstick. It is also beneficial

for the influencers who gain from being visible on Adeela's platform (adeelacosmetics,

2020). Another marketing idea was to transform the one dimensionality of the photos

into live videos. By sending lavish gift boxes of the lipstick to another set of celebrities,

Adeela was able to turn her new product into a luxury brand through the promotion of

other celebrity brands. This interactive strategy provided Adeela with a creative outlet

to market her product which sold for $24.99, with 40% of the proceeds being donated to

Sesobel, a social organization that enhances the lives of children with disabilities.

Clearly, as a celebrity with a sizable following, Adeela's creator was able to turn her

aspirational labor into a successful brand with a wide array of strategies and practices

that can mitigate the limitations of her character's one dimensionality.

So as these cyborg queens navigate their business with clear entrepreneurial

savviness, their fictitious public persona must maintain the impression of spontaneity

and fun that is hallmark of the aspirational laborer. Unlike the online laborer who must

justify getting paid for ads and whose product endorsements should be incorporated

subliminally within their comedic content, the cyborg queens' endorsement of other

celebrities and events is part of the artifice of her celebrity façade. Even transgressions are easily forgotten as cyborg queens move on with their daily posting. An example of this malleability can be demonstrated when an influencer outed Adeela's creator. The public was shocked that a masculine identity called Samer Lahoud was in fact the cyborg queen behind their beloved Adeela. One of the followers quipped "Are you joking? And her son Aloushy?? I thought she turned black and blue for two months after she gave birth to him…I honestly don't understand?" (El Assaly, 2018). Whether sarcastically quoted, or not, the followers of the fictitious Adeela are not hung up on identity politics of gender, class, race, or background. As a cyborg, she is a hybrid identity that attracts people based on interest, lifestyle and shared dreams (Haraway, 1991). The lines between reality and representation are so blurred that her non-naturalness is part of the "tension between identity and difference" (Friedman, 2010, p.177). And by embracing this tension, both the cyborg queen and her fans are implicated in a new understanding of this hybridity that is corporeal and imagined, human and machine.

The malleability and hybridity of cyborg queens is also implicated in how they manage their characters' authentic identities. It is this very characteristic that attracted audiences to their brand in the first place. But how does one create authenticity for an avatar? Talking to the artist Assaad Bou Mjahed, who has worked on recreating digital images for many celebrities, he reiterates that "drawing a character is the last part of a whole process. You should view Adeela and Mantoura as a company that has built its personality on a clearly defined personal brand from its inception." He clarified, "The work then is a collaboration and the creators of these brands have to make sure that their characters have clearly defined identities that they must remain loyal to." In the case of

Adeela, she started as an Arab version of Adel. During her branding growth from 2016 until today, her physical attributes have rarely changed. While she may wear the veil for Ramadan or a sexy red outfit for Valentine's Day, she remains to her fans an authentic representation of a clearly defined person at a moment in time. Her narratives also resonate as real because they explore the mild evolutionary changes that women's bodies and subjectivities constantly undergo. She proudly displays her heavier body during quarantine or celebrates her image as she sponsors a new fitness sculpting service. Her content accentuates her evolution while preserving her fictitious history. She frequently refers back to fabricated personal narratives, such as her devotion to her son Aloushy or her attraction to Nassif Zeytoun, a popular and attractive Syrian singer. This consistency is a valuable strategy because it reinforces the branded authenticity of Adeela's character and reiterates her role as a celebrity who is evolving and following the needs of her community but still representative of a real camouflaged personality.

Mantoura, on the other hand, suffers from accusations that her brand is an imitation of Adeelas. Many commentators on Mantoura's platform accuse her of trying to reproduce Adeela's image. When I asked Mantoura's creator about her choice of avatar she was firm in her reply, "This represents me by all means. This is how I see myself, my identity and everything in between. So this avatar was not a choice among others, this is completely my creation and a reflection of myself." But, within six month that ideal representation changed and the avatar she modified looked different than the original. While one should not discount personal growth and the need to evolve, Mantoura's persistent incongruities in her representation reveal a less believable storyline. Discussing the difference between both characters, Assaad Bou Mjahed, the digital artist who has worked for both cyborg queens, critiqued this fact when he

