

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

CONTROVERSY AND TABOO:
SEXED BODIES ON LEBANESE SOCIAL TALK SHOWS

by
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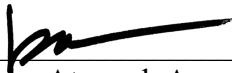
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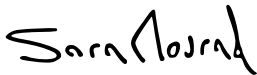
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Controversy and Taboo: Sexed Bodies on Lebanese Social Talk Shows

This thesis analyzes social talk shows aired on Lebanese television channels in the past decade, examining the themes they discuss with a focus on the homosexuality, a taboo topic in Lebanon that has been among the most recurring in these shows. The thesis explores the way these shows' producers have chosen to examine this topic and their possible motivations behind giving more visibility to the queer community. The shows chosen for this study were aired on *LBCI*, *MTV*, and *Al Jadeed*, and presented by a handful of hosts, who, throughout the past decade, worked for all these three channels, changing employers but remaining loyal to the social talk show format. In this thesis, I demonstrate that the producers in charge of these shows most likely chose to focus on controversial topics in an attempt to have better ratings and prolongate the lifespan of their shows.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On the 29th of January 2017, Badih Abou Shakra, a well-known Lebanese actor, won the first prize of the fourth season of the Arabic-language version of the hit reality show *Dancing with the Stars*. Unbeknownst to both producers and fans, the episode would be the show's last. It was not only the last chapter of the show itself, but it also drew close the curtain on reality shows in Lebanon. A year earlier, in January 2016, the last episode of season 11 of *Star Academy*, a popular reality show singing contest, aired, with the promise of kicking off the 12th season in September 2016. But the reality show was then terminated due to financial reasons.

The two shows are among many reality programs that were cancelled in the past decade due to lack of funding. This form of entertainment, although very popular with viewers, was too expensive to produce. The 2000s had seen an influx of reality shows on almost all Lebanese channels (mostly with financial backing from production companies in the Gulf states and contestants from the wider Arab world). In that decade, reality television shows, which are “hybrid texts whose mixture of “Western” and “Arab” elements blurs cultural boundaries,”¹ became “the most commercially successful media genre in the Arab world.”²

The decline in this type of form of specialized television productions came in conjunction with an increase in the number of talk shows on air, which replaced reality shows on Lebanese channels as a cheaper form of entertainment that can fill broadcasting

¹ Marwan M. Kraidy, “Hypermedia and governance in Saudi Arabia”, *First Monday*, special issue number 7 (September 2006): 5, URL: http://firstmonday.org/issues/special11_9/kraidy/index.html.

² Kraidy, “Hypermedia and governance in Saudi Arabia”, 5.

hours. In the talk show format, one or two hosts along with several unpaid guests appear on a set that has a minimal décor, to discuss topics of public interest. Lebanese channels steadily increased the number of such shows, which specialized in certain topics: *MTV* had one focused on corruption, *LBCI* added to its grid one comedy talk show and one for variety entertainment, while *Al Jadeed* and *OTV* both started new humanitarian talk shows that shed the light on families in need and raised donations from viewers to help, with a panel of experts on board discussing poverty.

This new programming focused on social talk shows that had started a decade earlier but had become an important way to attract viewers. This format was cheap and a guaranteed hit, unlike some reality shows that Arab audiences may not warm up to. Examples of reality shows that flopped include: *Splash* a diving show that ran for one season in 2013 on *LBCI*; *Top Chef Arabia* a cooking competition that lasted for two seasons in 2011 and 2012 and aired on *LBCI* and other Arab channels; and *Al Zaim* (The Leader) on *Al Jadeed* for one season in 2013. For Lebanese channels, talk shows were a better investment than reality shows that needed larger scale operations (in both funding and human resources).

The new shows joined a long list of old ones that had started in the 1990s when Lebanese and other Arab channels were emulating famous American shows like *Oprah* and *The View*. The shows were not a financial drain on budgets and “cheap as they may be to produce, studio-based discussion programs were financially attractive to Arab stations in the early days of Arab satellite broadcasting for other reasons besides low production costs. The most obvious one was to attract viewers with the promise of live debates that would break long-entrenched taboos.”³ For the Lebanese channels, who

³ Naomi Sakr, *Arab Television Today* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 156-157.

never had the same budgets as their Arab and Gulf counterparts, these shows were the perfect type of programming, as they could suit any budget.

The new shows needed to tackle both new and old topics, sometimes in a rehashed way with new guests and experts, to avoid repetition of the old shows. This thesis focuses on relatively new social talk shows, which started in the past decade. For the purposes of this thesis, I define a social talk show as one that discusses social, economic, and everyday subjects of interest to the public in Lebanon, with members of this public and/or guests with specific expertise (lawyers, doctors, advocates, etc.), with “spontaneous conversations”⁴, and that is produced during the past two decades. Specifically, this thesis studies the topics the producers and hosts of these shows chose to discuss and why they have chosen them. I focus on the choice of the ‘taboo’ topic of homosexuality, which has been among the most recurring. I explore the way the producers have chosen to examine it, giving more visibility to homosexuals and LGBT to gain more viewers. I then argue that this choice was driven by a competition to get the most ratings and keep their shows and programs on air, one season after another.

A. Legacy of the Past and Present

Social talk shows are not new in the Lebanese television scene. They were most famous in the 1990s, when new channels opened after the end of the civil war, and offered their viewers live shows ranging from entertainment to news.

That decade was a time of political turmoil in Lebanon. Local channels had one or two political talk shows each. People were eager to watch dissidents of the Syrian military debate warlords and the new political class and discuss the future of the country

⁴ Bernard Timberg and Bob Erler, *Television Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show*, Texas Film and Media Studies Series (Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 2002), 3.

fresh out of a two-decades civil war. There were four privately owned channels in that decade alongside the national state television, yet only one, *LBCI*, presented its viewers with a social talk show, *El-Shater Yehki* (Let the Brave Speak out), hosted by Ziad Njeim, Lebanon's most famous talk show host at the time. The show was aired live and tackled one main topic per episode, such as women's rights, sectarianism, corruption, political clientelism, democracy, free elections, etc. The show featured an on-set audience who would ask questions and engage in discussions with the main guests, who ranged from political analysts, sociologists, lawyers, doctors, to religious figures, parliament members, and everyday citizens. This show was the forerunner of other shows that followed suit in later years, the format it followed proving to be successful with viewers.

All the shows that have come since resemble a newer version of what Njeim did on that famous show. During its six-year run, the show, despite tackling controversial topics, only discussed homosexuality once in an episode in 1996, when he hosted three gay men whose faces were covered to obscure their identity and went by pseudonyms. The episode was a big success as "sexual deviants like Lucio [one of the men on the show] drove higher audience ratings and consequently higher advertisement shares. Their appearance on the show made commercial sense."⁵ With this show and the ones that followed, "real people with real stories were television's newest commodity, delivered on a weekly basis to audiences watching from home."⁶ This novelty on Lebanese screens would be followed years later, on all channels with live and pre-recorded shows.

⁵ Sara Mourad, 'The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon' (2016), 69.

⁶ Mourad, 'The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon', 69.

B. Media Landscape in Lebanon

In this thesis, I chose to focus on three channels (*Al Jadeed*, *LBCI*, and *MTV*) and some of the social talk shows that ran in the past two decades during primetime Monday and Wednesday slots. The names of the hosts changed over time, and some have moved jobs within the three aforementioned channels during this specific period, depending on the better offer, but the show formats rarely changed.

Beyond these three channels, the visual media landscape in Lebanon has always been described as diverse by Arab viewers, yet in fact it only has seven “recognized” or licensed television channels: one owned by the state, and six private ones, down from seven after *Future TV* closed due to financial reasons.⁷ The focus on the three channels mentioned earlier and the choice to disregard the other ones relates to the nature and goals of the other channels. While *Al-Manar* television owned by *Hezbollah* does not feature social talk shows due to its nature as a “resistance channel” focusing on politics, *NBN* and *OTV* never entered the competition with the other channels on talk shows or bulletins or entertainment shows and series. These two channels are owned respectively by parliament speaker *Nabih Berri* and the president of the republic *Michel Aoun* and operate on small budgets while serving as mouthpieces of their owners and advertise party agendas. And while *NBN* focuses on bulletins and reruns of old series, *OTV* has several entertainment shows and no social talk shows. These two channels stayed out of the fierce competition fought by the other channels and the small ratings wars every Monday (the 09:30 P.M slot on *Al Jadeed* and *LBCI*; sometimes *MTV* had a live social talk show in

⁷ Al Mustaqbal newspaper, owned by late prime minister Rafiq Hariri and then his son, also prime minister, Saad, closed indefinitely in February 2019 due to financial difficulties, almost three decades after launch. See: <https://www.annahar.com/english/article/924074-after-20-years-future-newspaper-is-closing>. The television channel with the same name closed in September of the same year. See: <https://thearabweekly.com/cash-strapped-future-tv-suspends-operations-after-26-years-air>.

the same slot) and Wednesday (the 09:30 P.M slot has a recorded social talk show on both *Al Jadeed* and *LBCI*) for the past decade and a half.

Al Jadeed, *LBCI*, and *MTV* are infotainment channels that share each a portion of the viewers market in Lebanon. *LBCI* is a direct result of the “wartime state collapse”⁸ and was established in 1985 by the *Lebanese Forces* militia, changing its ownership in the 1990’s. *Al Jadeed* and *MTV* were established after the war ended and while the first was and still is popular with secularists the second caters to a more Christian audience.

C. The War Starts at 9:30 PM

The Lebanese channels all follow a similar programming pattern for the evening. The main news bulletin starts between 07:30 and 08:00 P.M and is followed by a Lebanese drama or comedy series, before kicking off the talk shows at 09:30 P.M, be they political or social. This programming model has been followed for the last decade at least, with short periods of interruption to this pattern when political turmoil and social unrest transformed the channels into an ongoing political live show (in 2013 when parliament extended its own term and protests resulted; in 2015 during the garbage crisis; and in 2019 after the WhatsApp tax issue and the protests that followed). The following section outlines the shows I will be focusing on in this thesis, with a brief profile of the hosts to establish the bigger picture and better understand the dynamics of said shows.

In June 2008, *Al Jadeed* launched *Lil Nasher* (For publication) with Tony Khalife, who had moved a year earlier from *LBCI* to present an entertainment talk show consisting of games and hosting local celebrities. *Lil Nasher* would run for 7 seasons, until Tony

⁸ Marwan M. Kraidy and Joe F. Khalil, *Arab Television Industries*, International Screen Industries (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: London: Palgrave Macmillan; British Film Institute, 2009), 9.

decided to move to *MTV* where he went on to present a similar show. The show was the first live social talk show after *El-Shater Yehki* (Let the Brave Speak out), hosted by Ziad Njeim, ended in 2001. Tony was by then a well-established and famous host in the entertainment world, as he had spent several years presenting contest and entertainment shows, after working as a news anchor in the 1990's.

Two years later, in 2010, *MTV* joined the fray with its own show *Inta Horr* (You are free), aired live as well at the same timeslot each Monday, at 09:30 P.M. The host Joe Maalouf was a young journalist who had gained fame as a radio host of an entertainment radio channel. *LBCI* didn't take part in the social talk show phenomena until 2013, seizing the opportunity when a fallout took place between Maalouf and *MTV* to give him an offer to start a show *Hki Jeless* (Honest Talk). Maalouf stayed with *LBCI*, hosting the social talk show on Monday nights for 6 years, until the summer of 2019 when he and *LBCI* parted ways because of a non-agreement on the new contract.⁹ Maalouf went back to *MTV* where he presented a couple of episodes of a new social talk show that was stopped after the protests started in Beirut.¹⁰ In May 2021, he joined *Al Jadeed* to start a new social talk show *Fawda* (Chaos).

Tony Khalife had a similar path; he left *Al Jadeed* in 2015 to *MTV*, where he hosted the Monday night social talk show for one season presenting a self-entitled show (*Tony Khalife*). He returned to *Al Jadeed* in 2016 and remained there until the end of 2019. When he left *Al Jadeed* in 2015, the station found a good replacement in Rima Karaki, who took over his show *Lil Nasher* for the next three years. But in 2016, when

⁹ This was related by relatively unknown websites, mostly ones that specialize in entertainment news, such as this one: <https://alwake3press.net/?p=22074>.

¹⁰ Please check *Amnesty* and their report entitled "Lebanon Protests Explained", updated on the 20th of September 2020: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/lebanon-protests-explained/>.

he returned to *Al Jadeed*, *Lil Nasher* with Rima Karaki was still on, so the channel gave him the Thursday night slot, at 09:30 P.M.. At this point, he went into fierce competition with the most watched show in Lebanon, *Kalam El Nass*, a political talk show that ran from 1995 till 2018 and was hosted by Marcel Ghanem. So, when *Al Jadeed* had two social talk shows, their aim was to go into direct competition with each other and with other social talk shows and with the most watched political talk show in the country, knowing that at times they were able to overcome Ghanem in the ratings when controversy was the main aim of the show.¹¹

The last newcomer to the social talk show hosting scene was Neshan Der Haroutiounian, who decided in 2018 to enter this domain after twenty years working in entertainment as a host of talk shows interviewing actors and singers in the Arab world. His show *Ana Heik* (This is who I am) was pre-recorded and joined the fall programming at *Al Jadeed* on the Wednesday night slot, at 09:30 P.M, in a direct competition with a long running show aired on *LBCI*, pre-recorded also, *Ahmar Bil Khat EL Arid* (The thick red line). I chose to exclude *Ahmar Bil Khat EL Arid* from this thesis for two reasons: the show is aimed at Arab audiences and not mainly Lebanese ones, featuring topics that are of interest to the broader Arab audience and not specific to Lebanon, in addition to the fact that sexuality related topics are not that frequent. Moreover, the show has been studied in the excellent work on the mediating of sex in post-war Lebanon by Sara Mourad, that is one of the references used for my thesis.¹²

¹¹ Zeina Berjawi, producer of social talk shows at *Al Jadeed* since 2008. She worked with both Khalife and Karaki. Personal interview, December 2021.

