

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

BEYOND THE SHELF:
DVD CULTURE IN LEBANON IN THE DIGITAL AGE

by
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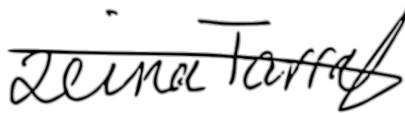
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To my Professor and Advisor Blake Atwood, thank you for supporting and encouraging me to keep moving forward.

To my mom, thank you for believing in me, I owe it all to you.

Finally, to my best friend, Pia Mansour, thank you for walking this journey with me.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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With digital technologies creating new updated and trendier ways for people to consume media, DVDs remain essential to this provision. Throughout the first chapter, we get an understanding of the distribution process of DVDs in Lebanon and its role in providing content throughout the years. In the second chapter, we understand how important the role of DVDs was during the pandemic in enabling people to reach media content when formal entities and other internet technologies were not easily accessible. The third chapter explains the ongoing effect of the financial crisis and the ways DVDs continue to survive even with the reopening of formal entities. This chapter permits us to see that DVD artefacts were capable of adapting to new trends to ensure a longer existence. All three chapters help readers understand why DVDs should not be underestimated nor understudied when one wishes to understand how people in Lebanon reach global media. This thesis is especially important because it opposes popular beliefs that DVD artefacts are considered as “old media” and that they will eventually be ultimately forgotten.

Keywords: DVDs, artefact, informal media, formal media, underground, overground, piracy.

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INTRODUCTION

“We have entered a moment when movies, like most media, are distributed and consumed through digital systems, giving the appearance that movies have become ubiquitous and intangible” (Herbert, 2014, p.2).

“Intangibility,” though a word that might seem vague and unidentified, is essential to understanding its pair, “tangibility,” which was once an identification of reality, a sort of proof of the existence of an object thanks to the fact that it could be observed, seen, and touched. When it comes to media and their development in the world, tangibility may seem to be a historical fact rather than a current phenomenon because most new media are now delivered and received through invisible digital chains where no tangible object seems necessary for consumers to acquire the media to which they seek access. However, to believe and agree with the idea that tangible media are outdated would mean to agree that all material devices such as DVDs are no longer essential to the consumption of global media. Also, to disregard tangibility would mean to ignore the culture value that society has ascribed to it.

When I first started this thesis, I was amazed by how common it is for people in Lebanon to think that DVD artefacts are no longer standard access tools for global media. So *why* DVDs? Is a question I will be answering in different ways in every chapter of this paper because reaching a point where people would shift their perspective and vague understanding of the fascination and importance of the artefact in the consumption of global media in Lebanon is one of the essential goals of this thesis. Many of the people who asked me about my topic had similar reactions, implying that when it comes to the access of DVDs, especially when buying them, renting them, and re-distributing them, they are not seen as a very interesting topic to be studied and discussed. But what should

be kept in mind when reading this thesis is that viewing the artefact as somewhat regular is not even close to the description of the distribution and consumption of DVDs in Lebanon. What people have identified as a simple and not strange artefact in Lebanon is considered a serious crime in other countries such as Iran. As Atwood (2021) discussed in his book *Underground*, to participate in the process of distributing or receiving DVD copies in Iran would cause serious legal damages to those involved. After the government implemented a ban on the artefact “video dealing became completely informal work marked by its mobility as much as its criminality” (Atwood, 2021, p.101). Furthermore, the common belief that buying pirated copies in broad daylight is especially fascinating to me because what seems as an underground informal process in other countries is believed to be an overground formal reality in Lebanon. Therefore, not only is *why* DVDs a major question that needs to be answered, but also *how* and *where* were they reached.

Throughout this thesis, I have used different terms such as underground process and informal media to identify illegal copies and the distribution of DVDs. The term underground also signifies the DVD transactions that were happening in the shadows of the Lebanese media industry. I identify the underground process of DVDs as the informal circulation of DVDs between consumers and distributors in ways that are perceived unusual or rather secretive compared to overground processes which happen in broad daylight. Examples include DVD shop owners secretly opening their stores, afterhours deliveries and consumer to consumer stairs exchanges. The term piracy also shows up to indicate none-original copies of DVDs or illegal websites. I believe these key terms are essential to the understanding of the information they accompany. Furthermore, the term artefact is used instead of DVDs in many instances to describe the medium as a tangible tool of access.

In order to better understand how DVDs were perceived prior to the financial crisis, during extreme situations and during the crisis, I have used interviews as a main methodology to gather the required data. All in all, around 20 interviews were conducted. Almost 10 different shops across Lebanon were chosen for interviews. I believe that choosing shops from different areas has permitted the understanding of the cultural backgrounds affiliated with the areas chosen which affects the different media consumption choices of many of the consumers. Also, interviews with consumers that were at the shops during the visits were also conducted. This has permitted me to choose random consumers of DVDs during a time where they were buying or renting them. Also, many of the interviews were conducted with friends and family members to be able to gather unfiltered information. Many of the stores I visited have hesitated to discuss in details many of the questions asked because they feared they would be legally affected. Even though censorship on these stores is not quite strict, it does not change the fact that these pirated copies were being illegally sold. Also, being fined for participating in their distribution of DVDs is possible, which explains their hesitation.

In this thesis, I focus on the informal distribution of DVDs in Lebanon and the role they play in the consumption of media. I argue that informal DVDs are essential to the consumption of global media in Lebanon and their existence in the media world is used as a primary not secondary way to access entertainment media. Throughout the chapters, an understanding of the distribution of and accessibility to the artefact will be examined. An explanation of the role that DVDs play to reach global media in Lebanon will be thoroughly displayed throughout the different chapters. While many scholars identify DVD consumption as one of many ways for people to reach entertainment, in Lebanon, the artefact is an essential and primary access tool for people to consume

international media. While formal entities and internet media are also used in Lebanon, DVD consumption remains primary to reaching media. The information used in this thesis was gathered through different interviews that targeted those who consume DVDs and those who distribute them. Though one might think that the distribution process is usually clear; in this case, it will become evident that the distributors and consumers' roles in some instances were interchangeable. In the second chapter of this thesis, we will see that the distribution process of DVDs was no longer related to just DVD shop owners and their consumers. Due to the lockdown restrictions that were implemented, people who were not able to leave their homes were exchanging DVDs with their neighbors and friends. This has shown that the chain that included distributors and consumers was no longer clear because many of the consumers were suddenly the distributors.