commented that "Mantoura cannot settle on a specific concept for her brand. She gravitates from one idea to the other. This makes it hard to believe that she is real." Going back to her site's inception, she represents herself with various cartoon characters that included Tom cruise and then the Arab singer Ahlam. Later on, she adopted a more feminized and sexualized representation of a brunette beauty that is ever changing in her features (figure3).
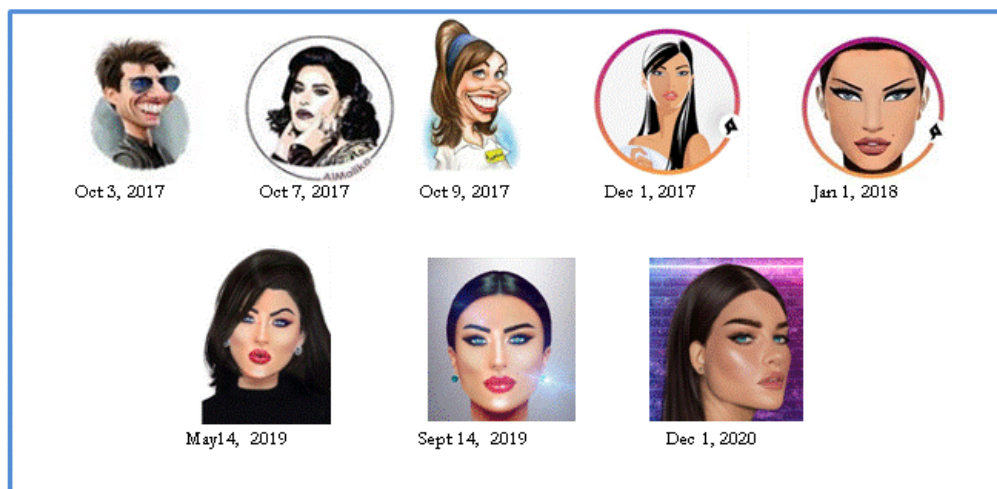

Figure 1 Mantoura's Instagram Profile Photos

These variant changes underscore an unstable online identity which hinders the buildup of an authentic brand. Furthermore, she has not developed any persistent narratives outside her role as a sexy diva. So unlike Adeela's accounts of compassionate motherhood, or jealous divorcées, Mantoura's one dimensional personality seems dull and unremarkable. This further reveals the importance and difficulty that goes into building an authentic brand that translate its creator's fantasy yet weaves a believable narrative that audiences can cling to.

Celebrity cyborg queens, therefore, have multifarious roles as aspirational laborers. By gauging their audiences and the public's desires and fantasies through their analytics they can translate society's normative standards and thus calibrate their

platform and their brand to fit certain standards that are generally heteronormative within society. So being an attractive sexy female with heterosexual desires falls within clear and stereotypical gendered binaries that the queen attempts to uphold. Effectively their fictional fame becomes the embodiment of a dichotomy between what is authentic and what is manufactured (Dyer, 2013). This embodiment transcends the human subject as a 'subject of shame" (Matviyenko, 2010, p.39) because unlike real subjects who must 'apologize' for their bodies as imperfect or inadequate" (Matviyenko, 2010), the cyborg queen, has removed this weight by creating the perfect physique and thus becoming liberated to communicate and meet without the burden of her externality (Sterling, 2002). And her enactments are not only those of her creator, but a mirror to a larger material and ideological constructs of gendered identity within society. The creators of Adeela and Mantoura's brand operate like a "primordial mirror" where the subject is constituted through their identification with the image, yet remains detached from it. They become both the self and its other (Rehak, 2013). This fragmentation highlights the paradoxical role of agency demonstrated by their unapologetic use of camp humor and conformity to postfeminist and normative ideals of gendered roles and representations. The oscillation between these roles is constantly being played out by the cyborg queen comedians.

C. All Hail the Queen Mother

Figure 2 Em Ken

Figure 3 Emm Ali

بعد تصويتكن، الجمهور **emkenofficial**
اختار كون أنا الملكة والسياسيي
مشحوطين. فلتحكم الملكة !!!!!
💎💎 #اقتضى_التوضيح

41w

After your votes, the public
elected me to be the queen.
And the politicians are fired.
So let the queen rule!
Clarification needed
(emkenofficial, 2020a)

يا ويلك من غضب الام يا **hajje_emm_ali**
حمودي ..

26w

God help you from a
mother's wrath Hamoudi!
(hajje_emm_ali, 2020b)

While successful cyborg queens such as Adeela and Mantoura must use many

practices and strategies to calibrate their brand, other cyborg queens squash any written

standards with their transgressive performances. Cyborg queens, who do not get paid to

sponsor events or products, produce a different kind of comedy. Their brand becomes

uncommodified and it establishes them as highly creative producers who place few

limitations on their content or representation. Em Ken and Emm Ali are fictitious

characters whose authentic elaboration of motherhood makes them unique

representations of gender and sexuality online. Unlike their celebrity counterparts, their

brand is not commercialized. While they may make money by sponsoring a product or

event, they often use their platform as a space for self-exploration rather than self-branding. Ultimately, their labor, representation and content become part of a small community that aims to recalibrate our understanding of the social norms that shape our lives.

The camouflaged creators of Em Ken and Emme_Ali are aspirational laborers, too. While their platforms are often times not financially rewarding, their online performances fulfill their aspirations for visibility as fluid identities in the making. Unlike the branded celebrities, these cyborg queens labor differently. They do not post daily because their creative productions are original narratives or songs that require preparation. And because most of this content is very individualistic and does not follow a specific pattern, it represents its creator and not always the audience's expectations or market demands. Since most of their content is based on narratives of clearly evolving fictitious characters, their form of authenticity gravitates more into a self-reflexive form of expression rather than a branded one. Their performed authenticity is similar to the standup comedians because it is an exercise in self exploration within an accommodating digital space. Their labor then is focused on creating this space where they can engage with the public using their own set of rules. Their work, consequently, is to provide a cyberqueer space where the bonds of gender and sexuality are eroded and where discursive communities can be built (Wakeford, 2000, p.412).