¹² Sara Mourad, 'The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon' (2016).

D. Methodology and Literature Review

The research for this thesis focusing on the media scene in the last decade studies episodes of selected talk shows dedicated fully or partially to topics pertaining to the subject of homosexuality and LGBT. This research analyses the choice of topics in the shows, and how they were tackled and presented to audiences, by studying several episodes. Interviews conducted with presenters and producers of said shows, and channel executives and experts in audience measurement metrics helped consolidate the findings and add an important input to the analysis of the content of the episodes of these social talk shows.

For this thesis, I interviewed 6 people working in the television industry, and watched 86 episodes of the social talk shows. The real difficulty was accessing these episodes as channels in Lebanon do not archive all their shows. Some have certain seasons online; others can give only physical access at their headquarters to watch old episodes, as they never thought of giving their viewers a possibility to view their archive online. Even paid online subscription does not guarantee having access to full seasons of shows, as some episodes might be missing, or not uploaded in chronological order. I had to resort to a tedious online search on YouTube for some episodes, requesting access to some episodes from the producers of the shows, who gave me access to many episodes that were not published online or partially published.

Another difficult part in the preparation process of this thesis were the references needed for it. The body of literature on homosexuality or any LGBTQ-related topics on Lebanese and Arab television is extremely scarce and almost nonexistent. In the last decade we have seen some research on the topic, notably the thesis by Heather Radwan Jaber on homosexuality in Lebanese series in which she analyzed the few characters some

series chose to introduce to the audience with their “different” sexual orientations and how homosexuality was represented through these series.¹³ Other studies on the Lebanese queer community discussed sexual tourism,¹⁴ and the daily lives and struggles of the Beirut queer community.¹⁵

But the most thorough research on the representation of sexuality in Lebanese media is in “The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon” by Sara Mourad, who studied the discourses on ‘ideal’ masculinity and femininity through media in post-war Lebanon. A full chapter is dedicated to two famous social talk shows of the 1990s and 2000s: *El-Shater Yehki* and *Ahmar Bil Khat El Arid*. Both shows discussed homosexuality, albeit not regularly as it is the case now with the new format of social talk shows. While this work is extremely valuable for the study of the media landscape and the mediation of sex issues in Lebanon, it does not cover the past decade during which social talk shows proliferated. The television scene in Lebanon witnessed a tremendous change in the past ten to fifteen years, with a major change in programming, more than once, to accommodate financial constraints (introduction of reality shows when money was flowing, then transition to talk shows to circumvent the decreased budgets, to the joint Arab ventures of drama series, then back to local series productions).

¹³ Heather Radwan Jaber, “Is There A Gay International? An Analysis of Homosexuality on Lebanese Musalsalat,” (Master’s thesis, AUB, 2016).

¹⁴ Jared McCormick, “Hairy chest will travel: Tourism, identity, and sexuality in the Levant”, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 7(3), 71-97.

¹⁵ Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut*, 1. paperback ed (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015). Merabet focuses mainly on marginalized queer and gay men living in Beirut or in proximity, without conversing with previous work on homosexuality and its history in the region. And *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories*. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Middle East, ed. Beirut: Meem, 2009. The book contains personal anonymous stories from gays, lesbians and transsexuals and transgenders from many places in Lebanon.

In contrast to the scant amount of research on sexuality in Lebanese television, the topic of “gay TV” in the United States has garnered a great deal of attention. In *Gay TV and Straight America* (2006), Ron Becker focused on the 1990s to study and analyze “straight panic” and “gay chic,” and how the executives of televisions viewed gay audience as a money generator through advertisements. On the other hand, *The New Gay for Pay: The Sexual Politics of American Television Production* (2017) by Julia Himberg picks up where Becker ends and discusses the gay television scene in the past two decades with new shows featuring more gay characters and the new-found visibility of lesbian characters, specifically. Himberg talked about the special channels dedicated just for LGBT programming but were motivated by financial and commercial gains instead of activism, which likely resonated in the mindset of the producers of the Lebanese social talk shows who sought above all ratings for their shows and thus financial gains as we will see later in this thesis.

However, looking at the bigger media picture and even though the amount of scholarship regarding sexuality/ homosexuality on Lebanese televisions is limited, the literature on media in the Arab world is varied and expansive but does not go beyond news, as entertainment television has not received much interest from researchers. As Walter Armbrust puts it, the “existing literature...tends to clump (with some important exceptions) at either end of a historical spectrum: analyses of the adoption of the printing press in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and scholarship on ‘new’ (primarily digital) media as they have unfolded over the past two decades.”¹⁶ Armbrust alerts us to the disproportionate attention that some forms of media have received in the

¹⁶ Walter Armbrust, “A History of New Media in the Arab Middle East,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 16, no. 2–3 (July 2012): 155–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2012.647666>, 155.

scholarship on the Arab world. In fact, the amount of scholarship on *Al Jazeera* and news media in the recent two decades is huge,¹⁷ in addition to countless articles (in academia and the press) and papers written after 2011 trying to decipher the role the Qatari channel had in the Arab uprisings.¹⁸ Hence, a gap exists in literature on Arab and Lebanese televisions, when it comes to what lies beyond the news, which my thesis tries to fill with its focus on social talk shows in Lebanon.

Despite the dearth of scholarship on commercial televisions in the Arab world, Marwan Kraidy has contributed to the body of literature on the subject. In *Arab Television Industries* (2009) he and Joe Khalil examined the ownership and financing of the channels, in addition to how shows are produced, how the audience research is done, and the impact of the programming on these audiences. In *Global media studies*, he and Toby Miller explained how television shows work in the Arab world within the boundaries of censorship while creating revenues and attracting viewers despite navigating the many taboos imposed by society and state: religion, sex, politics, etc. In *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* he recalled the golden age of reality television

¹⁷ Includes and not specific to: Marc Lynch's *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today* (2006), Hugh Miles with *Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab New Channel That Is Challenging the West* (2005), Mohammad Nawawy's *Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network That Is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism* (2003), Khalil Rinnawi with *Instant Nationalism: McArabism, Al-Jazeera and Transnational Media in the Arab World* (2006), John Rushing and Sean Elder's *Mission Al-Jazeera: Build a Bridge, Seek the Truth, Change the World* (2007), Phillip Seib with *The Al-Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics* (2008), and Mohamad Zayani's two books *The Al-Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media* (2005), and *The Culture of Al-Jazeera: Inside an Arab Media Giant* (2007).

¹⁸ For example: Aldreabi, Haitham A. "Narrative Account of the Arab Spring: Translations of Aljazeera and RT of the Egyptian and Syrian Uprisings as Case Study." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 7, no. 10 (October 1, 2017): 819. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0710.01>; Bosio, Diana. "How Al Jazeera Reported the Arab Spring: A Preliminary Comparative Analysis." *Media Asia* 40, no. 4 (January 2013): 333–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2013.11689986>; Ismael, Nihad. "Al Jazeera's Role in Toppling the Dictators One by One," n.d. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/al-jazeeras-role-in-toppl_b_948247; Hroub, Khalid. "Qatar and the Arab Spring - Conflict & Intl. Politics," n.d. <https://lb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/qatar-and-arab-spring-conflict-intl-politics>.

on Arab channels and how the most famous and watched shows were perceived and received in various Arab countries and Lebanon.¹⁹

Outside the news making business, Egypt is the country that garnered most attention in academia with its long history of cinema and famous series that are watched all over the Arab world²⁰, including one work about gay characters in Arab cinema.²¹

This thesis will try to add to the existing literature the Lebanese focus that only exists in a handful of texts when it comes to talk shows. As seen above, the three different bodies of literature paid little attention to how homosexuality is portrayed and tackled on Arab televisions in general, and Lebanese ones in particular, and the frequency with which the topic has been tackled on screens in the past decade necessitates further studying, to understand why this topic was of such importance to the producers of social talk shows, whereas it was not before.

In contrast to movies and series, where a character may insinuate sexual orientation and not show it directly so not to offend viewers, people participating in talk shows may openly declare their sexual orientations. They are present on these shows as such could serve the purpose of adding controversy and fueling debates on taboo subjects.

¹⁹ In addition to research papers on numerous Arab television related subjects he published in the last two decades. We can also add to the existing literature two books by Naomi Sakr: *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East* (2001) and *Arab Television Today* (2007). The former traces the birth of transnational channels in the Arab world and how states were trying to catch up with the private sector, while the latter examines the role of Arab governments in establishing entertainment channels. Also, *Arab Media: Globalization and Emerging Media Industries* (2011) edited by Noha Mellor who also published in 2005 *The Making of Arab News* that studies press and journalism.

²⁰ From Lila Abu-Lughod's *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (2004) exploring the world of series, to Charles Hirschkind's *The Ethical Soundscape* (2006) on the audio cassette religious sermons, to Viola Shafik's books about cinema: *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (2007) and *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class and Nation* (2007), and the work by Walter Armbrust *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (1996) that examines different media to understand how the Egyptian national identity is formed and how it interacts with modernity.

²¹ In *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East* (2006) Brian Whitaker, who was *The Guardian's* Middle east editor, adds an analysis of Arab cinema and its gay characters.

When we study the content of these social talk shows we may understand how the society they are shown in operates, in line with television being “one of society’s prime storytellers, a resource and tool for learning, deliberation, debate, and persuasion, and a site wherein power and ideology operate.”²²

My thesis will explore the current media scene and how it is mediating homosexuality to understand how people behind the scenes tackle such sensitive topics, creating sensational content to have a share of the most important market for them: audience. The first chapter analyzes the different topics (pertaining to homosexuality) chosen and at what frequency they were used, during the selected period. Some topics were addressed more than once in one specific season of a show. The second chapter studies the politics behind the guest selection on the shows, while the third focuses on the ratings that each show is after. The focus on topics, guest choice and ratings race explains the focus on homosexuality.

²² Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz, *Television Studies*, Short Introductions (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 22.

CHAPTER II

LEBANESE TALK SHOWS AND THE SEARCH FOR HOMOSEXUALITY: THE ROAD TO BEIRUT PASSES THROUGH BIRMINGHAM

A. Introduction

The discussion of sexualities on Lebanese talk shows is not new. This trend started with the transition from terrestrial (read Lebanese focused) into satellite (reaching Arab audiences) broadcasting that “involved a careful marketing strategy centered in an ostensibly “liberated” sexuality.”²³ For the Lebanese channels that lacked the resources of their Arab counterparts “debates on hot topics offered a supplementary means to build ratings.”²⁴ This pattern has been especially clear in the last decade with the social talk shows that are aired especially on three of the Lebanese channels: *LBCI*, *MTV*, and *Al Jadeed*.

The weekly shows these channels have are mostly aired live and engage with audiences on social media platforms as the show airs, via hashtags that are constantly shown at the bottom of the screen, asking the viewers to give their opinions about the topics discussed. In contrast to older versions of the typical Lebanese talk shows, current shows tackle topics pertaining to sexuality regularly, in addition to other topics that society considers taboo or controversial. It is common, for example, for one of these shows to feature women speaking up against “marital” rape and sexual harassment, men proudly stating that they practice oriental belly dancing, and activists talking about sexual

²³ Marwan M. Kraidy and Joe F. Khalil, *Arab Television Industries*, International Screen Industries (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: London: Palgrave Macmillan; British Film Institute, 2009), 42.

²⁴ Naomi Sakr, *Arab Television Today* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 158.

freedoms. With the advent of this new kind of shows, prime-time slots were no longer reserved for politicians but rather for transgender men and for women talking about undergoing hymenoplasty and plastic surgery to their labia, or two men planning to marry, or for a woman trying to find a loophole in the law to change their gender on identity papers. But why do these shows resort to frequently discussing topics pertaining to sexuality / homosexuality? And how are these shows tackling what society considers taboo and highly controversial?

In this chapter, I argue that the people behind social talk shows in Lebanon have resorted to topics society deems controversial to get more viewers and win the ratings war that seems to be the driving force in television around the world, and in Lebanon. I will be analyzing a number of episodes from the shows, to see how recurring these topics are, and how they are tackled, in addition to interviews with the producers of these shows to understand the logic they follow in planning for each episode and deciding on its content.

B. Strip Dancing and Gay Marriage

As we will see in this section and the following one, regardless of how each of the shows is structured and built, controversial topics seem to be a recurring theme. Homosexuality is part of a wider panoply of themes that shock and that some might consider risky, but “taking risks includes creating innovative and challenging content with the potential to attract large audiences”.²⁵ And almost everyone launched their shows with controversial topics in the first episodes, as if to establish a loyal viewership with bold themes from day one.