Throughout this thesis I explain the different ways people gather global media in Lebanon. In doing so, this thesis will be expanding discussions on the essentiality of informal media and pirated content, most specifically DVDs, to access content especially in countries or situations where formal entities are not easily accessed. Against the backdrop of popular discourse, this thesis will highlight the importance of informal media and underground processes in countries where formal entities were not available to everyone. In addition, the examples used throughout the chapters will make it clear why gathering data using different methodologies could not have been possible to reach the outcome of this thesis. As informal media is seen as a sort of taboo and illegal action in most countries, finding tangible data that do not include interviews and other sorts of on ground research is not possible. In order to study underground procedures in Lebanon, such as the exchange and consumption of pirated DVDs, this thesis has included one on one interviews with those who interact with the artefact. Whether the distribution process

includes transmitting information from DVD shop owners to consumers or consumer to consumer exchange of content, the role of DVDs as a main media tool will be highlighted and understood by the readers. I have tried my best to randomly choose the shops and consumers that have participated in this study because it is important to show the common cultural beliefs people have on the artefact and their opposite responses to the medium.

A. From Secondary to Primary

While discussing piracy is not a new topic to scholars, most have focused on internet piracy when discussing the matter. In Lobato's book *Proxy Wars*, informal internet websites were discussed as an alternative to those that were not being able to access formal entities such as Netflix. While Lobato's book discusses geo-blocking and VPNs as main reasons for people to look for alternatives, this thesis is agreeing on the availability of Netflix and other websites however, their lack of accessibility being a main issue due to the poor internet infrastructure in the country. Moreover, this thesis is adding DVDs as a way for people to reach global media instead of just focusing on pirated websites. While it is true that in many countries piracy is used even though formal entities are easily accessible, in countries such as Cuba or Lebanon, many consumers could not have reached the content they required if it weren't for pirated DVDs and informal media. Lebanon has been going through an extreme economic crisis since 2019, including the deterioration of the local currency, inflation, the absence of electricity, and the shortage of fuel. In such a country, internet access is naturally affected by the protracted crisis. The poor internet infrastructure and the ongoing financial crisis have led to internet media being harder to access. Also, the fact that people could no longer pay without having international cards has made it harder for people to consume media through platforms

such as Netflix, Disney+, and similar media platforms. This ongoing crisis has led people to depend on DVDs to reach the global media they seek. Also, like other countries, Lebanon's government imposed strict stay at home rules during the pandemic. Therefore, how could a country with little internet availability access media during lockdown?

Finally, DVD stores in Lebanon are quite common due to the lack of governmental policies; Also, DVD stores are cultural artefacts that are normalized in the Lebanese society. As DVD stores are easily accessible and culturally considered as formal, considering pirated DVD copies as a main tool to reach global media has never been perceived as an underground process in Lebanon. As the internet in Lebanon was never quite effective in many areas, watching movies on pirated websites is frustrating at times. This means that even before the crisis, not everyone could happily watch digital movies from home; thus, most people have counted on their neighborhood DVD shop to access new movie releases.

B. DVD Culture Over the Years

This literature review aims to examine the consumption patterns, trends, challenges, and future perspectives related to DVDs. Despite the rapid growth of digital media and streaming services, DVDs still hold a significant position in the entertainment industry. This review synthesizes relevant research articles and books to provide a comprehensive overview of DVD consumption.

In his book *Movie Culture, and Technology: The DVD Revolution*, Barlow (2005) gave a great understanding of the introduction of the DVD and how it marked one of history's most important technological innovations. The book describes thoroughly how DVDs helped people consume media from the comfort of their homes, giving

consumers the experience of a theater with a more personalized experience. Though the book raises many important points, Barlow's book does not really focus on the competition of internet media and how it might have affected DVD culture. Moreover, his book focuses on countries such as the US which does not resemble the case in other countries such as Lebanon.

In another book, *Cult Collectors*, Geraghty (2014) discussed how different people collect tangible media artifacts due to their emotional attachment to the objects or because they are interested in keeping a tangible copy as a sort of nostalgia or focal point for fans. The author also recognizes new technologies such internet websites where they become sites of memory and fan cult communities. While the article is quite important especially in recognizing the connections between fans and the commodities they consume, it has failed to recognize the fact that many of those who collect these tangible artefacts are doing so because it might be an only way for them to reach global media. While it is true that media collections happen due to sentimental attachments, the author also mentioned that many of those that collect them do so before these artefacts become historical. This thesis will show that though some authors believe that DVD artefacts are no longer perceived as primary or "new media", in countries such as Lebanon, they are not close to becoming historical or even perceived as such.

C. DVD Artefacts as a Historical medium

Authors such as Herbert (2014) discussed Video rental stores and the tangible phase of movies where consumers accessed mainly global media through these stores. Though this book gives a very important history on video stores, especially in their peak between the 1980's and 2000s, it has mainly focused on DVDs as being a historical medium instead of one that still plays a major role in the consumption of global media today. To extend on Herbert (2014)'s book, this thesis will be showing that DVDs and their shops in Lebanon are still considered as an essential way for people to reach media. Moreover, they are not perceived as a historical precedent to digital media, instead, they are seen as media that can be used with the internet and other forms of access tool; as complementary instead of a historical precedent.

In the book "On Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of movies", Tryon (2019) discussed that with home entertainment media and the many entertainment media platforms that are emerging, many of these digital deliveries are affecting television and mostly the film industry as a whole. However, with all the changes that are happening, and the fact that people could easily access the content they require through their phones and other digital objects, it has also affected physical media formats such as DVDs or Blu-ray. Though Tryon (2019) makes very important points in his book, the fact that people accessing entertainment media from anywhere they like affects the purchase of DVDs is not ultimately applicable in the case of Lebanon and its consumer's preferred media choices. This thesis shows that though many individuals can access internet media, they would still prefer consuming entertainment content through DVDs.