The platform and queer space that these cyborg mothers inhabit becomes the ultimate product of their aspirational labor. Working to produce their transgressive comedic content, these queens' engagement with their audiences is higher than their branded counterparts such as the creators of Adeela and Mantoura. Instagram

engagements are part of the analytics that bloggers watch, and they reveal the level of the public's interaction with the content whether through likes, shares, or comments (Olafson, 2020). In the case of Emm Ali and Em Ken, their level of engagement surpasses their celebrity counterparts. Emm Ali has a 17.18% and Em Ken has 7.71% engagement. On the other hand, Adeela has only 1.23% engagement and Mantoura 1.86% (Jain, 2020). Clearly the content and space that both these cyborg mothers have created is one that allows discursive communication between the creative producer and her fans. This changes the labor of the cyborg queens from the production and reproduction of commodifiable products that articulates the way we are in society, to a more authentic elaboration that proposes how we can or should be.

Paradoxically, this authentic elaboration is only a façade that covers the artificiality of gender construction. The aspirational labors of non commodified Cyborg queens such as Em Ken and Emm Ali highlight a contentious balancing act between conformity and contestation. So while Adeela and Mantoura create a cyberqueer site, the uncomercialized cyborg queers' site is unhinged by commercial or market limitations to become a platform where "social discourses are inscribed and contested" (Foucault, 1990, p.2) and where subversive practices work to dismantle the social and cultural norms attached to gendered binaries (Butler, 1993a). Consequently, their gendered performance "enact a collective identity that calls attention to the artificiality of gender and sexual binaries" (Taylor and Rupp, 2004, p.130). The potential value of these cyborg queens' celebrity status is its attachment to resistance against normative gender politics. The queens' performance and camp expressions provide the platform for the presentation of these fluid identities where they may have difficulty been visible anywhere else (Sandoval, 2018). And since all gender performance is socially

constructed, the cyborg queens, as hyperreal women, will also simulate multiple subjectivities that are re-inscribed with all the stereotypical and normative standards of postfeminist sensibilities that include the ideal body, beauty, and wealth.

Em Ken represents these very postfeminist sensibilities. Em Ken is a sultry barbie-esque woman with European features, including blond locks, a baby face and childish voice, and an often-exposed midriff. With nearly 65,000 followers, Em Ken is a local celebrity, but outside her occasional promotion of New Yorker Cup coffee shop, she does not sponsor any other product. When I reached out to Em Ken to get more feedback on her work, she directed me to her manager in order to maintain her camouflage. He described to me the cyborg queen behind the persona of Em Ken. "What you see is Em Ken; this is her body and her clothes! She is an authentic representation of her creator who happens to be a rich woman, an entrepreneur and a mother," he elaborated to me. Using animation technology, Em Ken has the faculty of movement and is easily able to play with aesthetics, such as clothing and accessories. While Em Ken's manager refused to highlight the name of this technology, an animation expert confirmed that many 3D animations apps are available for iPhone or Android that do this kind of programming. The manager did confirm that they paid for this service which provides generic facial features that seem to be standardized due to structural limitations by the App.

Em Ken became a national phenomenon in 2019 with her protest song "Mabsouta"[16]. In this song she outlines the Lebanese's precarity that were highlighted by the October 2019 uprising, against a background of images that illustrates the country's environmental degradation, political corruption, and social injustices. The

[16] Mabsouta?" or Are you happy? is in reference to Jihan Khoury's statement, a loyal follower of the Patriot movement and supporter of General Aon's presidency. She was severely bullied for making that statement on air following his selection as president.

song's popularity brought Em Ken a legion of supporters from the Lebanese October 2019 uprising. She became one of the voices that expressed people's anger. "This is my way of contributing to the revolution" she said in an interview in L'Orient-le Jour "I do this for our children, for my son Ken" (Khoury, 2019). Her sentiment though is not confined to a single event. All of Em Ken's performances are highly gendered elaborations that carry a social or political critique. Her camp humor attempts to disrupt the common-sense way we view the world.

The following is a good example that demonstrates the cyborg queens' camp humor:

 "Hi lovely people!" starts the video of a female avatar with a high-pitched voice. "In the time of corona, it is hard to be an influencer. But I have the steps for success." Then the woman begins her instructions. "Step one: go out, play around, have fun, take selfies, and as long as you have a sticker that says 'stay at home,' you will be fine, after all you are an influencer." "Step two." she continues. "Follow the current events no matter what they are, even if you don't really understand them! After all, you are an influencer. So there is poverty, try to be poor." She then shows a picture of a scantly dressed woman ironically exemplifying poverty. She elaborates on step three: "if you don't have charisma, ask for help. Your son, your daughters… do whatever you can together even if you look stupid because after all you are an influencers!" And finally, "always keep in mind international reference, so go on your story and make a statement like "stop being poor" here she shows Paris Hilton's image wearing that very statement on her shirt "and this way you would be contributing to the eradication of poverty in Lebanon. I hope you can benefit and have learned the secret of stardom" (emkenofficial, 2020b).