²⁵ Naomi Sakr, *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization, and the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 134.

As I mentioned above, the shows studied in this thesis have different approaches picking the topic of each episode and allocating time to it, even if they tackle the same themes. *Ana Heik* on *Al Jadeed* every Wednesday night since 2018 and presented by Neshan Der Haroutiounian dedicates each episode to just one topic. Some episodes had one guest who from start to finish, with occasional secondary guests. But most episodes have four or five guests throughout the show who all discuss the one topic chosen for this specific episode from different angles. Almost all episodes are pre-recorded a day before airtime.

The other shows have different segments and rely on trending topics on social media and in news bulletins. Any topic circulating on social media or being debated socially would find its way to the shows, which are aired live at the same timeslot every Monday at 9:30 p.m.

When it comes to how each topic is chosen, everyone is looking for interesting ideas, each in his own way. In an interview conducted on the set of his show in June 2019, Neshan repeatedly referred to being a “respected” talk show host, one who met with the rich and famous and considers that people trust him “to present a well curated content”.²⁶ He has full prior control over his show. The other shows are presented and produced by journalists who come from different backgrounds: one rose to fame through tabloid journalism (Joe Maalouf), the other spent years as a morning show presenter with a very limited fan base (Rima Karaky), while the third found fame when he left the newsroom and switched to talk shows (Tony Khalife). As their producers told me, sometimes the topics are changed hours before the show is set to air if they find a more “interesting

²⁶ Personal interview with Neshan Der Haroutiounian, June 2019.

story.”²⁷ But while Neshan advertises respectability, as if to differentiate himself from other social talk show hosts, he and the others have nonetheless tackled what society deems as taboo themes repeatedly.

Neshan decided to devote the first episode of his show to male strip dancing.²⁸ The information provided with the video of the episode on *Al Jadeed*'s website considers it to be a “phenomenon,” promising a “first of its kind interview with a stripper who will talk about his experience.”²⁹ For the same reason, Rima Karaky, in her first episode hosting *Lil Nasher* in 2014, featured a Syrian gay couple living in Lebanon who wanted to get married. And as I will elaborate in the coming sections, both shows tackled shocking subjects to attract viewers from the very first episode, and this affirms Marwan Kraidy's claim that “entertainment shows that break taboos and involve viewer participation are popular and controversial: popularity makes them potentially controversial, and controversy makes them more popular.”³⁰

Hence, regardless of the background of the hosts of social talk shows, and the format of the show itself, as we will elaborate more in the next sections, there seems to be a common inclination towards contested topics and themes that Lebanese society considers taboo. Producers and hosts of social talk shows think this will keep audience loyal to them, upholding the lifespan of their shows.

²⁷ Personal interview with Rouwa Saba, producer with Joe Maalouf, June 2019; and Zeina Berjawi, producer at *Al Jadeed*, October 2018.

²⁸ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUcQNr_RpXM

²⁹ The blurb on the website talks about “a hobby that turned into a profession with Elie Zir (..) confessions and discussions between Elie and the participants”. See: <https://www.aljadeedAlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ana-heik-1>

³⁰ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life*, Communication, Society and Politics (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29.

C. Controversy Recycled and Upcycled

When they are not featuring topics related to sexuality, Lebanese social talk shows turn mundane topics into controversies, when they run out of polemics to discuss. But sexual topics seem to be the most prevalent. In this section, I will look into several episodes of the shows to see how the same controversial topics are used several times in each season, in the hopes of attracting viewers looking for contentious content.

The overreliance on contested topics can be observed by a quick research into each show, with one host, Joe Maalouf making it a staple of all the shows he hosted, as we will see in the next section. For example, after Rima Karaky took over the show *Lil Nasher* on *Al Jadeed* sexuality became a recurring topic. For instance, three episodes in the first six months of 2015 were dedicated to homosexuality and transsexuality. In 2016, nine episodes in the span of six months had a topic related to sexuality. In 2017, nineteen episodes in nine months dealt with topics related to sexuality, while in 2018 five episodes in four months tackled sexuality. The topics ranged from sexual harassment by religious figures against female inmates in prisons, to infidelity, prostitution, and hymenoplasty.³¹ Same can be noticed in the other shows, on *Al Jadeed*, or elsewhere. During the spring of 2017, when Tony Khalife was presenting the show *Al Ayn bil Ayn* (Eye for an eye) on *Al Jadeed*, he had an episode about homosexuality, followed by one on sexual impotence

³¹ See: prisons episodes: <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lal-nasher-33>; and <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lal-nasher-15-02-2016>; Infidelity: <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lal-nasher-38>; and <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lal-nasher-35>; Prostitution: <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lalnasher-29-02-2016>; <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lal-nasher-07-03-2016>; <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lal-nasher-16-05-2016>; <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/nasher-23-05-2016>; <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lalnasher-06-03-2017>; <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lalnasher-01-05-2017>; <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lalnasher-08-05-2017>; <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lalnasher-03-07-2017>; <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lalnasher-24-07-2017>; <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lal-nasher-29-2018>. Hymenoplasty: <https://www.AJJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/nasher-08-02-2016>.

and sexual obsession, then sexual prowess two weeks later, followed by an episode on polygamy.³² And this trend is clear and present in all the seasons of the many shows he presented. In the subsequent years, Khalife revisited the same topics: homosexuality, transgenderism, with the other sexuality related topics of impotence, online sex, sexual dysfunction, sex toys and sexual enhancements, etc. Joe Maalouf was Tony's competition. He presented a similar show on two competing channels, *LBCI* and *MTV*. The same format, same timeslot, and sometimes same guests who would appear one Monday here and the next Monday there. The same pattern in tackling taboo or controversial topics can be observed with the three social talk shows he presented in the past decade: *Enta Hor* (*MTV*; 2010-2013), *Hki Jeless* (*LBCI*; 2013-2016) and *Hawa El Horiye* (*LBCI*; 2016 - 2019). In some seasons, topics related to sexuality would be present in every episode over the span of a few weeks.³³ In some seasons, as we will see in the next section, he would revisit the same sensational topic for a full month under the pretext of more reactions from viewers at home.³⁴ So social talk shows in Lebanon relied on the same topics that can be used over and over to entice viewers and keep them coming back to a certain show.

These shows do not deny wanting to bring audiences through sensational topics. The blurbs that describe each show are telling. For Rima Karaky's show on *Al Jadeed*'s

³² See: homosexuality episode: https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ain_19; impotence: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/al3ayein-bel3ayen-28>; Sexual prowess: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/al3ayein-bel3ayen-30>; polygamy: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/al3ayein-bel3ayen-31>. And when he was not debating sexual topics, he was discussing excommunication, atheism, changing religion, civil marriage, and sorcery, all in one season of the show.

³³ See: Homosexuality in Islam, May 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mzqcfxo9fhQ>; Online sex videos and embezzlement, June 2014 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uK_6tCjjoa8; Sexual videos, June 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IkS0swq-JE>

³⁴ In the 2014-2015 season of *Hki Jeless* he had a segment for the case of harassment in an orphanage for 4 consecutive weeks.

website we can read that it "hosts unique and rare characters, discussing bold and controversial topics".³⁵ The description for the Tony Khalife's show *Al 'Ayn bil 'Ayn* is no exception. It states that Khalife presents the show "with his bold style... The confrontation between the two guests will not be conventional, and it will be based on suspense and provocation."³⁶ On the other hand, Neshan's show *Ana Heik* is advertised as one where the host "confronts people who choose paths and beliefs against the tide, with obscene acts that most of their societies do not accept, breaking taboos (..) to fulfil their forbidden desires".³⁷ The host of the show, Neshan, told me sexuality was the one of the first topics he tried to break as a taboo on his talk shows.³⁸ While *Al Jadeed* clearly advertised the controversy in their shows, *LBCI* relied on the host and his reputation. *Hki Jeless* (Straight talk) and *Hawa El Horiyeh* (Wind of freedom) were advertised as shows that promote freedom of speech and expression,³⁹ while the host, Joe Maalouf, was described as "bold in tackling topics of public interest and concerns."⁴⁰ The producers of these shows do not deny resorting to sensationalism. Rabih Farran who worked on the show *Ana Heik* until the end of 2019 said they chose the topics for each episode based on "suspense and marketing."⁴¹ He added that this is "the era of the ratings"⁴² and that is why most shows chose what he calls extreme topics. He claimed this was the reason that

³⁵ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/program/nasr#about>

³⁶ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/program/ain#about>

³⁷ See: https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/program/nishan_1#about

³⁸ Personal interview with Neshan Der Haroutiounian, June 2019.

³⁹ See: <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/episodes/956/هوا-الحرية/ar>; and <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/7kijelis>

⁴⁰ See: <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/7kijelis>

⁴¹ Personal interview with Rabih Farran, June 2019.

⁴² Personal interview with Rabih Farran, June 2019.

the first episode of the show was about a Lebanese male stripper, and “that is why it reached record viewings both when it aired and then later online.”⁴³ He added that after the show started airing each Wednesday night, they would be trending on twitter within 15 minutes and that “this was the case in all the episodes except two that discussed topics that are not controversial”.⁴⁴ Farran insists the station that hosts the show (*Al Jadeed*) never interfered in the content as it “wants the ratings, so they do not care what we talk about as long as it’s within the boundaries of what is permitted to be shown on television which is nudity and violence”.⁴⁵ Farran says that the theme of the episode establishes its success and adds that the producers knew beforehand that the gay marriage episode was destined for the publicity it got, “while the hijab episode would not be as much of a hit”.⁴⁶ He says that being unconventional is the best way to keep the social talk show running and successful, as “the taboo always sells and brings audiences”.⁴⁷ His colleague Zeina Berjawi who worked on both *Lil Nasher* and *Al ‘Ayn bil ‘Ayn* said that they chose catchy topics and try to “shock”⁴⁸ the audience. Joe Maalouf’s producer Rouwa Saba admits during an interview with her conducted in June 2019 that they “choose the controversial issues, or what we deem will be interesting to the viewers”.⁴⁹ She adds that the ratings are an important factor and that is why they focus on controversy, and especially topics “we know that people are interested in, such as rape or homosexuality, because viewers

⁴³ Personal interview with Rabih Farran, June 2019.

⁴⁴ Personal interview with Rabih Farran, June 2019.

⁴⁵ Personal interview with Rabih Farran, June 2019.

⁴⁶ Personal interview with Rabih Farran, June 2019.

⁴⁷ Personal interview with Rabih Farran, June 2019.

⁴⁸ Personal Interview with Zeina Berjawi, October 2018.

⁴⁹ Personal Interview with Rouwa Saba, June 2019.

like to know about these issues”.⁵⁰ Saba insists these topics were taboos and still are in Lebanese society but “people have always been interested in these topics, because it is a taboo and people are nosy and curious and want to know what the neighbors are doing”.⁵¹ Saba seems to be echoing what Bourdieu calls “slices of life”, as talk shows offer their viewers “what are essentially raw products (..) these lived experiences come as unbuttoned exhibitions of often extreme behavior aimed at satisfying a kind of voyeurism and exhibitionism.”⁵² The viewers are able to “play out our transgressive desires through identification with this “low” culture of talk show guests without having to leave our orderly complacent world.”⁵³

D. Sensationalism from Rome to Birmingham through Beirut

The hosts and producers of social talk shows in Lebanon did not limit themselves to what was happening in the country, and when disputed events took place anywhere on the planet, they were keen to have a say in them, and discuss them, with a Lebanese twist.

When the movie “Francesco” was released in October 2020 during the Rome film festival, the comments that the film quotes by the pope about gay marriage caused a stir worldwide for a few days and then died down.⁵⁴ The Lebanese social talk shows were determined to have a say in the matter. A week later Tony Khalife dedicated 30 minutes

⁵⁰ Personal Interview with Rouwa Saba, June 2019.

⁵¹ Personal Interview with Rouwa Saba, June 2019.

⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 48.

⁵³ Jane Shattuc, ““Go Ricki”: politics, perversion, and pleasure in the 1990’s” in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Ed Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 223.

⁵⁴ See: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/pope-francis-supports-same-sex-civil-unions-but-the-church-must-do-more>; and <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2020/10/21/what-pope-franciss-comments-about-gay-families-could-mean-lgbtq-attitudes-worldwide/>

of his show to the issue, hosting a sheikh and a priest from Lebanon and a Muslim Egyptian scholar. The segment sought to analyze what the pope intended to say, discuss gay marriage and how it should be forbidden. The priest came with the Catechism of the Catholic Church and kept reading paragraphs from it while the sheikh spent his time quoting numbers from mysterious research studies. The show was searching for the sensational a week after the topic was no longer a news item, coinciding with what Bourdieu calls “the search for the sensational and the spectacular.”⁵⁵ Sex, even a week late will sell, as sensational news “has always been the favorite food of the tabloids. Blood, sex, melodrama and crime have always been big sellers.”⁵⁶

And just like with Tony, an event that happened elsewhere on the planet would inspire Joe Maalouf to dedicate an episode to it, as when the *BBC* decided in 2014 to postpone a debate taking place in the city of Birmingham on homosexuality in Islam and aired in the program *Free Speech*,⁵⁷ Joe hosted a gay Imam from Algeria and discussed the matter that happened on another continent and did not stir any social debate in Lebanon at the time.⁵⁸

When he was working in *MTV*, Joe used his show as a platform to demand the closure of several cinemas in Lebanon that were “showing pornographic movies” and where “vice and sexual misconduct” was taking place. This happened in May 2012, then in June of the same year.⁵⁹ The language used during the episode was derogative: *Liwat*

⁵⁵ Bourdieu, *On Television*, 19.