D. Piracy During Lockdown

Against the backdrop of popular discourse on piracy surges during lockdown, scholarly debates about the pandemic and entertainment emerged. However, media scholars have mainly focused on *formal* digital modes of access and circulation. Authors such as Blasco et al. (2021) focus on discussing the usage of cinema movies to aid health workers gain a more objective view of the pandemic. While this approach is quite interesting, the authors failed to discuss how health liners will be able to access the media content described. Additionally, scholars such as Kavas (2021) and Awasya et al. (2021) discussed the pandemic and entertainment. However, Kavas (2021) mentioned piracy as a negative effect of digital media surge but failed to recognize it as an alternative in countries that do not have easy access to formal content since theaters were closed. Lastly, several researchers such as Rahman et al. and Dixit et al. took to discuss media use and the lockdown by identifying its relationship to binge-watching.

To extend Humphreys' (2020) work, I intend to research the consumption of informal media in a country that has not always suffered technological advancement gaps. This thesis is especially important because scholars have prioritized formal means of circulation and neglected to identify informal media as a main source of media consumption because they presuppose the availability of internet infrastructure in most countries.

As revealed in this literature review, scholars of media have focused mainly on digital formal entities and digital informal ways for people to consume media during a time where formal platforms such as theaters or other sorts of formal none-digital media were not accessible. While very few studies have focused on informal none-digital forms of media consumption, it is especially important to recognize tangible media such as DVD

artefacts as an essential tool to reach media in Lebanon. By serving the topic of the importance of DVD artefacts in Lebanon, I fill this gap and investigate the role this artefact played before internet media became popular, during a time where digital media could not have been easily accessed and during an on-going financial crisis. In this way, this thesis will challenge scholars to refocus on tangible media as essential and primary to reaching media even with all the technological advancements that are emerging.

E. Thesis Structure

To be able to fill the gap in the existing scholarship on DVD consumption as a primary gateway for people to reach entertainment media, this thesis was divided into three chapters.

The main argument of the first chapter is that DVDs are a main part of the Lebanese culture and their usage has always been primary even before internet media became popular. In this chapter, I explain the history of DVDs and their usage throughout the years. The chapter highlights the normality of consuming informal media in broad daylight. Whether consumer or distributor, consuming or providing DVDs is a normalized process in Lebanon that is considerably perceived as formal by the Lebanese people even though it is not. Also, the chapter provides an understanding of the aesthetics of some of the visited stores and their importance in the Lebanese culture. Finally, based on the interviews I conducted, this thesis has demonstrated the significance of DVDs even after digital technologies emerged.

The main argument of the second chapter is that tangible media such as DVDs and the physical aspects that are linked to such artefacts play a major role in the media world in Lebanon. Even in situations where people had to limit their physical contact,

they would still take risks to reach the medium. In this second chapter, it will become clear that though people have treated DVDs and their reaching process as normal, consumers and distributors had to undergo illegal ways to help people retrieve the artefact during the pandemic. As the first chapter indicated that going in a DVD store and buying a pirated copy is ultimately acceptable in Lebanon, due to lockdown restrictions that have obliged most stores to remain closed, DVD shop owners were illegally opening their shops and providing their customers with the required content. Throughout the chapter, a focus on the importance of DVDs during lockdown especially as formal entities such as theaters remained closed, and the dependency on DVDs for people to reach global media will be obvious. As the country was going through economic collapse prior to the beginning of the pandemic, the use of digital technologies remained difficult during lockdown due to the constant electricity cuts most areas in Lebanon were enduring. This chapter not only highlights the importance of DVDs to reaching global media, it also shows the importance and beauty of its tangibility to those that use it.

The purpose of the third chapter is to show that even with an on-going financial crisis and the closure of most stores in different industries, DVD shops are continuing to survive and even finding new ways to adapt to new media trends such as online DVD shopping. This chapter demonstrates that DVD consumption remained essential during the ongoing financial crisis. In this part, interviews with shop owners who struggled to find new ways to keep their stores open will be portrayed. Not only did DVD shops survive despite the crisis, the pandemic, and the financial deterioration of the country, they were also adapting to new trends such as featuring online galleries and Instagram competition that permitted them to participate in the technological advancement that most industries are going through. This adaptation has permitted the tangible artefact to

participate in the intangible internet world, making both traditional and digital media intertwined in a way that shows that both tangible and intangible media can co-exist without one being considered as an ancestral precedent of the other.

Together these three chapters give their readers a deep understanding of the important role DVDs play in Lebanon whether before the internet became familiar, during a pandemic that affected most formal media industries, or during an on-going financial crisis. It is safe to say that against the backdrop of scholarly articles on media consumption and pirated content, this thesis shows the essentiality of pirated DVDs for people to reach global media in Lebanon. Throughout the different chapters, readers will understand *why* DVDs are essential when one wants to study media consumption in Lebanon. Those that understand the importance of reaching media will view the artefact as a major gateway rather than one of many forms for people to consume entertainment. With informal media and piracy being used as a main way for people to reach media around the world, it is important to note that internet piracy could not be consumed in Lebanon as much as it was in other countries which has led people to continue focusing on DVDs when seeking global media.

Finally, as this thesis focuses on access and distribution, I intend to focus on the theory of distribution as the main theory to prove my points. Different authors mentioned in the below chapters such as Tran (2015) and Cubitt (2005), have discussed this theory, and their arguments will be mentioned to prove their relevance to this thesis.

CHAPTER I

DVD SHOPS AS CULTURAL SPACES

*“The Beauty of Artifacts is in how they reassure us
we’re not the first to die”- Simon Van Booy.*

A. For the Love of DVDs

When I first decided on writing this thesis, many of my close acquaintances’ responses implied a sort of “normality” or maybe “boringness” for my choice of topic. My friend Pia even asked, “But what is so special about something as normal as DVDs?” I replied, “The fact that you would think of them as normal encourages me to show my readers how far they are from normality.”