In the above sarcastic post, Em Ken outlines the steps needed to turn anyone into an influencer such as herself. Her advice is a critique of the clichés that are associated with celebrity culture. Her rendition highlights the detachment and hypocrisy displayed by many of these influencers in their blinded pursuit of fame. In essence, Em Ken's critique is a commentary on contemporary life within the postfeminist logic of individualism, objectification, and self-branding (Gill, 2014; Grindstaff, 2020). Em Ken's passionate commitment to defend "the cause of women and that of the LGBTQ community" (Khoury, 2019) turn her transgressive content and camp humor into a cyberqueer space for identity exploration, and discursive communication. Her whole platform is filled with comedic performances that rearticulate motherhood, marriage, sexual desires, and politics. In one instance she can produce three or four skits that are exaggerated dramas about her sexual escapades, and in the next she implores her fans to explore the newest Among Us multiplayer social deduction game and connects it to Lebanese politicians and politics. This diversity in her content presents her fans with a queer space for discourse and communication.

Central to this cyberqueer space that Em Ken's creator has established is the contestation of conventional gender roles. Her account features two persistent categories: the sexy diva and the mother. Her appropriation of these two topics eliminates their prescribed polarity and pulls them into a queer expression that contests their normality. Em Ken's representation as an erotic and highly sexualized body, accompanied by narratives that instruct viewers on the art of seduction makes her a classical example of postfeminist sensibilities where women's bodies are sexualized to express desire, autonomy, heterosexual fixation, and self-regulation (Gill, 2003; Dobson, 2015). Yet her humor's exaggerations of her role as a non-nurturing, detached,

self-obsessed mother are not only funny, they are poignant. They demonstrate how by deconstructing her mothering roles she re-questions and re-articulates a new interpretation for this seemingly stabilized category. For example, in one of her skits with Ken, her son inserts a CD and asks her to dance:

Em Ken: I don't like to dance

Ken: yalla mama! Ah ya Em Ken.

Suddenly, Arabic rhythms begin and Em Ken changes from her demure outfit into two fetching dresses in white and black. She begins to sing and belly dance seductively, while looking hypnotically at the audience. All the while her son's supportive chants in the background with "Ah Ya Mama!" or "Ah Ya Em Ken" are guiding her through the various lyrics.

When I dance ya habiby I shake all lands

لما برقص يا حبيبي برج كل البلدان

After me no one comes, and no one comes, not now nor later

من بعدي ما بيجي لا هلق و لا بعدين

You can't forget me, I can seduce you in seconds, I am the star of the square

ما فيك تنساني, بغيرك بثواني أنا نجمه الميدان

However much you turn and look, I am different than all other women.

قد ما لَفَيت, رحت و حريت أنا غير كل النسوان

I am Em Ken.

أنا أم كن!

(emkenofficial,2019)

How can one explain this performance with its highly stylized theatrics and complicated hand gestures? Em Ken's exaggerations of femininity as well as her erotic

swooning, culminated by the stark breakdown of mothering norms, as Ken is seen

wearing mirrored geysers and colorful clothing while chanting behind his mother, are

clear disruptions to Arab norms of both mothering and 'respectable' womanhood. The

video's stylized shots that go back and forth between Em Ken's swooning and her son's

direction are reminiscent of club like scenes. The juxtaposition between the performing

characters (mother and son) and the symbols they were producing (dancer and

provocateur) disrupt the normative roles that constitute familial relationships and even

breaks down the boundaries of gender roles and parental hierarchies. In a sense, the

whole skit is an agitational performance that questions motherhood, sexuality, and

gender.

On another spectrum is another cyborg queenly mother whose style and content

are very different but equally transgressive. Emm Ali, whose lifestyle draws from the

stereotypes of an urban Shi'a, rearticulates not only expressions of gender, but also

conventions of Lebanese sectarian and religious tropes. Emm Ali's is a heavyset woman

with a loose head-cover wrapped around a bearded-face accentuated by heavy makeup

provided by a filter[17]. Emm Ali's cyborg queen launched her account in May of 2020,

and most of her skits are conversations with her audience or her children. Her content

consists mainly of lighthearted comedic narratives about her daily life, her children, and

her loathsome neighbor. Emm Ali's main protagonist is her son, Hamoudi. Their

volatile and abusive dynamic draws out an interesting narrative that highlights how

cyborg queen moms interpret and rearticulate the role of masculinity in society. Emm

Ali's camp humor and overexaggerated drag articulation of the domineering woman

and submissive man reconfigure understanding of these socially constructed roles and

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[17] The filter is the creation of an online personality and Lebanese Drag artist called Nasrcissa.

gives them new meaning. Her conversations with her invisible son Hamoudi provide the perfect backdrop to this kind of subversion:

"Shou, you infidel" she says as she invades his room. "Did you pray?" she dangles a tea sieve and asks him "Hamoudi! Do you know what this is?" With a devilish smile, she says "wish I would drain your blood with it." She continues, "had you opened the prayer carpet you would have seen it- I left it there to see if you are actually praying! You think I am stupid and can't catch you leaving your prayer you animal!" Then she runs after him with the flip flop to Blondie's lyrics "One way or another" (Hajje_emm_ali, 2020a).