⁵⁶ Bourdieu, *On Television*, 17.

⁵⁷ See: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/tv-radio/bbc-criticised-preventing-debate-homosexuality-islam-take-place-birmingham-mosque-9190824.html>

⁵⁸ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mzqcfxo9fhQ>

⁵⁹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgodayMyILM> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Z5Z2Zblh7w>

and *Shuzuz*, for example, and Malouf repeatedly demanded that security forces raid these cinemas. In the blurred videos he showed in these episodes, some men were watching what Maalouf said were pornographic movies and performing “sexual perverse acts.”⁶⁰ The raid on one of cinemas a few weeks later and subsequent arrest of 36 persons (mostly Palestinians and Syrian refugees) was the most important event of the summer, especially after the security forces performed anal tests on the arrestees to check if “they were gay.”

⁶¹ The mediatic reaction made Maalouf tone down his language in the following season, until he was fired⁶² for an episode in which ironically, he defended gay rights after the municipal police of Burj Hamoud, a town west of Beirut raided a gay friendly nightclub and arrested 18 persons with various accusations raging from indecency, to suspicion of being gay. The “*Ghost nightclub affair*” as it was known received intense media coverage and Maalouf in an episode on his show criticized (softly) the fact that pictures of the detainees in their underwear were circulated by the municipality, so the channel fired him.

After moving to *LBCI* at the end of 2013 he continued with the same trend: controversial and taboo subjects reused and revisited every month to compete with Tony for viewers. Every year for The International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, he used to either dedicate a segment of his show or an entire episode to discuss gay rights in Lebanon.⁶³

⁶⁰ See notes 47 and 48.

⁶¹ This led to a decision by the minister of justice to ban such tests that appear to have been used in some police stations in Lebanon when an arrest is made and the police suspects that the arrested is gay. The Lebanese order of physicians later issued a decree to ban such acts by its members as well.

⁶² See: <https://www.almodon.com/amp/media/2013/5/10/انت-حر-لم-يعد-حر-ا>

⁶³ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDmdpb-7JfK>

Rima Karky who hosted a talk show on *Al Jadeed* for several years was no exception to this trend as we have seen in the previous section: sensational topics, and a focus on sexuality was the main feature of her four years at the helm of the show *Lil Nasher*. One month after she started hosting the show, the first homosexuality-themed episode aired.⁶⁴ A half-Syrian, half-Lebanese man wanted to marry his Syrian boyfriend, who goes by the name of Jennifer. The YouTube video published by the channel on its official page was entitled: “Lebanese society: be aware of the first public gay marriage,” and by the end of August 2021 has been viewed more than six million times.⁶⁵ So the bet on sensational topics was paying off in record viewership for the novel social talk show host.

When Ricky Martin visited Lebanon several months later, Rima dedicated an episode to homosexuality and she hosted gay men whom she claimed were revolting against society because Martin, who is openly gay, was in town. Martin’s presence, who apparently was in town for personal or charity work (as a UNICEF ambassador) and did not make any public appearances, was used as an excuse to produce an episode about homosexuality.⁶⁶ This came just three weeks after an episode that featured an American Muslim imam who performed marriage ceremonies for gay couples in his congregation.⁶⁷ So, she like the other hosts went after sensational news happening thousands of miles away from Lebanon, in an attempt to win the race for ratings.

⁶⁴ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdDF3aQIgbI>

⁶⁵ SEE: <HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=QDDF3AQIGBI>

⁶⁶ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lel-nasher-34>

⁶⁷ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqNjtwpVIBk>

Transgenderism as a topic came a few months later, in November and December 2015 and then again in April and July 2017 and finally in April 2018 in the last episode she hosted.⁶⁸ In November 2015 an entire segment was dedicated to Suzy, who used to be Kassem and was a sex worker known in Beirut and on the screens, as a regular guest on social talk shows. The video of the segment that was later published by *Al Jadeed* on its YouTube channel garnered more than three and half million views.⁶⁹ This is interpreted by the producers as a sign of success, with a high rate of online viewership, and a proof that contentious topics attract viewers.

Neshan's first season on air was similar as I mentioned in the previous section. Besides the male strippers⁷⁰ episode, there was another one on male dancers⁷¹, and an entire episode dedicated to lesbianism⁷² and one on homosexuality⁷³ then one episode that dealt with transsexuality.⁷⁴ The three last episodes were aired within nine weeks of each other, and the rest of the season had an episode on infidelity, cohabitation, and polygamy and polyamorous couples⁷⁵. The other season's episodes tackled serious issues

⁶⁸ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lel-nasher-1>, <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lel-nasher-6>, <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lelnasher-24-04-2017>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DagrFxYrgc> or <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lelnasher-17-07-2017>, and https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/lel-nasher_25

⁶⁹ Entitled "Suzy's first appearance on Lil Nasher" the video was viewed 3,676,978 time (August 2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDJek3tnSkE>

⁷⁰ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ana-heik-1>

⁷¹ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ana-heik-9>

⁷² See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ana-heik-20>

⁷³ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ana-heik-3>

⁷⁴ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ana-heik-16>

⁷⁵ See infidelity episode: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ana-heik-26>; cohabitation: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ana-heik-17>; polygamy: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ana-heik-25>

like bullying in schools, parenting children with special needs, while also doing the usual click baits like the miracles of Saint Charbel and burlesque dancing.⁷⁶

The talk shows are following “a diet of sensationalism, titillation and verbal jousting”⁷⁷, and “where taboos are broken, orthodoxies questioned”.⁷⁸ The channels adopting a model of commercialization and the producers and hosts believing that sex and other taboo subjects bring the advertisers, the focus on contentious topics appears to be a basic rule in the workflow of social talk shows in Lebanon.

E. Ceilings

During the one-on-one interviews I conducted with the people behind these talk shows, I was interested in knowing if the channels ever interfere in their content (topics, guests, interviews, etc.). Are there channels censoring some topics or favoring others? All insisted that this never openly happens, and that the television channels do not interfere in the content of the shows, which I was unable to corroborate from different sources. Rabih Farran, who worked on the show *Ana Heik*, said that this was stated in the contract between the production company and *Al Jadeed*, adding that “they (*Al Jadeed*) want the ratings, so they do not care as long as it’s within the boundaries of what is permitted to be shown on television and does not hurts people.”⁷⁹ This is what his colleague Rouwa Saba, who worked on two of the Joe Maalouf shows, called “ceiling that we never surpass

⁷⁶ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/ana-heik-26-02-2020>

⁷⁷ Marwan Kraidy, “Globalization *avant la lettre*? Cultural hybridity and media power in Lebanon”, in *Global media studies: Ethnographic perspectives*, eds. P. D. Murphy & M. M. Kraidy, London: Routledge, 292.

⁷⁸ Kraidy, “Globalization *avant la lettre*? Cultural hybridity and media power in Lebanon”, 292.

⁷⁹ Personal interview with Rabih Farran, June 2019.

ourselves.”⁸⁰ She says that *LBCI* also never intervened in the topics they chose, and they were never asked not to discuss a certain issue. She adds that even though they consulted with the executives of the channel on some topics, in all the ones related to sexuality the call was theirs only. Dimitri Khodr, the general manager of *Al Jadeed*, claims that in all the social talk shows his channel airs, the management is never informed about the topics beforehand. He adds in an interview that if the shows’ producers decide to consult with them, they are fine with it, but otherwise they don’t interfere in the topic or how a host works. However, Khodr mentioned that once *Lil Nasher* had a segment about a religious topic, the channel owners received a phone call from the Beirut Mufti’s office complaining. I inquired if they asked the producers to avoid such topics in the future, he said they did not and changed the subject. Zeina Berjawi, producer at *Al Jadeed* said that they would sometimes receive phone calls from the audience protesting to some topics, but that does not affect whether the show will tackle some themes again or not. In Lebanon, a country ruled by a fragile equilibrium, taboo topics can range from religion to politics to sexuality.

Both producers and channels deny any censorship on the content of their shows, except their own “judgement”, and all almost insist the topics they chose are carefully curated to do no harm and are of public interest. But from Joe Maalouf’s problems at *MTV* as we have seen in the previous section, and what Khodr insinuated, and in a country where politic intertwines with all parts of life, censorship exists, when religious or political powers are “annoyed” by how a certain topic is discussed.

⁸⁰ The word is used in Arabic figuratively to mean censorship or limit.

F. Conclusion

Social talk shows “turn personal stories into a spectacle for public consumption. They incite and entice people to share intimate information about their lives.”⁸¹ Through this the people in charge of these shows retain their viewers “by breaking cultural rules, by managed shocks, by shifting our conceptions of what is acceptable, by transforming our ideas about what is possible, by undermining the bases of cultural judgment, by redefining deviance and appropriate reactions to it, by eroding social barriers, inhibitions, and cultural distinctions.”⁸² In the Lebanese context where we have an “anarchic television industry” to use Marwan Kraïdy’s words, the television screen is still functioning as “both a technology and a tool for cultural storytelling” where viewers can enjoy debates on topics that are not usually discussed during Sunday family lunches.⁸³

In this chapter, I argued that the production of social talk shows in Lebanon relied on contentious content, to lure viewers to watch certain shows. The many episodes reviewed showed a tendency to discuss any subject that would stir controversy, following what might be considered the winning formula of “live transmission, taboo and sensitive topics, a high level of interactivity through calling, emailing or texting, and an aggressive promotion strategy.”⁸⁴ This is what Joe Maalouf, Tony Khalife, Rima Karkay and Neshan Der Haroutiounian have adopted as a work model, and they are applying it on a weekly

⁸¹ Sara Mourad, “The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon” (2016), 70.

⁸² Vicki Abt and Mel Seesholtz, ‘The Shameless World of Phil, Sally and Oprah: Television Talk Shows and the Deconstructing of Society’, *The Journal of Popular Culture* 28, no. 1 (June 1994): 171–91, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1994.2801_171.x, 171.

⁸³ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Second edition (New York London: New York University Press, 2014), 3.

⁸⁴ Kraïdy and Khalil, *Arab Television Industries*, International Screen Industries, 52.

basis, in the race to win the viewers and satisfy the ever-eager television executives and owners looking to reap the benefits in a war where all kind of weapons are allowed.

CHAPTER III

HOSTS AND GUESTS: TWO CAN PLAY THIS GAME

A. Introduction

The guests on social talk shows are most of the times as equally important as the host, the star of the show and its main protagonist. Most of the guests who appear on these shows in Lebanon are not famous personalities. They are normal people with interesting stories to tell, and they don't require fees to appear on the silver screen. Obviously, this serves well the producers of the show who have limited budgets that don't include any guests' honorariums. In their work on the social talk shows in the USA (the American shows served as a model for the Lebanese ones, minus the presence of the audience on set), Vicki Abt and Mel Seesholtz write: "Talk is cheap. These shows don't have to pay for the expensive celebrity guests who appeared on earlier forms of talk shows, they don't have to employ expensive screenwriters or actors, they can count on an endless supply of people wanting to get on *Phil*, *Sally* or *Oprah*...These people are clearly exploiting the medium which exploits them"⁸⁵. In Lebanon, people want to be on Joe's show or Tony's and are willing to do so for free. In many instances, they call the shows' producers and offer their story to be featured on certain episodes.⁸⁶

The main role of these guests is to bring "valuable" input on subjects the audience and the show are currently interested in, mainly topics that result in creating a social buzz (in society or on social media) that contributes to the fame of the show, or its notoriety, depending on one's point of view. This buzz is caused by the controversial content that

⁸⁵ Vicki Abt and Mel Seesholtz, 'The Shameless World of Phil, Sally and Oprah: Television Talk Shows and the Deconstructing of Society', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 28, no. 1 (June 1994): 171-91, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1994.2801_171.x.

⁸⁶ Interview with Zeina Berjawi, producer at *Al Jadeed*, October 2018.

these shows provide. This allows the viewers to have a “*window into other worlds*” as “television makes it easy to be a casual anthropologist and travel in worlds very different from one's own”.⁸⁷

As Marwan Kraidy and Joe Khalil put it: “Controversial programs – including (...) provocative social talk shows – typically generate impassioned polemics, generate high ratings (...) and the cycle repeats itself: controversial content. Elevated ratings, increased revenue, higher production budgets, more controversial content, etc.”⁸⁸ The controversial content is a result of a successful interaction between the host and his guests, and by successful we don't mean pleasant and calm, but on the contrary it can involve shouting and arguing, that will bring more interactions from the audiences at home or on social media, especially when tackling taboo and sensitive topics. The audience in front of television sets interacts with the guests, who are normal people like them but with catchy stories to tell.

Therefore, to have controversial content, the shows need guests who can, alone or through the interaction with other guests and the host, create controversy, to lead eventually to more views and ratings.