To better understand why DVDs are an interesting and important topic when discussing media culture in Lebanon one must first look at the beginning of its use. DVD stores in Lebanon are common sights that can be found all around the country, including urban and rural areas. In order to study this history, I looked at the shops that have been selling DVDs—and before them videocassettes—for a long time. My research revealed tremendous diversity in how different shops in different areas deal in movies as material objects. The differences in trade were largely due to the common cultural traits established in specific areas. For example, the interests of a DVD shop I visited in Hamra area were different from those of a store I visited in Kfarehbab, Keserwan. More specifically, the choice of DVDs that consumers choose in Beirut were very different from those of Keserwan. Due to the universities and schools that are located in these areas, it become obvious that many of the consumers have chosen content that resembles the general culture located in the areas they live in. Throughout this chapter, it will

become clear how different areas perceive new media depending on their interests and the demographics of their customers.

Also, while governmental regulations in Lebanon have had many opportunities to remind its citizens of its different censorship reforms and its awareness of the illegal selling of DVDs, many shops are still available for consumption and/or renting out copies openly. In different news articles written by the New York times, The Lethbridge Herald, and the BBC, the Lebanese authorities' efforts to ban specific movies from being featured in Lebanon have been discussed. Movies such as Wonder Woman (The Lethbridge Herald, 2017), Annabelle: Creation (Screen International, 2017) were banned from Lebanese theaters. Most bans are due to the affiliation of the movies with Israel, their religious misrepresentations, or their use of sensitive information such as discussing the Hariri Assassination in the movie "Beirut Hotel" (New York Times, 2021). However, citizens were still able to watch these movies by buying a pirated DVD copy from their local DVD store. When interviewing the different DVD stores, selling pirated copies was never an issue because rarely would a police officer fine these stores though they are aware that more than 80% of their content is not original. Rami, a true representative of DVD culture, has decided to embark on his journey of selling DVDs due to his enthusiasm for global media culture.

Finally, this chapter highlights the history of DVD consumption in Lebanon, providing its readers with important knowledge on its role throughout the years as a main gateway for people to reach global media. Also, as formal entities and other technologies have advanced towards none-tangible artefacts, DVDs remained essential to those that understand its value. So why DVDs? and what role have they played in the media field over the years in Lebanon? I argue that DVDs are and always have been a part of the

Lebanese culture, making their consumption primary to reaching of global media in Lebanon.

B. Pirated DVDs and their Normality

This chapter progresses readers' understanding of the role DVDs played over the years in Lebanon, and how their consumption regardless of digital advancement, is still essential to many people.

To begin with, while online searching for stores in Hamra area, I came across interesting feedback written about a small video and music shop there: "The owner is super knowledgeable about films and movies of all kinds" (Google Comments). Honestly, well informed is an understatement to the knowledge and fascination Rami, the owner of "Rami Film and Music", has on global media. Whether DVDs were an essential part of the movie culture in Lebanon, the distribution of pirated copies although technically illegal, has historically been highly normalized in Lebanon and has not been perceived as informal, because it is systematized and complex.

At first, one must understand why DVDs make an interesting topic of discussion. In the literature review, it becomes clear how people have understudied this artefact due to the high focus of scholars on formal entities to consume global media. In some countries such as Iran, people risk their liberty in order to distribute pirated content (Atwood, 2021). This neglect of recognition of the role of informal media as a main source to reach media has made this paper essential to the acknowledgment of the importance of pirated DVDs in the consumption of global media in Lebanon. Also, the fact that pirated DVDs could be bought in broad day light in Lebanon has led the people to forget that the pirated form of this artefact is illegal; thus, its consideration as "normal"

or “boring” when people first heard about the topic. This underground yet overground process has led consumers to normalize the informality of pirated copies to the point where they could be confused as formal to some extent.

The interviews in this section will induce better understanding of the reasons people referred to informal DVDs to reach global content even in the case of Lebanese made movies. As Tran (2012) has argued, “Media piracy is not necessarily an active political decision to break the law or resist global capitalistic forces, but a ubiquitous source of access in many developing countries that is created by the social and economic constraints of the surrounding environment” (p. 53). This point is essential to the understanding of this thesis because DVD piracy in the context of this paper has proven itself as a major key player to the consumption of global media in Lebanon due to the fact that in some instances it was the only main road for people to access content. Also, as Larkin (2004) stated “If infrastructures represent attempts to order, regulate, and rationalize society, then breakdowns in their operation, or the rise of provisional and informal infrastructures, highlight the failure of that ordering and the recoding that takes its place” (Larkin, 2004, p.291). As informal entities such as the selling of DVDs have never been perceived as underground in Lebanon, this shows that the failure of having good media infrastructure has had a direct effect to this “normality” of informal media distribution and consumption in Lebanon which better explains why rarely legal actions are taken towards these industries.

C. Online Media vs DVD Artefacts

This paragraph identifies the story of Rami and the beginning of the journey that led him to opening his own store. As Rami first began his media journey by working in another store, his experience and enthusiasm regarding movie culture has led him to keep moving forward. Rami first started his journey in the early 1990s at a store called Video Chico in Hamra area. Back then, the store was working with VHS, which later shifted to DVDs in the early 2000s. “The owner of the shop was very invested in world cinema and documentaries and from him, I started to learn more about the industry” stated Rami. He also informed me that his fascination with the movie industry was the reason he joined Video Chico’s team in the first place. Many of his clients were AUB and LAU students, who were interested in watching documentaries or other genres of movies that were recommended in cinema classes. This led the team to augment their knowledge of the different types of content that are situated in global media. Taking into consideration his mentioning of selling DVDs to students for educational purposes, I asked Rami if he believes his job’s role was important to the media industry as whole. With disappointment, he believed that at some point, the shop played a main role in the access and knowledge of global media, but with all the internet access, this role is no longer as essential today as it were back then.

While Rami’s disappointment with the role of DVDs today is clear in his speech, he has had many reasons to remain open even with the competition he daily endures against streaming media. When I visited his shop, my excitement for meeting a person that truly sees DVDs for their cultural value could be easily noticed by him. Though he first requested that I come back another time, he changed his mind as if he could notice the disappointment. Nervously, I reassured him that I would make my

conversations brief and would try my best not to take a lot of his time. What was first supposed to be a fifteen-minute conversation, ended up being over an hour full of the love and hope we both have for movie culture.