There is no end to Emm Ali's abuse of poor and invisible Hamoudi, and her main concern is his religious piety. Her dogmatic approach and outlandish ways she catches her 'infidel' son's disobedience is a contestation at its very essence to these consecrated duties she so observes.

For the creator of Emm Ali, the abuse is another way to view the religious and sectarian structures that define familial life. Parents' duty to policy their children's lack of spirituality through drag performance becomes a rearticulation of this struggle between the more traditional elderly and their less conforming youths. By their exaggerations, the cyborg queen can facilitate a discourse where people from various sects or religious affiliations can affectively connect with Hamoudy's struggle, or his mother's tyrannical behavior. Followers often find excuses for his conduct. For example, when Emm Ali discovered a condom, a slew of fans defended by saying "Safety first!" (lifewithelie, 2020). Others supported Emm Ali's dogmatic conduct by questioning her religiosity "Your arms are showing! This is not a good Hijab" Attacked

matteo.at (2020). Case in point, when asked about the character's overtly abusive personality and stereotypical representation the cyborg queen replied

"She is loving, yet tough. She is pious, yet gossipy. She is a middle-class shia woman who grew up in Beirut. It's a slice of society that deserves to be represented. Comedy should come by laughing with her, and not at her." she further clarified that "while I started pulling the traits of this character from my shi'a upbringing, I have found with time that many traits of Emm Ali are very common to many mothers from other sects as well. I saw that by seeing people or friends from other sects tagging their siblings or commenting on the posts. For the creator, Emm Ali has become a way to express a sense of being in the world. It is an expression of a reality that by its exaggerating reveals its common patterns and anomalies that binds different people together.

The construction of Emm Ali's public persona therefore demonstrates how gender is socially constructed and performed. The character's ability to weave together multiple narratives and to recreate multifarious subjectivities is therefore hinged on her gender as a woman. Asked about her choice of gender, Emm Ali's creator admitted that "Such a character cannot fly with a male version. Seeing Abou Ali going after Hamoudi with a flipflop would bring more trauma than comedy to people." So Emm Ali's feminized roles become both real and liberating to her creators and her fans. "She is an element of my upbringing" she explained "so I feel I can remain authentic for a long time and use many references from my personal life," The multiple feminized narratives Emm Ali dips into include her proud relationship with her daughter and granddaughters, her frustrations with her Italian daughter-in-law, her trusting gossip with her friend, and even her vile jealousy of her neighbor. They all enunciate gendered explorations of the self where to be woman is to be polymorphous. In effect, for her creator, Emm Ali's

character becomes the voice of divergent subjectivities that her cyber queen is able to embody through that representation

And while Emm Ali expresses numerous versions of womanhood, she enunciates a constricted view of masculinity. Masculinity as represented by Emm Ali is confined to a strict and narrow binary of the disobedient son, or the compliant and doting husband. Her performance reiterates her role as the disciplinarian and spiritual police. Emm Ali's vulgar and often abusive catch phrases then become a performance of how gender is also regulated and conditioned. Her camp humor and vulgarity culminated with her clear drag representation highlight the dichotomized binaries that perpetuate gendered systems. As a drag, her burlesque performance between herself and her son destabilizes masculinity through role reversal. The fragile and vulnerable Hamoudi chased by his overbearing mother performed by a drag queen wearing a beard "denaturalize the performance of femininity as tied to a specific body" (Hobson, p.2013, p.39). By imitating normative gender roles through the enactment of exaggerated humor she is making a critique that gender is nothing but an act not a state. Consequently, Emm Ali, like other cyborg queens, is more than just an exaggerated expression of femininity, motherhood, religiosity, or sectarian ideals. She is an elaboration of complex and contradictory subjects. She is at the center of the self and an inseparable part of how gender is expressed and restrained. Regardless of background, class, or religion, the cyborg queen is the imitation that frames identity construction making her as authentic and real as the characters she emulates.

D. Conclusion

The analysis of cyborg queens' labor is an exploration of how the transgressive tool of camp humor mixed with the limitations of self-branding practices reveals much about the potential power, agency, and challenges of cyborg queen's creative production. Their labor within celebrity culture can express society's norms and stereotypes while contesting their validity. While all our cyborg queens reproduce strategies for dissent and a normalization of what some may deem deviant behavior, uncommodified celebrities such as Em Ken and Emm Ali are unapologetic and unhinged by the potential negative implications of these performances. Celebrities such as Adeela and Mantoura have the agency to perform as they please, but their fan base, the market economy and their potential reach can place hindrances on this agency.

The aspirational labor of cyborg queens, like their online and stand up counterparts, is framed by a lot of affective connections and communications between themselves and their fans. They negotiate similar challenges to maintain an authentic public persona that is attractive to both audiences and the market. But their creative work is the antithesis of normative ideals of women's work. Women's work includes the notions of affective performance that is hinged on women's dedication, emotional support, and domestic service (Jarrett, 2014). The cyborg queens, especially characters such as Em Ken and Emm Ali, exhibit clear disregard to these standards. Their drag responses to their audiences' policing demonstrate their unapologetic views. That does not discount the fact that they are constantly negotiating these policing practices in order to maintain the use-value of their brand which is attached to the commodity market. As such, whether financially successful or simply a platform for self-expression

the guise behind their drag image provides them with agency to maintain the right balance between what they want to produce and what others expect them to reproduce.