The “pioneers” or star hosts in Lebanon introduced the guest-centred shows to their viewers in the mid-90s and 2000s, and these pioneers were Ziad Njeim in his show *El-Shater Yehki (Let the Brave Talk)* and Malek Maktabi in *Ahmar Bil Khat El Arid (The Thick Red Line)*. In addition, these shows introduced to the Lebanese and Arab viewers sexual (including homosexual) topics, which were not common on screen beforehand and

⁸⁷ Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 48. Emphasis (words in italic) from author.

⁸⁸ Marwan. M Kraidy, and Joe F. Khalil. *Arab Television Industries*. International Screen Industries. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: London: Palgrave Macmillan; British Film Institute, 2009, 51.

considered taboos no one addresses in public. With these two shows, viewers met real people, who talked about their sexuality, unseen to audiences before, and created a controversy that people remembered long after the episodes aired. Sara Mourad argues that “in a purely materialist sense, real people with real stories were television’s newest commodity, delivered on a weekly basis to audiences watching from home. Sexual deviants like Lucio [a gay man who appeared on *El-Shater Yehki* in 1996] drove higher audience ratings and consequently higher advertisement shares.”⁸⁹

The current shows did not innovate with their format. They continued the trend of hosting guests who create controversy whatever the subject of the discussion, similar to their predecessors. Maktabi was known for always choosing the right guests for his shows. Even when the episodes would discuss the most mundane of topics, or topics that were discussed every season. When early and child marriage would be discussed he would have a man married at 16 instead of a young girl as most would expect. For the misogyny episode the guest was a woman who was married half a dozen times. A tradition the current shows tried to keep up. So, when Neshan decided to tackle the topic of belly dancers he hosted a professional male dancer,⁹⁰ while Joe Maalouf orchestrated an official live police arrest on his show of a 21-year-old man who ran away with the 15-year-old girl he was engaged to.⁹¹

Naturally, the right guest will help boost the viewership, even when they are not famous. Zeina Berjawi, who worked on several of the *Al Jadeed* social talk shows, has

⁸⁹ Sara Mourad, ‘The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon’ (2016), 69.

⁹⁰ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7R0azyUaI9U>

⁹¹ The incident was reported in many newspapers and websites the next day. see: <https://www.annahar.com/article/728854-القوى-الامنية-في-استديو-هوا-الحرية-وتعتقل-الخاطف>

noticed that the most popular segments of the show are the ones that feature two people confronting each other: this breaks the internet. Sometimes it keeps the discussions going for weeks at times on social media and in some social circles.⁹² The debates and discussions achieve a “watercooler effect”⁹³ and contribute to the stature of the channel, and specifically the show that featured the said debates and will help attract viewers to the following episodes, with the same promise of heated debates and discussions.

In this chapter, I claim that guests who are invited to appear on Lebanese social talk shows are chosen specifically because of the controversy they will bring to these shows and this controversy will bring higher ratings. I argue that these guests are not picked according to the expertise they have or the experience they hold in a certain field but rather because of the controversy surrounding what they represent. This controversy results in higher ratings and this is shown in the number of views of selected clips from the episodes or the entire episodes posted on YouTube and other social media outlets and the ratings that some channels announce. The people behind these shows believe this will keep their programs on air, during peak airtime, with the added viewers and high ratings they receive contributed by a high dose of controversy from topics and guests alike.

B. The Choice of Guests: Expertise Has No Place Here

The guests on Lebanese social talk shows are rarely chosen because they are experts in a certain topic. They seldom have experience pertaining to the topic discussed on the shows, and when it comes to discussing the taboo topics of homosexuality, transgenderism and transsexuality, the guests are never psychologists or medical experts

⁹² Interview with Zeina Berjawi, producer of the *Tony Khalife* show, October 2018.

⁹³ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Second edition (New York London: New York University Press, 2014), 43.

in sex change operations, or social scientists explaining why certain communities might be reluctant to accept the LGBT community. In addition to people from this community, the guests are Sheikhs or pastors deprecating the activists, and in some episodes the producers would host journalists, or politicians to help the clergy in their task, to facilitate creating the much-needed controversial content.

Obviously, the choice of guests differs from one show to another, depending on its format. On *Tony Khalife*, there are always a multitude of guests to debate several issues even when a character directly related to the debated subject cannot be present. Its main competition, *Hawa el Horiye* with Joe Maalouf, followed a similar pattern. In most episodes, a main character/ guest is present to talk about the subject at hand with a cleric or an activist. In contrast, the show *Ana Heik* aired on *Al Jadeed* also and hosted by Neshan der Haroutiounian, is pre-recorded and features studio audience in addition to the main guests, of which one at least is directly connected to the topic of the episode, and the audience participates by voting on some issues only without any interventions. Because of the format all the shows, except *Ana Heik*, have different segments assigned to different topics, and usually dedicate around 12 to 15 minutes to each one. In this time, they feature as many guests as they can, up to four sometimes, to debate the controversial topics, which always ends up in heated arguments. On *Ana Heik* and because each episode is dedicated to one single topic, the main guest will have ample time answering the host's questions, challenged by him only, before debating with the other guests later in the program for a shorter period of time.

In general, when the producers of *Tony Khalife* can't find someone to talk about the topic at hand, these specific guests are replaced by a report about the topic and some selected guests, be it former politicians, journalists, or analysts. This method allows the

panel of guests and the host to debate as much as they want on the subject without any objection from the person of interest, since none are present. This was the case on the episode aired on Monday, October 15, 2019, which featured a segment about a marriage between two Lebanese men. The host explained that one of his producers/journalists “investigated” a video that was shared widely on social media the previous week, which showed a marriage between two men. People who shared the video claimed both men are Lebanese, but the show’s “investigator” discovered only one is, and that the “truth” and facts will be revealed in a report. The report invaded the Facebook and Instagram accounts of the two men (a Lebanese and a Brazilian) and showed pictures of them together in addition to a video taken from social media, of their wedding ceremony, and assured the audience that it took place in Switzerland. The report ended with a phone call to the father of the Lebanese man in which he said the family was very supportive of their son.⁹⁴

And as one might expect, the discussion on this episode was typical. The “investigative journalist” reiterated that even though she or others may be against gay marriage she was touched by how the father was very supportive of his son. A guest on the show, well-known news host Nora Khoury announced she would kill her kids if they were gay, citing the sanctity of marriage in Christianity. She asked why they would want to get married and mocked them by asking “do they want to have kids, that’s why?” She later added that “they are free to do whatever they want, it’s none of my business but why get married.” The discussion covered the right to get married and personal freedom and ended when the host switched to another hot topic: “a woman cuts her husband’s penis

⁹⁴ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/toni-4#8OayWG48voRItm1955sRwQ>

after she caught him cheating.”⁹⁵ The guests on this episode discussed issues pertaining to other people who were not present to defend themselves, announcing controversial ideas and thoughts. A situation often occurring on social talk shows in Lebanon, especially when debating topics pertaining to homosexuality, and a main guest cannot be present for various reasons, which leaves the stage open for “experts” to discuss and debate the lives of others.

The panel on similar shows results from invitations and refusals. According to Bourdieu the absence of someone is considered censorship: “The worst censorship is absence; the speech of absent people is excluded in an invisible manner. Hence the dilemma: turn it down (virtuously but invisibly) or agree to be caught in the trap.”⁹⁶ But absence sometimes is mandatory as in the case of death. This was the case in an episode of the show *Tony Khalife* which included a segment dedicated to a famous social media character, a transgender named Suzy, who passed away few days earlier. The guests were the usual winning formula: a cleric, a journalist, and a friend of Suzy’s, a trans woman named Joelle. The panel debate was quickly diverted into a discussion about transgender and transsexual rights.⁹⁷ The cleric present on set was the one who signed the papers needed for Joelle to undergo the sex change operation. Soon the guests and host were debating the religious views regarding the Islamic death prayer when a transgender is involved, while the journalist participating reiterated many times that she helped launch the late Suzy to fame as she paid her bail a few years ago when she was arrested for

⁹⁵ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/toni-4#uw0Th8zVL8yHWUIMimfgg>

⁹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, “Analyse d’un Passage à l’antenne”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 1996, 25. Personal translation.

⁹⁷ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2ssfvtqABM>

prostitution and introduced her to television executives. The third guest, Joelle, was invited to try to add some spice to the show and talk about her experience.

The presence of clerics, whether Sheikhs or pastors, as guests on social talk shows is very frequent. They are asked for their “religious opinion” regarding issues pertaining to everything from sexuality to corruption ending with elections. I asked the producer at *Al Jadeed Zeina* Berjawi why there is a cleric in almost all the episodes featuring a topic about (homo) sexuality. She said the host tries to protect himself from any viewer’s backlash: “We bring the sheikh or the priest so he would give the religious view and let him say all the controversies.”⁹⁸ So the host will remain, at least in the eyes of the viewers, as an objective moderator of a debate between a cleric and another guest, usually defending homosexuals/ LGBT, giving the cleric the opportunity to say whatever is needed to enflame the debate, adding controversial content to the episode to keep the viewers tuned to the show.

Joelle, mentioned above, is not new to the social talk shows. On November 12, 2018, she was looking to go back to visit her family in her southern village after being denied entrance for years. Joe Maalouf hosted her on his show *Hawa el Horiye*. The promotion that aired two days prior showed a veiled young woman with heavy makeup shedding a tear and talking about her grandparents. Because she is a trans woman, her family disowned her. This was focus of the episode. The reports showed Joelle walking in her old school and talking about how it felt to be considered a boy and wanting to play with the girls and how she faced violence from her family for that reason.⁹⁹ The show

⁹⁸ Interview with Zeina Berjawi, producer of the *Tony Khalife* show, October 2018.

⁹⁹ See: <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/hawael7orriyeh/news/22624/هل-تحقق-حلم-جويل-بالعودة-الى-المدرسة/ar>

needed its “hot topic” and what is better than a veiled trans woman to bring the viewers in?

One of the producers of the show, Rouwa Saba explained that the guests are chosen according to the story they must tell—if it is worth airing then they will be studio guests or in reports. She said that the show has a phone number people can call to suggest topics. She added, “Sometimes we go visit these people, but we never air the reports as we find out when we arrive that the issue is completely different to what we were told, or some details were withheld. But we have decided in the recent years to always include the other side of the story even if we are not fully believing in that other side of the story.”¹⁰⁰ Obviously, the confrontation between the two guests will increase the controversy. As quoted before, Marwan Kraidy argues, “entertainment shows that break taboos and involve viewer participation are popular and controversial: popularity makes them potentially controversial, and controversy makes them more popular.”¹⁰¹ The shows need to build on their popularity week after another and feel they must present controversial content to stay popular, and confrontation between two guests is the perfect recipe in the popularity contest.

Sometimes, the hosts take it upon themselves to create the controversy and the controversial content when it is not possible to have opposing guests debate and argue. In an episode aired on October 29, 2018, Joe Maalouf obtained the reports from an investigation into a tattoo artist who was arrested several days earlier by one of the country’s least popular and most notorious security apparatus: The State Security. The tattoo artist was charged with “transmitting the HIV virus” to women who sought his

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Rouwa Saba, producer with Joe Maalouf, June 2019.

¹⁰¹ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life*, Communication, Society and Politics (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29.

services to fix their eyebrows and lips. Maalouf, who kept insisting on keeping the suspect anonymous, revealed a few minutes after the segment started that the man has never actually transmitted any viruses to his clients, but he was gay and had HIV, which apparently in the state security's opinion is a crime. The sexual preferences of the man became the talking points in the segment, and how he got HIV because of his sexual activities as a gay person, after having an affair with his assistant who transmitted the disease to him.¹⁰² Since the protagonist was in jail, the producers hosted a doctor of pathologies and a human rights activist who has the virus too. The presence of the doctor and the activist prevented the segment from turning into a trial for the tattoo artist on his sexual preferences without him being present to defend himself. The discussions were heated, and the host repeated his accusations claiming that the sexual preferences of the tattoo artist were responsible for other people getting infected with HIV (even though he claimed at the start of the show that no one was in fact infected). Maalouf in this episode created what Bourdieu calls "urgency" to impose censorship through interruption of his guests, and by claiming to be the "audience spokesperson".¹⁰³ In this case, the host was the one trying to make the controversy, taking on an accusatory role usually given to the clerics.