Rami is still in the industry even if he no longer believes DVDs remain essential to media culture. The choice of display that he has chosen for his store gives his customers a great impression of the media culture and the items that surround it. Rami's shop is not very ordinary looking compared to other shops which sell DVDs. The setting, the design, and the location of the store is a whole scenery that heightens one's curiosity to understand the story behind Rami's specific choice of display. The store is stacked with huge wooden shelves that present hundreds of movies that are categorized according to their directors, producers, and origins. Different shops I visited were most likely dividing their content according to new releases or different genres such as Comedy or Horror. But with Rami, it was different; it was as if one has walked into a media museum that portrays all the movies that were of great success over the years.

Not only was the display purposely chosen, Rami's choice of movie distribution is also quite unique. His audience is exceptional because a specific type of people would choose Rami as their main DVD dealer. Rarely does a bystander visit and ask for new movies that are being featured in cinemas or known for being a trendy Netflix series. However, many of whom specifically target Rami's shop are clients that care to watch authentic and award-winning movies. "Old but gold" is a sentence that kept coming to mind when Rami was giving me examples on the movies he mostly sold. This display and targeted audiences reflect upon Rami's passion for what he does.

Other than the fact that Rami was enthusiastic about the movie culture, he was also more interested in working in something he loves than thinking about the financial

gain that he might obtain from his job. At some point in the conversation, Rami told me that he had informed his mom that his job and his shop are what he wants to pursue as a definitive career. He did not see himself working in a different domain because for him, it was never about the money, it was about the passion he had for movie culture. After I asked him what motivates him to work in this industry, Rami informed me that even with all the difficult times Lebanon has been going through and all the technological advancement, media artefacts have been enduring, seeing customers that still care and ask about classical movies that truly show their passion for movie culture encourages him not to give up on his long-lasting passion.

Rami also kept historical tangible media artefacts on display as a main decoration of the store. On the right side of the store, there is a small section dedicated for VCR tapes. Curiously, I wanted to know why keep all these tapes in sight and not in a storage. “Seeing them reminds us of their beauty” is a sentence Rami used to describe the guardianship of VHS and even music cassette tapes as display. Rami did not only love movie culture, but also enjoyed the physical evolution of the artefact. VHS tapes have their own sort of beauty, a timelessness in them that he believes are even more precious than DVDs. “When people used to engage with VHS tapes and experience a sort of issue with the object, it was easy for us to cut and retape the strings, which could permit them to re-use the tape. When DVDs were promoted for their simple physical appearance and easy use, people did not consider that once a DVD would get scratched, it would be nothing but media waste.” Rami’s speech was not only trying to explain that the evolution of video cassettes is not as eternal as their previous ancestor, but it also indicates how after DVDs the tangibility and physical existence of media culture was no longer a priority. If we take the internet for example, it is no secret that access to different movies

could be less time consuming than the effort of buying a DVD. However, the internet is an intangible archive that might erase different content leaving nothing but a memory of what was once an exciting movie. The fact that one could keep a realistic touchable memory of what was once a movie or cassette that brought memories and moments together, is an art piece that some people like Rami appreciate though their monetary worth is not as important as the experiences they once created.

After gathering enough knowledge about movie culture, Rami decided to leave Video Chico and open his own store. Rami decided to open his shop in 2019. When asked about the demographics of his clients, Rami informed me that his main audiences were no longer students like at Video Chico as much as they are older film enthusiasts. While I was interviewing him, an Iraqi customer entered the shop to collect an order he had asked Rami to prepare for him. When I asked him to explain the reasons he frequents Rami's store, he emphasized that Rami is a great source of media access when in need of specific authentic content. He explained, "I was looking for a specific movie that was made in 1932." While most people, including Rami, believed that the non-Russian versions of the film were the original form, this customer knew exactly what he was looking for.

Some of the consumers that visited Rami's shop wanted to own a copy of the original movie that were no longer found everywhere. This has permitted these consumers to keep their emotional attachment to these films alive and immortal. The Iraqi customer for example, asked Rami to secure a copy of the first version of the movie because he loved the music used in it. When asked what was so special about the music, he told me that the natural voice of the singer with the absence of musical instruments would give him goosebumps every time he watched the movie back in the day. I was

stunned by the fact that this client told me he still remembers the singer's voice as if it were engraved in his mind even though it was quite a while before he found out about Rami's shop and his extraordinary ability to secure copies of original movies that were very old. This Iraqi customer reminds me of Larkin (2004)'s statement that "technology, especially the media, often provides the conduit for our experience of being "inside" or "outside" history. The materiality of media creates the physical details and the quotidian sensory uses through which these experiences are formed" (Larkin, 2004, p.303). "Do you see why I believe what I do still matters?" asked Rami while pointing out at the customer with a smile on his face. "Not only do I inform people about classical movies, many of my customers introduce me to movies I never knew existed." Amazed by this public sphere in which the distributor and the consumer exchange knowledge as much as physical commodities, I couldn't but tell Rami that I wanted to ask him about the shared qualities for success in this field, but I think this customer is a great example to my future readers about the beauty and opportunities this job presents; it is its own world, a media cultural public sphere if I may say.

Many like this Iraqi customer are looking to find old classical movies that are no longer considered "trendy" or "in demand" in other DVD stores. I tried to ask other stores about *Nightmare Alley*, a movie Rami recommended that I watch. Curiously, I wanted to see if I could find the movie at a normal, commercial DVD store. As expected, many of the shops I visited pointed me to the copy of the movie that was made in 2021 while Rami was recommending the original movie produced in 1947. This is another example on why Rami specifically is exceptional in the world of cultural media in Lebanon. Not only does he provide access to movies that are available at other DVD

stores, he also provides movies that are forgotten and considered outdated but are valuable to those who know their worth.

While passion and love are among the main reasons Rami opened his store, I was interested to learn about the possible support that helps him achieve the work he performs. I asked, “What is the role of the government in limiting your work? Do you get some sort of funding in this field of work?” He informed me that the government makes his job harder than it should be because some officers decide to come from time to time and end up giving him fines if they find out about some of the pirated copies. “I don’t really care honestly; some people are willing to pay for original copies while others cannot afford them.” He did start a renting procedure where people could return the movies after they were done with them, but many would still prefer to keep the movies with them, which is why copies are still in demand. Rami believed that producers and directors should be supported, and this is why he buys original copies. But for him, not granting access to specific movies because the prices are too high is not a good enough reason to prohibit people from accessing content they asked for.