But as cultural commodity, the aspirational labor of commodified cyborg queens reveals that despite their agency they must constantly mitigate the potential financial ramifications of these transgressive behaviors with immediate self-regulation. Their micro celebrity status makes them import real world fantasies into the virtual sphere thus reproducing the cultural and social norms that have been part of the disciplinary machination that controls women's bodies and performances. There is a dialectical relationship between the self-branded stars' inherently transgressive performance, and the re-articulation of normative ideals they fosters online. By focusing on the role of labor, the analysis reveals how consumer culture brands these celebrities so they can rebrand more commodities. Their labor produces their celebrity which reproduces other celebrity brands in a cycle of perpetual cultural consumption. Their ultimate production is an articulation of contemporary life within capitalist structures. The libratory potential of these micro celebrities is thus limited because it turns into a "continuation and an intensification of this commodification of identity with its focus on superficial appearance and possession" (Cleland, 2008, p.149).

Furthermore, and central to their work, is the effect their labor has on their identity and the space they have so carefully assembled. The aspirational labor of cyborg queens eradicates identity borders producing a cyberqueer space where they can safely express this fluidity. What I wish to problematizes is the role of authenticity within this space. If anything, the value of this authentic subjectivity is in question because it blurs the lines of identity politics where there is no longer a self or its other within this hybrid new persona. While liberating, the potential drawback to this

110

hybridity calls into question the role of the cyborg queen as a political agent. After all, they are only free to be what they aspire behind the guise of technologically facilitated masks. The cyborg queens' drag performances imprison their self-expression rigidly within the realm of the illusionary rather than the real. This highlights how their contradictory labor, while contesting certain social norms, may neutralize the political struggle of queer identities within the "real" public sphere. By inhabiting these cyberqueer spaces, the cyborg and her equally marginalized followers are kept firmly in their place and in front of the computer (Carlson, 2001) within an increasingly commercialized virtual space.

The ideals then of freedom lauded by social media and the labor of its cyborg queens reveal another potential pitfall. The panopticon of the neoliberal machination which controls the virtual world keeps its clutches on the political struggle of fluid subjectivities. The cyberqueer space where these identities feel most free to engage with popular culture becomes a self-inflicted prison where the governmentality of the virtual market and its consumer culture, numbs any potential political or social discourse that can facilitate real change. The cyborg queens' political and cultural savviness as a mirco-celebrity, who represents our deepest dreams and desires, may in fact remain a virtual fantasy confined within the chit chat of the digital mundane.

THE FINAL ACT: LAUGHTER IS (NOT) ALWAYS THE BEST MEDICINE

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to go beyond the elaboration of comedy as a creative art form into how it is constituted as a mode of work. Reorienting the focus unveils invisible economic, social, and cultural structures that shape both the comedians' work and the content they create. I argued that comedy is a gendered form of aspirational labor that has inherent tensions between the comedians' creative work and their sense of authenticity. This tension is heightened within the digital market economy as comedians apply micro celebrity practices that dilute some of the transgressive and queer qualities of their comedic content.

By doing a comparative of both Lebanese standup and online comedic work, I uncovered in Chapter One parallels and divergences in their aspirational labor. Both forms of comedians depend on personal entrepreneurial skills and business acumen in order to build up a solid fan base. To maintain this base, they must build affective bonds and networking relationships with their audiences. But their biggest challenge is to maintain an authentic public identity that is commensurate with the comedians' own interpretations.

While they faced similar challenges, the online and standup comedians respond to these challenges differently. As freelance and independent workers, online comedians' labor is flexible, adaptable and filled with entrepreneurial energy (McRobbie, 2011a, Duffy, 2016, 2017). In this investigation online comedians included both 'real' characters as well as fictionalized characters. In Chapter Three I introduced the cyborg queens as online comedians camouflaged by technological images that enact

drag performances. Both these forms of comedians must persistently monitor their followers' interactions, gauge their engagement metrics, and interact with their loyal fans which signal positively to the consumer market. Their work is propelled by the need to perpetuate a branded authenticity that is salient to both audiences and the marketing of commodities.

Once their visibility is established, online comedians must apply microcelebrity practices that include self-branding techniques which turn the online comedians from primarily comedic producers into public personas that are consumed by others. Many online services provide avenues for these self-branded services. Big celebrities such as Adeela and Bloggerwanabe's creators use marketing agencies such as Humanagment group that markets most influencers and matches them with brand sponsorship deals. Others, such as Farid and Ghayd, use websites such as Omniyat. It allows talents to engage with audiences by signing autographs, participating in masterclasses, or producing personalized songs (omneeyat, 2020). Oulo is another such popular website that invites dedicated fans to pay around fifty dollars for personalized video messages. Ghayd, Farid, Nathalie, and Sara are members of this site (Oulo, 2020). Along with these sites, most online comedians have expanded their visibility on all forms of digital platforms including podcasts, twitter, linkedIn, and content producing apps. These strategies help to diversify their portfolio and facilitate the generation of new income from different sources that are attracted to their influencer and celebrity status. Their brand and creative content is thus repackaged and sold to the most ardent fans. All of these practices place a lot of pressure on the comedians who constantly work to manage these platforms. The normalization of these working conditions ultimately results in the

comedians' self-precarization and the blurring lines between their private and public personas and their temporal and spacial boundaries (Lorey, 2006).