Even if the format of *Ana Heik* is different from the other two shows, the questions the host asks the guests are meant to generate controversy. In the gay marriage episode aired on October 10, 2018, Neshan hosted a Lebanese man named Nicholas Chalhoub, who married his Spanish partner earlier that year. Instead of bringing a cleric like the

¹⁰² The Legal agenda, one of Lebanon's leading nonprofit research and advocacy organization, tackled the incident in an article published on its website on the second of November 2018, by one its researchers Joelle Boutros. See: <http://legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=4993>

¹⁰³ Bourdieu, Pierre. "Analyse d'un Passage à l'antenne", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 1996. <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1996/04/BOURDIEU/5425>. Personal translation.

other shows to confront the main guest, the producers chose to give Chalhoub ample time to talk about coming out, moving abroad, meeting his husband and his life in Europe as a gay man. The host, as in the previous example tried to ask what he says were probably “questions viewers are thinking about” regarding his attraction to men, his relationship with his family, marriage to his Spanish partner. And at the end of the show he confronted his guest with three others, two of them speaking from religious background, preaching Chalhoub over his Christian roots advising him to “fix his problem” and repent. The confrontations and the host’s questions, advertised before airtime (the show is recorded), resulted in record viewership according to the producers (they refused to disclose numbers) and the episode online was viewed more than one million times.¹⁰⁴

Equally, the formula was successful in the lesbians’ episode aired on January 31, 2019, when he hosted three women. The first, a Syrian woman named Amira, talked about her previous relationships and the fact that she got engaged to a gay man to cover up her secret life. The host asked her if she was harassed as a child, and if she ever cheated on her girlfriends. He asked the second guest, Linda, if she had sex with a woman and who approached whom. He asked the third guest, who appeared undercover with a big wig and sunglasses, “So they know you are a girl, but they act with you as if you’re a man and you are the dominant one in the relationship?”¹⁰⁵ In the episode dedicated to trans individuals, he asked his guests about paid sex, how they use the bathroom (standing or sitting on the toilet seat).¹⁰⁶ The host by playing the role of the “expert guest” at times, can make sure any controversial confrontation between guests is under control, as he can

¹⁰⁴ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXPSg5nuOuk>

¹⁰⁵ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVSpJamFxQ>

¹⁰⁶ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYRwkRdSjVM>

set the tone for the discussion with his guest and end the debate when needed. Hence, in the absence of confrontation guests, the host will step up to the challenge and fill the gap, and provide the controversial questions needed in these shows.

As noted above, the guests on this specific show create controversy themselves by who they are and how they live their lives without the need for another controversial guest to debate them: a man married to another man, a woman saying loud and clear that she had sex with another woman, a transsexual saying that she was offered money to have sex with a man who likes transsexuals and a transgender describing how she uses the bathroom the way women do even though she still has the physical morphology of a man.¹⁰⁷ The choice of main guests is not aleatory in such shows as the producers pick the ones that have the most compelling and shocking story to tell.

The guests, as seen in this section, are chosen based on two criteria: the willingness to break social taboos on air, and the ability to debate. Furthermore, opting to have the clergy as additional guests is intended to create the controversy that will help give the show or a specific episode notoriety and fame. An inventory of the episodes of these shows, reveals how a few clergymen (Muslim and Christian) became designated guests on all channels when it comes to discussing taboos and controversy, for their ability and willingness to debate and discuss endlessly.

C. The competition for the numbers

The controversy the guests bring to the show affects the ratings and viewership average. The people behind each show make sure to let the audience know there is a

¹⁰⁷ See gay marriage episode: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXPSg5nuQuk>; lesbians: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVSjJamFxQ>; Trans: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4TjNwDwjK8>

controversial guest in an upcoming episode via promotional material aired several days prior and messages sent through the channels' app on mobile phones. In this way, producers and marketers make sure that a lot of people tune their sets to their channel. If this does not work, the clips or entire episodes aired on social media reach a bigger number of viewers.

The producer of *Ana Heik*, Rabih Farran, says that the choice of the guests on the show proved right because of the controversy they bring, and “15 minutes after the show starts airing each Wednesday it is trending on twitter.”¹⁰⁸ In addition, he says that the episode which hosted the openly gay man Nicholas Chalhoub, and his husband was with the lesbians' episode their most viewed ones but refused to disclose numbers, as it is the case usually when it comes to viewership in Lebanese television where a decades long tradition of not disclosing ratings numbers prevail (except in rare cases).

In March 2020, the show opened a YouTube channel and began posting new and old episodes, and many guests have posted the episodes on their own channels, like Chalhoub, whose episode was viewed more than 1.3 million times by June 2020.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, a segment from the lesbians episode was watched more than eight hundred thousand times to this day.¹¹⁰ Compared with the episodes mentioned above, the episode that hosted the health secretary to discuss the government measures to stop the spread of the Corona virus barely reached 12000 views,¹¹¹ proving that “whereas political debates

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Rabih Farran, producer of the *Ana Heik* show, June 2019.

¹⁰⁹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXPSg5nuQuk>

¹¹⁰ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sL2z7Hzc1p4>

¹¹¹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wnREaaoGA4>

may be specific to a particular locality or social group, talk about personal and family relationships has the potential for mass appeal.”¹¹²

After comedian Bassem Feghaly, who has been impersonating famous Arab divas for twenty years without ever coming out as a transgender, surprised the producers with an appearance on the show *Hawa el Horiye* in November 2018, dressed in an evening gown with full makeup to talk about his personal problems with his family and neighbors regarding a property dispute, several clips from the show were widely shared by individuals on social media and WhatsApp groups the following week, igniting a popular discussion about cross-dressing and transgenderism. The social media ratings are not available for this show, as the channel does not air anything on its official social media accounts. Instead, the channel has a system of subscription to their website and get the ratings numbers from a specialized company that handles the matter. However, they announced in a statement shared on their social media account that 9.4% of adults watching television in Lebanon that night tuned in to their show, which is a very high number exceeding those of the top political talk show at that time *Kalam El Nass*, aired on the same channel every Thursday night. The channels rarely announce their ratings, and from all the social talk shows discussed in this thesis only the ratings of this season of *Hawa El Horiye* were published, in a very rare instance.

In comparison with other episodes, the Feghaly episode did better than the gay tattoo artist one which reached 7.4% of adult viewership, which is still a very high number. The fact that one of the guests had HIV and was admittedly gay, plus the heated exchange with Maalouf about homosexuality proved to be a winning formula. The

¹¹² Naomi Sakr, ‘Fragmentation or Consolidation? Factors in the Oprah-Ization of Social Talk on Multi- Channel Arab TV,’ In *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, ed. Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 169.

episode with Joelle the transsexual fared better with 8.3% of the adult audience that Monday. The numbers exceed those of any news bulletin or political talk show in Lebanon during that period.¹¹³ They show that the controversial guests on these shows entailed high audience rates.

Tony Khalife does not apply a similar strict policy toward social media, reflected by a more relaxed stance from *Al Jadeed* towards social media platforms. A lot of the guests share the segments they appear on and sometimes one can find entire episodes or parts of it shared by individuals. A few hours after the episode that was indented as a tribute to the transgender Suzy ended, a video taken from the episode circulated on social media, and it was titled: “Watch a sheikh give permission to a man to undergo sex change operation.” The video was watched a quarter of a million times on YouTube alone.¹¹⁴ The choice of featuring Joelle and the cleric paid off for the show’s producers, as they attracted viewers “with the promise of live debates that would break long-entrenched taboos.”¹¹⁵ Again, the choice of guests, a cleric approving a sex change operation, resulted in high numbers of viewing, enticing audience to choose a specific show out of the large array of options available.

In a previous section, I argued that the choice of guests serves special purposes, such as allowing the host to appear as neutral or simply moderating a discussion and allocating the role of providing controversy to the guest. But why the focus on clerics as in the previous examples, why not host members of the medical profession, or

¹¹³ Having worked myself as a news producer at *LBCI*, I had access to the numbers provided daily by the main audience measurement company that are not published and are rarely made available for the public, as they contain the ratings for all the channels on an hourly basis for each day. The main news bulletins have rarely surpassed the 5% threshold for all channels, while the main political show *Kalam El Nass*, aired on *LBCI*, sometimes reached 6.5% when major politicians were guests.

¹¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5CLbBwZHGO>

¹¹⁵ Naomi Sakr, *Arab Television Today* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 157.

psychiatrists? The producer in *Al Jadeed Zeina* Berjawi said that the medical professional will not provoke the guest and will help them. The cleric, on the other hand, will provoke the guest and they will fight. And this will allow the host to direct the discussion along the provocation with specific word choices and strategic questions. This will result in more viewership.¹¹⁶

Ultimately, the data that *LBCI* published regarding the ratings of the show and the views that anyone can access on social media platforms support the claim that controversy on these shows pays off for its creators. The ratings are used by advertisers to decide where to put the ads for their products, and usually the highest watched show gets the greatest number of adverts and in consequence the channel will reap the financial benefit from the high ratings of its shows. The episodes that feature the contentious guests who interact to create controversial content had record views compared to other episodes, which proves the claim stated in the introduction of this chapter that guests who are invited to appear on Lebanese social talk shows are chosen specifically because of their controversy that will induce higher ratings.

D. Conclusion

To conclude, Lebanese social talk shows—similar to such shows in other parts of the world— “turn personal stories into a spectacle for public consumption. They incite and entice people to share intimate information about their lives with...millions of unknown viewers.”¹¹⁷ It is the role of the guests present on the stage in each episode. Whether the topic is about corruption, rape, sex change or a new pandemic sweeping

¹¹⁶ Interview with Zeina Berjawi, producer at *Al Jadeed*, October 2018.

¹¹⁷ Mourad, ‘The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon’, 70.

through the world, they are chosen to affect viewers. The methods differ from one show to another, but the result is almost the same: “sensationalism, titillation and verbal jousting.”¹¹⁸ The controversy resulting from these episodes make these shows and their hosts not boring as the news bulletins that precede them because the fear of being boring pushes them to “opt for confrontations over debates, prefer polemics over rigorous argument, and in general, do whatever they can to promote conflict”.¹¹⁹ This method contributes to the fame of the presenters, and the guests alike, who are then seen through the entire season “show hopping” from one channel to another to contribute to the debates about homosexuality.

¹¹⁸ Marwan Kraïdy, “Globalization *avant la lettre*? Cultural hybridity and media power in Lebanon”, in *Global media studies: Ethnographic perspectives*, eds. P. D. Murphy & M. M. Kraïdy, London: Routledge, 292.

¹¹⁹ Bourdieu, *On Television*, 294.

CHAPTER IV

THE RATINGS WAR

A. Introduction

The word *rating* was recurring in all the interviews I conducted for this thesis. For the producers, it was what they aimed for: high ratings to keep the show they work on running. For the channel executive the ratings are important but the conservation of the brand the channel created was more important. Everyone is looking for what Amanda Lotz calls the “watercooler effect,” mentioned in the previous chapter, when employees meet in common spaces and chat about a show they watched the previous night. As Lotz states, “Programs that achieve *watercooler status* earn a certain degree of importance due to their ability to break through the cluttered media space.”¹²⁰ Lotz adds that in the USA and during the network era “watercooler shows were often those that were somehow boundary - defying.”¹²¹ This is what the producers of social talk shows in Lebanon aim to do with the controversial topics and guests that frequent their shows.

There is fierce competition between the few shows on air, and in this competition “for audience share, ratings and profits, television talk shows co-opt deviant subcultures, break taboos and eventually, through repeated, non-judgmental exposure, make it all seem banal and ordinary. The addictive nature of this lies in the fact that increasingly bizarre stories are constructed to maintain audience share.”¹²² Hence, the episodes hosted

¹²⁰ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Second edition (New York London: New York University Press, 2014), 43. Emphasis from the author.

¹²¹ Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 44.

¹²² Vicki Abt and Mel Seesholtz, ‘The Shameless World of Phil, Sally and Oprah: Television Talk Shows and the Deconstructing of Society’, *The Journal of Popular Culture* 28, no. 1 (June 1994): 171–91, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1994.2801_171.x, 173.

male strippers, trans people, lesbians, in addition to many other topics aimed solely at bringing in more viewers.

In this chapter, I argue that ratings represent a major component of the television industry in Lebanon and is a driving force for producers to include controversial content on their shows. I will explain how the ratings in Lebanon work, and how producers take into considerations as a success factor the social media index and the contradiction between the main actors of the industry regarding audience measurements.

B. The Ratings Effect

In his book *On Television*, Bourdieu refers to ratings, as a phenomenon that had a “very particular effect on television”.¹²³ He adds that it is mostly apparent “in the pressure to get things out in a hurry...the pressure to get a scoop, get there first.”¹²⁴ He claims that network executives are “ultimately slaves to the ratings” and a “rating mindset” reigns in media where everyone is fixated on what he calls “market success”. Moreover, Bourdieu claims that ratings are an “indirect way to trial the journalistic field by market” as opposed to the direct way which is through advertisers.¹²⁵

Amanda Lotz and Jonathan Gray have their own “market success” theory. If Bourdieu discusses “the pressure of the audience ratings, economic forcers weigh on television”¹²⁶ and that “in this way, the economy weighs on all fields of cultural

¹²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 26.

¹²⁴ Bourdieu, *On Television*, 28.

¹²⁵ Bourdieu, *On Television*, 27.

¹²⁶ Bourdieu, *On Television*, 56.

production,”¹²⁷ Lotz and Gray theorize creating and selling *audiences* in their book *Television Studies*. They claim that “audiences are the central commodity in a commercial television model, as channels sell potential viewers to advertisers, whereas in a public broadcasting model, the system exists solely for the edification, enlightenment, and entertainment of audiences.”¹²⁸ The producers I spoke with for this thesis all had the audience as a main target, and the shows they work on were a platform to attract viewers they can use as numbers later to prove they are successful.

Marwan Kraidy and Toby Miller, on the other hand, mention “success” as a major factor in the war and competition for the highest ratings. In their book *Global Media Studies*, they say that “production executives invoke audiences to measure success and claim knowledge of what people want”¹²⁹. They add that “media effects and ratings research wander the world, traversing the industry, the state, and criticism. Academic, commercial, and regulatory approaches focus most expansively on audiences as citizens and consumers, far more than media technology, law, or even content.”¹³⁰

Ratings in Lebanon have been conducted since the early 1990s. It consists of audience measurement companies installing a sensor machine, a telemeter, in selected homes, and this machine registers what the occupants of this household watch all day. The companies don’t disclose publicly how many machines they monitor but it is

¹²⁷ Bourdieu, *On Television*, 56.