As for Lebanese movies, copies are usually sold when creators do not make originals available to the public. In many situations, Rami tried contacting the producers themselves to ask for original copies he could buy. However, the responses were always indicating a lack of budget to create originals of a specific movie. “I try everything with them! Even if I sell original copies of their movies, they would not provide me with more DVDs because they cannot afford to have a budget dedicated to large quantities.” Apparently, the myth that fines on pirated Lebanese or Arab movies are higher than world cinema is not actually correct. Throughout the different interviews conducted with DVD shop owners, it was made clear that there is no extra fee to be paid if the shop owners

were selling Lebanese or Arab movies. In fact, DVD shops try to do their best to sell original copies out of support for their fellow citizens, which is why not many pirated copies are found. In a situation where the distributor cares more than the actual creators about creating original movie copies, are pirated copies really considered pirated? How is it pirating if no original copy is yet to exist?

Another discussion point that I asked Rami about was the type of people and expertise that matter to him when and if he intends to hire employees. I was informed that other than the fact that there is no governmental support or funding for this field, most shop owners don't usually hire many people. In Rami's case, while he worked at Video Chico, there were only two employees: he and the owner. As for his own shop, he works by himself. One of the main reasons is that shops selling DVDs don't usually have large numbers of customers visiting at the same time. Also, in the case of the two other shops I visited in Adonis, the shops are family businesses run only by family members. This not only shows us that the DVD field in Lebanon is somewhat considered as a family business, it is also clear that most people hired in these shops are also chosen depending on their enthusiasm of global media culture as it was the case for Rami when he worked at Video Chico. There is a saying that is common among Lebanese people that describes that anyone can own a small business regardless of their educational backgrounds or expertise. We can see that though DVD shops can be considered as small businesses, a knowledgeable background on movie culture has ensured successful futures for those that engage in the process.

As for political obligations, DVD shop owners, including Rami, did not mention political parties as an issue to their shops because as global media such as Hollywood movies are of main interest to commercial shops, no political content is being portrayed.

Even in Rami's case, politics and political backgrounds are not a concern to him because the content he sells is appreciated for its artistic value and its political ideology. As shop owners do not gather funds or any kind of help from governmental entities, this line of work has survived throughout the years by their self-created success.

Rami also explained that the beginning of the shift from VCRs to DVDs was quite popular. Many were excited about the new medium due to the fact that it took less space because of its slim and small size. When they were first launched in Lebanon in the early 2000s, the internet was not as popular. People were very dependent on DVDs to watch global media as they were the quickest ways to stay up-to-date. I still remember the excitement we had every time we'd hear about a new movie that was launched in the US. We would visit our local DVD stores daily just to see if a pirated copy was created. Back then, most original copies were sold at larger stores such as Virgin Megastore. The stores would have original copies of new movies and new music CDs that were launched. Rarely would I decide to buy an original copy knowing I could pay a dollar to have a copy of the desired DVD by only waiting a few weeks after its launch.

This section has showed us that DVD shops, especially those that are operating based on their high passion for media culture, remain an essential part of the movie culture in Lebanon. Stores such as Rami's have shown us that not only do people choose to buy DVDs because they are cheaper or more reachable, many of those who choose to invest in the artefact do so for its historical and esthetical meaning; specifically, when it provides its consumers with a nostalgia and sense of attachment to the object itself and not just the content it provides.

D. Profession that Requires Experience and Deep Understanding

This section explains how different stores have different cultural choices when it comes to the movie selection they possess. While some stores such as Rami's have specific clientele that require unique types of movies, other stores are more used to commercial movies that are mainly new movie releases in theaters.

One thing I noticed when interviewing different store owners, is that geographical spaces affect the taste of every store. It is like every store adapts to the culture of different regions, reflecting on its local habitants' taste more than having a multi-trend that is commonly found in different areas.

In the two stores I visited in Adonis, the content found in both was nearly identical. People would choose which of these stores to visit based on the closeness of their homes to the store or its speed of having new content. However, in Rami's store, the experience he had while working at Video Chico with AUB and LAU students, who were mostly concerned with original classical movies more than commercial Hollywood trends, reflected and affected the content he chose for his own store. After he opened his store, the choice of movie classics and the knowledge he had on the movies he displayed were learned and influenced by the client's he helped.

Unlike Rami, another store I visited in Kfarehbab; for example, always portrays action movies in its new releases section. Also, the store owner always chooses to add "coming soon" posts on his Instagram page. The owner of the shop chooses this specific content because most people who visit his store request so. This common cultural interest in specific media genres might have been built in the school which is not very far from the shop. When I asked the owner of his usual clientele's demographics, most are students at the nearby Saint Coeur Kfarehbab School or students from LAU Jbeil who live in the

area. This shows that the choice of content distributed in different stores are influenced by the people who live in the shop areas. Also, it seems that the shop's clients always like to find out about new content through the Instagram platform. This has also led the store to create competitions and other sorts of online trends to keep his clients satisfied. Other than that, the clients of the three stores I visited in Keserwan are used to having clients walk in and choose the movies they wish to watch. This is one of the reasons the stores usually have more than one person working in them while Rami is the sole person at his store.

Different stores in multiple areas have different ways of informing their customers about their new movie releases. When I asked Rami about the usual way he informs his costumers of his new movie releases, he told me that a WhatsApp broadcast to the clients he thinks will like the content he downloaded is usually a very effective technique. He prepares a post that includes the director, producer and date of creation. As his clients are mostly interested in the directors, the posts he creates help them better understand why he feels the movies might interest them. Authors such as Herbert (2014) and Atwood (2021) have also discussed this point; they recognize that Video dealers are not only playing the role of distributors but they are also "arbiters of taste" (Atwood,2021). The fact that Rami and the Keserwan shop owners alter their products depending on the taste of their customers shows how their role goes beyond object distributors; they are in fact cultural media transactors. Other clients would rather call because as mentioned before, Rami's store is not the sort of shop that has many walk ins in order to trigger movie sales; his clients usually know what they want or are looking for. As Atwood (2021) described it, video dealers "serve as tastemakers, curating the content that people were able to consume and instructing them on how to interact with a new media technology" (p. 99).