This self-precarization is extended into a form of governmentality that polices the comedian's content and subjectivity. In Chapter Two I elaborated on how comedians often engage in self-censoring strategies to mitigate potential damage to their brand from negative implications by their followers or sponsors. But more importantly, their work and representation must contend with heteronormative standards that reinforce certain gendered practices and representations. Whether male or female, both genders align their representation with certain postfeminist standards of femininity and masculinity. So, male comedians such as Ghayd from el3amaa will post images of his buff workout body in the gym, while Sara, from Bloggerwanabe, would create a comedic skit about her weight during quarantine. Even cyborg queens such as Mantoura will elaborate on her character's sexuality by accentuating ideal body and beauty images. So the work of online comedians, as it becomes interlinked within the commodity market, is implicated with neoliberal governmentality. This governmentality encodes gender norms and enforces matrices of power that reinforce hierarchical systems of domination that control gendered bodies and politics.

As online comedians' aspirational labor becomes more established as celebrities, they face new challenges. While they may have garnered stardom, they are now pressured to maintain this status despite any negative implications on the way they see themselves and the content they want to perform. Another dilemma is the risk of imitation. Sara of Bloggerwanabe was accused by another up and coming Syrian comedian (Marashi, 2020) of stealing her content. The argument undermined Sara's branded authenticity as her accuser pointed out the many instances of plagiarism for

which Sara vehemently and condescendingly rejected. This feminized spectacle of female rivalry highlights the panoptic view online engagement, which can discipline content producers as well as pressure them to constantly generate new material.

As such, the comedians' aspirational entry to express their comedic skills turns their comedy and their identity into a commodity that is often outside the comedians' true self. Essentially their "real" identity becomes detached from what they 'do' (Marwick, 2016). They are camouflaged behind their commodified brand. As such there is little difference between the fictional cyborg queens I investigated in Chapter Three and other influencers such as Nathalie from Ja3danista. Both comedians' aspirational labor builds up their brand to turn them into fictional and consumable public personas. In an interview on Al Jadeed television, Nathalie Hjeij reiterated "I started this for fun, but the people made me into Ja3danista… I am not a celebrity; the fans turned me into one" (Al Jadeed, 2020). In that show called Tammam, Nathalie began the interview with a short bob and an elegant outfit, but in the second segment she put on a wig with long hair and changed into a different garb. When Tammam asked her "you changed the look? Are you this changeable" she responded "I am with Tammam, I have to give you…" and then she paused to finish with "I am many things" (al Jadeed, 2020). Nathalie, the divorcée that I had met when I first started this project, was not the woman performing on that show. She armed herself with a new 'look' and a new 'identity' that is commensurate with her role as the celebrity. The spontaneous woman I knew has morphed into a cyborg queen. In Chapter Three I explained how as cyborg, even while conforming to stereotypical and normative ideals, the queens' agency facilitates the ability to contest these very ideals because of their camouflage. But for Nathalie/Ja3danista, she is more exposed and thus more vulnerable. As the brash

interviewer proceeded to investigate her life, I questioned the discomfort she was projecting on the screen, and I wasn't sure whether it was part of the performance or true anxiety at having parts of her life on display in public.

Standup comedians' aspirational labor, on the other hand, takes on a different trajectory than their online counterparts. In Chapter One I explore their journey onto the comedic stage. They begin slowly and collaboratively with a community of people dedicated to create an informal industry for standup comedy in Lebanon. Their performed authenticity is the result of internally reflexive explorations of an authentic self (Giddens, 1991). So the comedy of these standup comedians becomes a cathartic exploration of queer and fluid identities that are in constant flux and conflict within their community. Similar to this form of exploration is the work of cyborg queens in Chapter three, especially those that are not limited to a commodified brand such as Emm Ali and Em Ken. Their comedy is an elaboration of drag performance that engages audiences with a gendered expression of the performers' own experiences. So clearly both standup comedians and cyborg queens share the ability to engage with transgressive comedy within a safe space of interaction.

The space that standup comedians inhabit as I elaborated in Chapter Two can then be paralleled with that of the cyborg queens' digital space in Chapter Three. In the case of the standup comedians they are part of a community of other comedians, fans, staff, and theater and bar owners who mitigate much of the challenges that often face aspirational laborers. This community constitutes part of a subaltern counterpublics space where the comedians experiment and harness their craft on the stage. The cyborg queens exist within a cyberqueer space where the binaries of gender and sexuality are eroded to facilitate a discursive community (Wakeford, 2000). The presence of these

116

two forms of communities allows for a space where the comedians fluid identities can manifest and be expressed without condemnation and redress. More importantly, this space facilitates the contestation of postfeminist ideals and gendered practices in both funny and shocking manners.