¹²⁸ Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz, *Television Studies*, Short Introductions (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 57.

¹²⁹ Toby Miller and Marwan M Kraidy, *Global Media Studies*, 2016, 25.

¹³⁰ Miller and Kraidy, *Global Media Studies*, 27.

estimated to be around 5000.¹³¹ These machines are distributed to cover all Lebanon to have a representative sample. The channels are interested mostly in numbers regarding their evening news bulletin, and the Lebanese series shown after the evening news and the 09:30 P.M slot programs. The executives of the channels receive each day the numbers regarding the previous day. The machines hooked to television sets in Lebanese homes tell how many from the sample watched the *LBCI* evening news bulletin, and how many tuned in to the local series that *MTV* shows after the news, and what 09:30 P.M program was most watched on *Al Jadeed*.

The social media index on the other hand consists of calculating interactions in two ways: on a designated hashtag that the channel launches when it airs a program (it usually consists of either a slogan or the name of the show itself); and by the likes and comments and all interactions that the channel receives on its own social media posts published during the said show.

But if the audience measurement numbers indicate how many people or households watched a show, social media numbers can only tell of interactions. In a lot of cases, people behind phone screens are not watching the show as it airs, and the channels cannot tell if the numbers of interactions are translated into actual screen time. But some of the producers I spoke with indicated that they still rely on these interactions to know if a certain topic is trendy or not. And the interaction is not limited to the time when a certain show is aired, as it can start a few days earlier when the channel advertises the upcoming episode, or after it is aired with selected clips from the discussions that were the most heated.

¹³¹ Having worked as a news producer at *LBCI* I had access to the ratings, and the number of machines was an estimate I heard many times from the owner of the channel. But it is not corroborated from other sources.

C. The Rating Wars

The importance of audience measurement is always present behind the scenes at any television channel, in Lebanon and elsewhere. It is a subject that lurks behind every new idea, or suggestion, and is often present in conversations when scoops and exclusive stories are discussed.

Although ratings are an essential part of how commercial television channels work, it is rarely a subject of public debate, and the audience itself, is unaware or simply not interested in how it works. In an unusual step, Tony Khalife dedicated an episode of his social talk show *Al 'Ayn Bil 'Ayn* for this topic. In the episode aired on January 19 2017, entitled *Kirmal El Rating* (For the sake of rating), he discussed, with a panoply of guests, what he called the “ratings war that have destroyed the screens and the noble message of media.”¹³² In the opening monologue of the episode, Khalife asked the invisible audience, watching from their homes: “If you don’t watch this decadence, and the tackiness we produce for the sake of ratings, how will we get any ratings at all?”¹³³ He added, “You want to know who is responsible for all these wars and the collapse [of media]? You, the audience, hold us responsible and say that we have brought media down to a low level of decadence in our search for viewership and rating, but have you asked yourselves even once how will we get any ratings at all if you don’t watch this decadence and the tackiness that we produce for the sake of ratings?”¹³⁴ The monologue ended with him saying that ratings show that “the highest viewings are for shows that air decadence and tackiness, and it means you as audience are responsible, as you are making the rating,

¹³² See here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80685-2wmyU>

¹³³ See here, at 01:03: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80685-2wmyU>

¹³⁴ See here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80685-2wmyU>

forcing us to make similar shows to get rating.”¹³⁵ As the episode goes on, we understand the trigger for the whole episode—and for Khalife’s three minutes monologue. Several days earlier, fellow host Adel Karam, who hosts a weekly entertainment show on *MTV* had appealed and pleaded with his host colleagues to ease down on the ratings war between them.¹³⁶ Khalife found it a good opportunity to discuss the matter. Khalife held the audience responsible for the controversial content the social talk shows offer, which resonates in what the producers of these shows have told me in the interviews. The social talk shows offer contentious content involving what the society deems taboo because the producers of these shows believe the audience searches for that content and considers it fit for their entertainment.

The ratings war that seems to annoy Khalife is the reason for his fame, as he made his career from offering controversy to viewers at home. He shifted careers in the nineties when he left the newsroom and its bulletins to host game shows that were highly in demand in Lebanon then, and later hosted entertainment talk show for two years before switching to the social talk show format in 2008. Since then, he moved between channels and hosted several shows. Before becoming a talk show host, Khalife was not a very famous host or reporter, and his fame came later in entertainment and social talk shows or as Sarah Mourad puts it "(he) has made a career out of publicizing intimate matters"¹³⁷. She adds that “he rose to fame hosting television shows that promised to put the private life of Arab singers and movie stars on display. He also introduced a new genre of investigative television through his show “Lil Nasher” (For Publication), which secured

¹³⁵ See here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80685-2wmyU>

¹³⁶ MTV has restricted access to its website, but Khalife aired Karam’s plea in his episode. See here from 15:37 to 17:21: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80685-2wmyU>

¹³⁷ Mourad, ‘The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon’, 12.

high viewer ratings through a sensationalist display of marginal and abnormal social behaviours and situations. Khalife, in fact, has been a forerunner in creating media genres that put private life on display.”¹³⁸

All social talk shows hosts had a similar career paths, starting as unknown faces and becoming famous with social talk shows. Their fame came with the type of shows that publicized the intimate lives of others to offer audiences a weekly dose of controversy. In this world, they believed their continuance depended on ratings generated by more contentious content.

D. Social Media Index vs. Advertising Money

The different actors of the industry all see ratings through distinct lenses, sometimes even contradictory. As discussed in the previous chapters, producers and hosts believe that higher ratings, generated by controversial content, will help keep the shows on air, because the audience keeps tuning in every Monday night. The producers add to the ratings they receive from audience measurements companies a social media index, consisting of how many times social media users have used the hashtag they launched when the show starts each week. Channel executives who also eagerly wait for the ratings number, dismiss the importance of the social media index, as they understand that advertisers have different considerations, and what is important for them is the willingness of the advertiser to spend his money in their channel. While the advertisers want to put their investment on a screen that is widely watched, sometimes it is not always the case, in a country functioning through a set of religious, and political and economic

¹³⁸ Mourad, “The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon”, 12.

considerations. In this section, I will discuss how contradiction prevails in the industry, as each actor has their own concerns driving major decisions they adopt.

Despite ratings being important, and if Khalife was the only host who was vocal about the importance of ratings in the production of social talk shows and eventually their survival as explained in the previous section, others dismissed ratings, focusing instead on “originality” and “oddness”. For example, Neshan Der Haroutiounian, the host and driving force behind the show *Ana Heik*, insisted during our hour-long interview on the set of his show, that he couldn’t care less about ratings, contradicting what his producers says. During our discussion, he emphasized that what truly matters to him is “breaking taboos to help people understand a subject better.”¹³⁹ But his main producer was more honest about the importance of ratings for their business.

Rabih Farran who was the main producer on the show insisted in the interview I conducted with him in June 2019 that “anything shown on television has to do with ratings”¹⁴⁰. He recalled that before the show started airing, and specifically during the preparatory period, the production team decided that the plan was to impose their presence no matter what and to attract the biggest part of the audience. I asked him about the ratings’ numbers, and while he refused to disclose any, he added that a major index they use was social media, and the fact that “within the first 15 minutes of the show each Wednesday it would be trending on twitter”¹⁴¹. Something that his counterpart at *Al Jadeed Zeina* Berjawi agrees with too. She said in an interview that they indeed do rely on the audience interaction with the hashtags they launch before the show starts. “This is

¹³⁹ Personal interview with Neshan Der Haroutiounian, June 2019.

¹⁴⁰ Personal interview with Rabih Farran, June 2019.

¹⁴¹ Personal interview with Rabih Farran, June 2019.

our real ratings index” she said.¹⁴² She adds that the high importance they give to social media has prompted them to feature promotions just aimed at social media users.

The social media index is where social talk show producers and media executive Dimitri Khodr part ways. The general manager of *Al Jadeed* television channel insisted that it is not a reliable measure for whether a show is trending. He says that there are 60,000 active accounts on Twitter in Lebanon. If all of them watched a certain show and talked about it using a certain hashtag, they would still only count as one point in the ratings chart. According to Khodr, this is why the channels rely on telemeters and not social media. And this is what will determine if a show continues or is cancelled according to him. So, in fact, no matter how much buzz a show creates on social media, the numbers that count are those of people watching on television sets and if this number appeals to advertisers.

Khodr emphasized that what matters the most is where the advertisers put their money, and it is not always about the highest rated show. He gave me an example of a “light” entertainment show his channel aired a few years earlier hosted by a famous pop singer named Ali Deek. The show, called *Ghanili ta Ghanilak* (Let’s Sing), was aired every Saturday night in the same time slot as the franchise talent show *The Voice* on MTV. *Ghanili ta Ghanilak* averaged 14 points on the telemeter chart, according to Khodr, while the competition (*The Voice*) never got more than 6. In the end, *Al Jadeed* canceled Deek’s show, because it had not secured enough ads for it. Meanwhile, *The Voice* was thriving with commercials every Saturday. Khodr said that “the person selling the product wants to place ads where people with money are watching...For example, if the people behind the car brand Chevrolet want to advertise a car that costs 35,000 U.S dollars, they will

¹⁴² Personal interview with Zeina Berjawi, October 2018.

target the family where median household income is \$6000, and that's why *MTV*, who does not have the same rating as us, has as much ads as us: because its viewers are from a spending class."¹⁴³ Khodr added that, in addition to the spending audience factor, some advertisers do choose the channels they want to put their ads on based on their personal convictions, claiming that there is an "emotional factor not related to the market in choosing what shows to invest in."¹⁴⁴ Therefore, high ratings would not necessarily result in bringing more advertisement money, and help keep a show on air.

Khodr adds that while some famous hosts do bring audience to the shows and increase ratings, sex does not always sell no matter who the host is. He gave me a concrete example: the episode when Tony Khalife hosted a trans individual the ratings were very bad. He refused to disclose the exact number. Thus, Khodr's statements contradict most producers, who advocate for the idea that high ratings will keep the show on air. Rouwa Saba, who worked with Joe Maalouf, insisted during our interview that the ratings are the most important thing to look out for "because the channel our show is on now will judge this show according to the ratings... whether we like it or not we are in the middle of the rating game."¹⁴⁵

Berjawi agrees with Saba and adds that as producers they do whatever it takes to get the viewer, any viewer, and keep him till the end of the show. She says that they even structure their show according to the "weather forecast" model. Most of the times the "hottest" topic is kept till the end of the show. This keeps audiences glued to their channel. She adds that promoting the show takes a different approach once the series that air before

¹⁴³ Personal interview with Dimitri Khodr, June 2019.

¹⁴⁴ Personal interview with Dimitri Khodr, June 2019.

¹⁴⁵ Personal interview with Rouwa Saba, June 2019.

it starts. The viewer is bombarded with the promos of the talk show and each station always shows its highest rated series before its star show. The series serve as a platform to promote the talk show and keep the ratings high. So, ratings lead to more ratings. When I asked her about the companies that provide the ratings, she said that they do rely on their numbers but do not fully trust these companies who are usually caving to the highest bidder. An issue that some working in market research do not fully contradict.

Market research companies in Lebanon are few and the sector was controlled by a single company, Stat-Ipsos, for decades, since the mid-90s. The second company that entered the Lebanese market and studied audience measurements is GFK MERME. Tarek Ammar was, from 2011 to 2018, the regional director of GFK MERME, and he is the co-founder of ARA Research & Consultancy, a market research company operating in Lebanon since 2002. He says that rumors circulated around Stat-Ipsos rigging some numbers but added that it never affected the market. In general, he agrees with Khodr about how some advertisers choose where to put their money.

Feedback provided by audience measurement companies affects how channels program their shows, and eventually the lifespan of certain shows. Ammar says that three channels split the audience and ratings in Lebanon: *LBCI*, *Al Jadeed* and *MTV*. The others never requested any ratings from the two companies, as they were political projects that did not seek a share of the market and preferred to keep the advertisers they have. He adds that he knows the channels requested the ratings from them for two reasons: getting advertisers from one hand and evaluating a show on the other. The evaluation process can mean anything from cancelling a show to modifying some of its aspects to please the audience. He says that the market research companies used to do additional research, not just ratings by contacting viewers and asking them specific questions about programs.

They noticed that “when we gave the channels the feedback, they used to alter the programs according to the research.”¹⁴⁶ Numbers provided by market research companies influence television channels, who aspire to please and keep the largest share of the audience if possible.

Although ratings are the driving force of the television world, in this section, I explained how each actor of the industry sees it in a different angle. The contrast in how each one views audience measurements and its implications, results in disparate objectives: producers want to add more controversy to increase ratings and the social media index and keep their show running; the executives care about certain ratings that securing advertisers and dismiss the importance of social media; while advertisers want to put their money where the spending audience is.

E. Conclusion

Social talk shows, as other television programs, live for the ratings. If one wants to borrow a line from both show icon *Liza Minelli* and hip-hop artist *Scarface*¹⁴⁷ and alter it to fit this chapter, then ratings would “make the world go around” for anyone working in television.