On another note, during the conducted interviews, many of the interviewees that have discussed their attachment to DVDs as a way of consuming global media began before the internet was a commonplace. Some still use the artefact even after digital technologies could provide them with access. Rita, a stay-at-home mom I met at one of the stores I visited in Adonis, has told me how DVDs are one of her “go to leisure” while she waits for her kids to come back home from school. According to her, going to her local DVD shop, choosing a new movie to watch, and going back home, is a sort of routine she does at least once per week. When I asked Rita why DVDs instead of internet movies or maybe watching some regular television series, she answered that “the fact that I get to leave the house and go to the store gives me the sense that I went out instead of just picking a movie from the couch”. The different reasons for consuming DVDs that some of the interviewees had were related to internet issues in their area which makes digital video harder to obtain and because of their preferences in using tangible media that could be reserved with them at home. However, in Rita’s case, going and buying a DVD had its own sort of pleasure even if she could have accessed internet media. As Herbert describes it, “If we have entered an era of intangible media where the apparatuses through which we shop for and consume movies appear everywhere, all the time, and yet no place in particular, then this moment is largely inconceivable without the hard-and-fast, tangible context of the video store serving a precedent” (Herbert, 2014, p.10). One of the recurrent ideas that was shared throughout the different shops in Lebanon is their recognition of the essentiality of tangible media regardless of the fact that intangible media exists in no specific time or space. For us to recognize the internet, we must first acknowledge its ancestral precedent which is the DVD. Also, even after the recognition

of DVDs as a cultural precedent, one might still choose to keep that ancestor as the main object to reach global media.

As the past and current understanding of DVD culture in Lebanon became clearer, it is a must to end this section with what could be considered as the future of DVDs. Rami discussed what he believes is the possible future of DVDs and other forms of tangible artefacts. When he showed me some of his DVD collections, there were DVD sets that dated years back. “Though I know people can now find them on eBay or Amazon, there is a certain beauty in having an original copy that existed in the time of these films.” Rami’s words emphasize that the artefact so many years after it was created somehow situates the consumer at the time of the movie’s creation. This permits the consumers to stop in time for a while and admire the worth and excitement such artefacts brought to us when they were first created. As Larkin (2004) stated:

“The infrastructure of reproduction created by piracy generates material and sensorial effects on both media and their consumers. Cheap tape recorders, old televisions, blurred videos that are the copy of a copy of a copy—these are the material distortions endemic to the reproduction of media goods in situations of poverty and illegality, and they shape the ways these media take on cultural value and act on individuals and group” (Larkin, 2004).

Pirated objects such as DVDs have proven to provide their consumers with much more than just content; they have created a bond or even a sensory attachment to the artefact, making it sure that the object has always been and might always be part of the Lebanese culture.

Rami also elaborated that he preferred dividing his DVDs according to their different directors and nationalities. The time and spaces of the DVDs was not a main technic he would use which instead of situating the consumers in the time and space of the movies is creating a sense of timelessness. “You can see how everything is set in alphabetical order depending on the country, continent and the directors; This media

library is no longer found nowadays, not even in the online world.” A funny link he gave was by comparing DVDs to wine. The older the DVD, the more important it becomes. I would like to think of what Rami discussed as a form of media immortality; the longer we hold on to these artefacts, the more we make sure they never die. Herbert (2014) also recognized this concept of immortality when discussing “Hybrid Spaces”. He identified how some stores in the US would facilitate the mobility of people by not only focusing on selling video cassettes. An interesting example is a shop called “Captain Video & Tanning”. This reforming of DVDs by including them in other businesses is, as Herbert described, localizing the media industry by disengaging from it. Though one would find strange how tanning and video rental can be found in the same place, it is interesting to look at the process from the point where it seems like video stores are being adapted to the trends that were going on in the country which in this respect, can show how the artefact is remaining immortal.

Even as a DVD shop owner, Rami also uses Netflix to watch new movies. He clarified that he does not see digital media as a replacement to tangible content; he sees them as two different artefacts that are meant to help consumers reach the content they seek though each in their own way. Curiously, I asked if he thought the Netflix experience is sometimes better than DVDs, and his answer was that the major issue with Netflix and other streaming services is the content they choose to portray and the ones they decide to omit. The concept of gatekeeping makes it clear that the shows and movies found on the platforms are purely commercial, so it is not about what different consumers want as much as it is about the money the companies gain from each program. Many of the series, such as the last kingdom or the blacklist are not complete. While the series are made from different seasons, the platform provides half of them. Other situations in which streaming

services might deceive its consumers is by deciding to remove a certain movie or series from it. Netflix; for example, adds a “last day to watch” feature on certain films it is going to remove. According to Rami, this is mainly because they no longer benefit monetarily from the programs they wish to remove. This is not an experience one might go through with a DVD because other than the fact that the physical copy is owned by the customer, some shops deliver specific copies that are made upon customer demand. The two media gateways might be delivering the same content, but with tangible media, it is the customer that decides which movie he wishes to obtain and when to no longer keep it if he desires so. With all the qualities intangible media can provide, there is one it could never have: The aspect of immortality that DVDs and VCRs have provided over the years before them.

Other than the fact that digital technologies and streaming services do not reserve the physical beauties of artefacts, Rami also believes that there is a larger issue with the new content that is being created. This is also discussed in Lobato’s “Proxy Wars” article. According to Lobato, “at a certain point, it made commercial sense for Netflix to stop thinking like a new- economy Sili-con Valley company (committed to enhancing user expe-rience through innovation) and to start thinking like an old- fashioned media company (by aggressively protect-ing its rights)” (Lobato,2019, p.175).