As such, standup comedians and cyborg queens take up social and cultural issues and deconstruct them. This deconstruction destabilizes normative standards in society and lays them out for audiences to question. Whether audiences laugh or not, these queer comedians insist on rearticulating their political or social stances so they will constantly tweak them, or rephrase them, but they won't delete them from their performance. For example, in one KED's special showcases which welcomed mothers for mother's day, Shaden attempted to tone up her comedic content rather than soften it. Her kind of "shock and awe" strategy bombed with many audible gasps being heard. By the end of her skit, she smiled unapologetically to her older audience "I think I bombed!" as she shrugged and left the stage, the MC who was about to introduce the next act also elaborated "Ugh, we told you they are mothers Shaden. So ladies, don't worry the next act isn't as rough….". Shaden's comedy to the mothers is uncompromising. It is comparable to cyborg mothers' performances which are a clear attempt at rearticulating gendered identities, especially motherhood, to renegotiate with audiences different interpretations of these normative and hierarchal roles.

Finally, I cannot conclude without taking a quick look at the reactions and survival skills of my subjects during the tumultuous economic, political and health crisis in the country. The culmination of the Covid-19 pandemic, economic strife, political stagnation and corruption, and the tragic August 4th explosion left little space for contemplation and barely any for survival. But looking at the Lebanese comedians'

aspirational labor becomes an important ocular for how they survive and sustain themselves in such precarious conditions.

In the case of the online comedians, their forums have remained active as the Lebanese conditions worsened. Most of the online comedians kept their feed filled with chit chats and recycled mimes that are in line with the digital mundane that spread throughout the virtual world. There was a clear reduction in sponsored posts which led some comedians such as Nathalie of Ja3danista to offer a discount on her page. Mantoura on the other hand provided new pricing packages to potential clients. These practices had been more subliminal in better times. But when asked, most online and stand up comedians confirmed that they took up freelance gigs and temporary contracts in order to sustain themselves during these precarious times.

On the other hand, the closure of theaters and other public places during the pandemic moved the stand-up comedians to the online forum. They reinvigorated their public persona and attempted to build their online presence. Their objective when I asked about this shift was to begin a fan base which they can carry with them into the theater once they reopen. Not all their followers will join them to their live shows, but if a small percentage does, they will have filled their showcases guaranteeing encore performances. So clearly the role of the digital sphere is inextricable from the aspirational labor of those creative producers that are established outside it. Nour Hajjar sarcastically expressed this sentiment when he posted during the quarantine period "tag 5 friends! So I can grow in followers ha ha I'm creatively bankrupt!" (Hajjar, 2020). Casting creativity into economic terms is the crux of this thesis because it highlights the tension that is inherent between creativity, the economy, and comedic labor. For Nour, his wealth is linked to his creativity not to the monetization of this creativity. That is

118

why his post was poking fun of online influencers as he held the camera in a sexualized manner and discussed triviality. But for many comedians this is a conundrum because as they become famous, they may face the same structures that shaped online celebrities' work. Nour and other comedians may be faced with this very paradox as they become more recognized. Only recently a group of standup comedians were invited to LBCi to discuss comedy and the revolution on Albert Kostanian's show Vision 2030. Most of the comedians hosted on the show were preparing live performances of their own in Metro el Madina. Their performances were the only new, live (versus online) shows in the whole city.

The standup comedians' new celebrity status signals a shift in the Lebanese cultural scene. Standup comedy's grassroots movement may be moving out of the shadows of Beirut's back alleys into the mainstream. This shift is in part due to audience's thirst for a new kind of comedy that is more authentic to the realities of their lives. For the standup comedians their content is born out of trauma (Kostanian, 2020). But more importantly, it attempts to shed light onto a persistent truth, which Lebanese media, an extended arm of the state, often glosses over. But as the standup comedians become more mainstream it will be interesting to see whether the censorship arm of the state will try to silence or dampen their voices.

For all the comedians investigated their struggle to make it through the precarious conditions of their country signal the versatility and passion that is infused into their comedic work. Choosing the profession of comedy is not an easy feat, but all the subjects featured in this study have made the best of very little. Their labor was built on the aspirations of something bigger than simple capital gains. Their comedy is an inextricable part of their community and the way they see themselves. The ways they

translate their authentic subjectivities, and then perform them online and offline exemplify different angles of how society and its people view themselves. The standup comedian's self-reflexive narrations of a performed authenticity articulate the realities and malaise of society and the fluidity of identities. Online comedians on the other hand, through their branded authenticity and gendered performances, enunciate what people aspire to be and what they aim to emulate. The cyborg queens' hybridity and queerspace provides fans with the agency to dream and to fantasize that there is no such thing as the real. They make clear the notion that authenticity is a fabrication of our own imagination, and that celebrity culture is but a construct of our deepest desires. All three comedic subjectivities provide a role and perform a form of truth. They all demonstrate that to make comedy is to labor; but this labor is born out of passion, skill, and a love for laughter.

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