The producers and hosts of talk shows want the highest and biggest part of the ratings, and in their quest for that and going back to the work previously quoted by Vicki Abt and Mel Seesholtz, they “create audiences by breaking cultural rules, by managed shocks, by shifting our conceptions of what is acceptable, by transforming our ideas about what is possible, by undermining the bases of cultural judgment, by redefining deviance

¹⁴⁶ Personal interview with Tarek Ammar, February 2021.

¹⁴⁷ See here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIAXG_QcQNU; and here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFf1292hpt4>

and appropriate reactions to it, by eroding social barriers, inhibitions, and cultural distinctions”¹⁴⁸.

The producers see things on short notice. What will happen tomorrow or the next episode: what guests would they feature, and what topic should be recycled or what phenomenon would be the main story? They want to get the attention of people both at home and on social media, this is how they see the ratings game unfolding. This results in controversial topics on a weekly basis, in the hope of turning the attention of the audience into concrete numbers on the ratings charts that they think will keep their show on air, and eventually their jobs. In their quest for securing the “sacred” ratings number, they deploy all weapons that will result in controversy, and this where homosexuality as a topic steps in.

The executives are long-term planners: How will this show affect my gross annual income? What will I do in next year’s grid? At the end of the day, it’s not about who gets more ratings but who has the spending viewers to get the ads. For the people in charge of organizing the budget of an entire channel, securing salaries and planning for months to come, the short-term gains of becoming the number one trend on twitter is not as important as obtaining an advertising contract that may be interested in content other than controversy on social talk shows. Pierre Bourdieu might have been right when he wrote: “Sensationalism attracts notice, and it also diverts it, like magicians whose basic operating principle is to direct attention to something other than what they’re doing”¹⁴⁹. Television is an expensive medium to set up and operate, and unlike state owned channels

¹⁴⁸ Vicki Abt and Mel Seesholtz, ‘The Shameless World of Phil, Sally and Oprah: Television Talk Shows and the Deconstructing of Society’, *The Journal of Popular Culture* 28, no. 1 (June 1994): 171–91, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1994.2801_171.x, 171.

¹⁴⁹ Bourdieu, *On Television*, 17-18.

that present information, and entertainment and culture without expecting any return on this “investment”, privately owned channels seek income in gain whatever the means are.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

On the November 9, 2021, *Al Jadeed* debuted a new social talk show entitled *Fo' el 18* (18 years and Above) dedicated specifically to tackle “bold” topics according to its webpage.¹⁵⁰ The six episodes aired in the first few weeks tackled: sex before marriage, cheating and adultery, child marriages, violence against women, online sex, and male belly dancers.¹⁵¹ The description of the show on *Al Jadeed*'s website informs us that each episode hosts 4 men and 4 women who will give their “shocking opinions” on the topic of the day, and then debate a guest and a cleric.¹⁵² The description of the show on the channel's website, and its format, resonate with other shows discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis. This new show is not different from *Hawa el Horiye* or *Lil Nasher* or *Ana Heik*, expect for its host and its air date, every Tuesday evening. It tackles the same topics, with the same “successful” format of having guests debating.

Such topics have been discussed on many occasions on all social talk shows that have aired in the last two decades in Lebanon. In addition, the title of this new show, which in Arabic explicitly means “meant for people above 18 years of age”, suggests before even announcing the topics of each episode that it will be based on controversy and taboo subjects. The format reminds us of other shows discussed in chapters one and

¹⁵⁰ See: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/program/18plus#about>

¹⁵¹ See sex before marriage episode: https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/18plus_1; Adultery: https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/18plus_2; Child marriage: https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/18plus_3; Violence: https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/18plus_4; Online sex: https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/18plus_5; Male belly dancing: https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/18plus_6.

¹⁵² Check the blurb on *Al Jadeed*'s website: <https://www.AlJadeed.tv/arabic/program/18plus#about>

two in this thesis: people debating, a main guest, and a cleric, in what Marwan Kraidy calls “a blurring of genres” where “religion mixes with personal finance or sexuality” and “talk shows blur politics and entertainment.”¹⁵³ Hence the trend of the social talk show continues, with its contentious topics, debates, and controversial guests.

The show reflects a comeback to social talk shows after almost a two-year hiatus for the Lebanese channels where the focus was on demonstrations and then the economic collapse, and of course the pandemic. In the last two years some shows were cancelled, and some hosts dedicated theirs to discussing the demise of the Lebanese pound and its impact on the daily lives of people, forgetting almost entirely about sexuality which characterized the previous versions of these shows prior to the events that impacted Lebanon and the world in the last two years.

At the same time, *Al Jadeed* introduced a new social talk show hosted by Joe Maalouf called *Fawda* (Chaos) dedicated to corruption. But the show’s section on the channel’s website states that the program will tackle, in addition to corruption, “social issues,”¹⁵⁴ allowing the host to address controversial topics whenever needed.¹⁵⁵ Joe had left *LBCI* in 2019, moved to *MTV*, and then left shortly afterwards before starting at *Al Jadeed*.

LBCI on the other hand started the fall season with talk shows for the 09:30 P.M slot for practically every day of the week: a political one on Monday, social on Wednesday, socio-political on Thursday with Tony Khalife, women’s issues on Friday,

¹⁵³ Toby Miller and Marwan M Kraidy, *Global Media Studies*, 2016, 97.

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.AJadeed.tv/arabic/program/foudaaa#about>

¹⁵⁵ In the sixth episode he tackled the paedophilia case involving the clergyman Mansour Labaki after the verdict was reached in his case in France. https://www.AJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/foudaaa_6 . While in the 8th episode he discussed his colleague Rabia’s show mentioned above and the controversy it is stirring https://www.AJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/foudaaa_8 , and finally the school harassment case in Tripoli https://www.AJadeed.tv/arabic/episode/foudaaa_9.

entertainment on Saturday, a political and health show on Sunday, and even the night dedicated to comedy has a talk show that tackles the week's political and social issues through comedy and discussions with guests, each Tuesday night.

While *MTV* has opted to focus on politics and social issues, with three talk shows aired after the evening Lebanese series every Sunday, Monday, and Thursday night. This means the events of the last two years were just a stumbling block in the social talk shows paths, with the channels returning to this form of programming, and tackling controversial and taboo topics after a normalization process with the pandemic and the economic crisis. The shows and television behind them act here their role as what Horace Newcombe depicts as “central cultural medium” representing “a multiplicity of meanings rather than a monolithic dominant point of view” and focusing “on our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas.”¹⁵⁶ So when the pandemic and economic crisis became parts of everyday life, they got to share central stage on the television screens with sexuality, conjugal violence, paedophilia, and many other topics.

Thus, the channels are once again relying on talk shows which proves that the “regularity and frequency of talk shows” are essential, as they “reproduced their channels’ brands and cultivated regular viewing that was of crucial value”.¹⁵⁷ In addition, the content needs to stand out to “create the difference that makes a *difference*, to maintain an audience with sufficient *reference* to the known and recognized, but to move ahead into something that distinguishes his [the producer’s] show for the program buyer, the

¹⁵⁶ Horace M. Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, ‘Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research*’, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8, no. 3 (June 1983): 45–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208309361170>, 47.

¹⁵⁷ Amanda D. Lotz and John Landgraf, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 75.

scheduler, and most importantly, for the mass audience.”¹⁵⁸ The audiences are the main protagonists in this matter as commercial television is what Amanda Lotz qualifies as “the business of creating and selling *audiences*”, who are “the central commodity in a commercial television model, as channels sell potential viewers to advertisers.”¹⁵⁹

The media scene in Lebanon was affected heavily by the economic crisis, and the pandemic of course. During the last year, journalists and reporters were constantly talking in closed circles about channels not paying wages, or reducing them, or paying in the devaluated Lebanese Lira, and how certain coverages were affected by the fuel shortages, in addition to the many lockdowns that took its toll on drama production. The crisis reflected on many projects, and channels found themselves prioritizing news and talk shows, and reruns of old shows and old series, as cheaper options to keep the screen alive. During this period, television came to encompass more than ever what Amanda Lotz qualifies as a “*window to the world*” and a “cultural hearth” that has told families and individuals “stories and offered glimpses of the world outside [their] daily experience.”¹⁶⁰ And with this economic crisis the channels need any advertising that comes and need to keep the viewers and controversy, and taboo topics are a good option for that as “any interactivity (good, bad, or indifferent) is economically valuable to producers and has been a defining goal of broadcast television since its inception in the 1940’s.”¹⁶¹

The social talk shows presented the audience with the controversy needed,

¹⁵⁸ Newcomb and Hirsch, ‘Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research*’, 51.

¹⁵⁹ Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz, *Television Studies*, Short Introductions (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 57.

¹⁶⁰ Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 3. Emphasis from the author.

¹⁶¹ John Caldwell, “Convergence television: aggregating form and repurposing content in the culture of conglomeration” in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Eds Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 54.

tackling taboo subjects pertaining to homosexuality and transgenderism with guests who fueled debates and carried out what Jane Shattuc describes as “screaming battles” and the shows acting as “voyeuristic spectacle rather than a venue for social change.”¹⁶² Shattuc in studying the social talk show scene on American televisions relies on the analysis Roland Barthes made of wrestling and its attraction to spectators, and what he calls the “spectacle of excess”, and Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on the “carnival” as a form of liberation, projecting it to talk shows that she argues “celebrate the self-consciousness of the drama where the performance breaks through the orienting boundaries of stage theatrics into the audience.”¹⁶³ And this is what conceivably may keep the social talk shows on Lebanese television going. The examples mentioned above of new shows introduced on some channels, and that are recycling and upcycling the same subjects with new and old guests the audience has come to know, prove that channels still think they can offer the viewers what keeps on amazing them.

When I was preparing for the thesis and trying to set up interviews, some people I encountered or worked with repeatedly told me that they think the talk shows are doing the LGBT community in Lebanon a favour by tackling such taboo subjects and inciting people to think about the rights of the queer community. Neshan Der Hartounian, the presenter of *Ana Heik*, told me that by choosing to dedicate episodes to gay marriage, lesbians, and trans people, he wants to help remove the stigma surrounding these topics. Analysing the episodes of the many social talk shows one cannot totally agree, as guests present in some of these shows like clerics shifted the conversation toward derogative,

¹⁶² Jane Shattuc, ““Go Ricki”: politics, perversion, and pleasure in the 1990’s” in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Eds Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 213.

¹⁶³ Shattuc, ““Go Ricki”: politics, perversion, and pleasure in the 1990’s”, 217.

demeaning, and sometimes insulting discourse.

My colleagues' and Neshan's opinion correspond with what Jane Shattuc claims using the homosexual theme the shows are "at their worst...exploited and made people inured to social injustice. But at their best, they finally offered an active, even aggressive 'in our face' identity to people who have been represented either as victims or perverts by a dominant culture."¹⁶⁴ Sara Mourad, in her work on the mediation of sex in post-war Lebanon, argues that while the talk shows helped to circulate the sectarian discourse in the country, they certainly "allowed the public articulation of minor discourses, and have therefore, in the process, contributed to the emergence of counterpublics."¹⁶⁵ So could these shows be helping people society considers as "others" because of their non-normative sexuality by giving some of them a platform, or are these shows in the way they tackle these topics contributing to more stigmatization? In *Representation*, Stuart Hall argues that what unsettles a culture is the breaking of unwritten rules and codes, or what he calls "matter out of place", and that "symbolic boundaries are central to all culture".¹⁶⁶ He adds that difference paradoxically is powerful "because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order."¹⁶⁷ Laws have not been changed in Lebanon, where "sex against nature" is still punishable by law and allows the security forces to detain whoever does not adhere to the "norms." Nevertheless, the discussion of all the taboo topics from homosexuality to gay marriage on Lebanese televisions, in all its drawbacks and the critique we have to how its carried out, has certainly helped give voice to the

¹⁶⁴ Shattuc, "'Go Ricki': politics, perversion, and pleasure in the 1990's", 223.

¹⁶⁵ Mourad, "The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon", 72.

¹⁶⁶ Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'", in *Representation*, eds Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon, Second edition (Los Angeles: Milton Keynes, United Kingdom: Sage; The Open University, 2013), 226.

¹⁶⁷ Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'", 226.

people who were previously marginalized, allowing them to express themselves more freely, whether by holding a party to bid farewell to a gay friendly bar closing because of the economic crisis,¹⁶⁸ or exposing a schoolteacher's chronic sexual harassment against his pupils in Tripoli¹⁶⁹, two examples of events that took place recently and show that a change in how the Lebanese society handles what it considers as taboos might be close.

In their quest for audience and more viewership and ratings, social talk shows on Lebanese television channels have addressed controversy and continue to do so, reinventing themselves over the years under new names and formats. The economic crisis and the pandemic seem to have helped the channels give the social talk show and its controversial content a new lease on life.

¹⁶⁸ Florence Massena, "A safe space, gone': Bardo's closure marks the end of an era for Beirut's queer community", The New Arab, 18th of November 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/features/bardos-closure-spells-end-era-beiruts-queer-scene>.

¹⁶⁹ Louay Faour, "Lebanese teacher sacked, investigated over alleged sexual harassment of schoolgirls", The New Arab, 8th of December 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/lebanese-teacher-investigated-over-sexual-harassment-claims>.

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