Regardless of how they will be distributed, today’s media producers are creating commercial content that no longer has the artistic traits that were found in classical movies. Also, protecting copyright laws and ensuring exclusivity to augment profits has also become one of the main goals of media agencies. If we look at Charlie Chaplin or Mr. Bean movies, we could enjoy a series of laughs without having to listen to any words. In today’s comedy films, there are common traits we can notice in movies

created by different producers. In other words, the lack of authenticity and creativity that is situated in today's different movie genres has proven that the content is no longer as important as the money the companies would gain from the films. "Do you not notice how you can almost predict the ending in every new movie? That was never common with classics", a sentence Rami used during his interview. I dedicated the last few minutes of my interview with him to grasp his view on the future that awaits DVDs. I made my beliefs clear in that I do not believe the artefact will ever die. Though other tangible media objects have become extinct, I do not believe the same fate awaits DVDs.

In the second chapter, there will be a clear understanding of the major role DVDs played during the 2019 pandemic. I told Rami that the dependence of consumers on DVDs to reach global media during the pandemic in Lebanon is one of the major reasons I believe they continue to persist. Though it will become clear in the second chapter of the thesis that streaming media have affected central role of DVDs as a main access road to global media, it was not capable of removing it indefinitely from our lives. "Today, I still believe what I do creates change and still makes a difference, but I do fear the future of DVDs because people are becoming less interested in tangible media," Rami stated. Though he believes the end of the DVD era is not so far, he is not willing to give up on his business anytime soon. The fact that this man has dedicated his whole career to the artefact should give readers a bit of hope for the future. At the end, Rami opened his shop in 2019, which was when popular streaming services were thriving around the world.

CHAPTER II

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND DVD STORES IN LEBANON

A. From Overground to Underground

As the first chapter of this thesis has indicated, DVD stores have been part of media culture for a very long time; Thus, the distribution of such media objects is normalized in Lebanon. Entering a DVD shop and buying pirated content is “as simple as going into a supermarket” a DVD shop owner in Adonis named Joey explained. This informal process is culturally formalized by Lebanese citizens to the point where its informality is unnoticed.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, many consumer habits changed. From virtual conferences to virtual class rooms, the physical world as we knew it went online. Consumption of entertainment media during the pandemic also adapted to the situation since cinema theaters closed and new movie releases were delayed or moved online. Given these transformations, how were people consuming media entertainment? According to different American journalistic sources (Jones, 2020; Watson et al., 2021), many people relied on informal digital platforms to reach information. As Cuthbertson (2020) reported, “Online piracy has surged in popularity since countries around the world began enforcing lockdown measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, new figures have revealed” (p. 1). As for formal media sources, Netflix, HBO, Disney+ were also providing content online: “Despite the piracy, streaming strategies have paid off during the pandemic; Wall Street cheered subscriber growth for Disney+, Netflix and HBO Max as most U.S. theaters remained closed (Watson et al., 2021, p.1). Whether formal or

informal, people's media entertainment habits shifted to a new virtual realm: the online world. With digital consumption making news headlines, was digital media the only means of entertainment consumption during lockdown?

Although globally formal and informal digital media platforms were important sources of information and culture during various lockdowns, they were not the only sources. As countries' digital consumption ballooned during the pandemic, Lebanon's access to digital platforms was complicated by weak internet infrastructure, electricity cuts, and a devastating financial crisis that began in 2019. With Lebanon's situation deteriorating, how were citizens able to consume media during lockdown? This question is especially pressing because access to formal distribution methods was severely limited with movie theaters closed, the lack of internet connection, and the inability of many Lebanese to pay for Netflix and other VOD services. With the lack of digital availability, how did people's preferences change in terms of informal media access during the pandemic in Lebanon, and why were their preferences shifted?

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that DVD pirate stores were a primary gateway for people to access entertainment media content during the pandemic and concurrent financial crisis because online digital media was not easily accessible. This section will also explain how, although DVD pirate stores are normalized in Lebanese culture, their distribution processes during lockdown were treated as informal. As mentioned by Joey, the owner of a DVD shop in Adonis, entering a DVD shop in Lebanon is as simple as going into a supermarket, but due to lockdown restrictions, stores were obliged to close and consumer mobility was limited to specific timeframes, which led the distribution of DVDs during that time to be constructed as an underground process.

This chapter provides an important corrective to popular discourse on piracy during the pandemic. Articles that discuss piracy and the pandemic are journalistic sources that represent the popular discourse. However, as for scholarly work, the pandemic and entertainment are the main road scholars took to discuss media consumption during lockdown. Yet, they failed to recognize piracy in the pandemic as an alternative source of information, especially in a country such as Lebanon which has been going through economic collapse. I intend to fill the scholarly gap by recognizing the consumption of DVDs as a primary media consumption tool during lockdown in Lebanon. DVDs are cultural artefacts that were exchanged in Lebanon before the pandemic; recognizing them as a primary source of access during lockdown is not meant to disregard digital piracy as another main source of access that was reachable in some areas of Lebanon.

With the help of insights gathered by interviewing consumers who were able to find alternative ways to reach global media during the pandemic, I argue that tangible media such as DVDs remained essential to the consumption of global media even when physical contact had to be limited. The tangibility of the artefact has proven to be an essential reason for why people enjoy DVDs as a main form to reach media. As informal media is not easily studied, the case of DVD distribution in the pandemic could not have been methodologically approached in a different way. “Each and every oral history interview opens up a world of possibilities when it comes to rethinking history and theorizing media more generally” (Atwood, 2021, p.13). The interviews conducted with the owner of a DVD shop that played the role of a channel distributor during lockdown was one of the main ways for us to understand *how* people were able to consume informal media in Lebanon when formal entities were practically out of reach. Also, because DVD

shop owners played the roles of channel distributors and consumer to consumer exchange was another main gate way for people to reach DVD artefacts, interviewing these channel members is mostly important to be able to gather reliable information that could not have been identified otherwise

B. An Unexpected Turn

This section will first discuss how DVD shop owners were able to deliver content to their consumers regardless of the strict mobility restrictions. Drawing on interviews conducted with Joey, the owner of the DVD shop in Adonis and the consumers interviewed in a second DVD shop I visited, the first part traces the process required for consumers to reach pirated DVDs during the pandemic lockdowns. In the second part, I describe consumer-to-consumer exchanges that were central to how people accessed media during these periods. During the number of visits to DVD stores, I was fortunate to encounter people who found interesting new ways to reach entertainment media. In the last part of this chapter, a brief description of how people who were fortunate to use digital platforms to reach global media is explained. Furthermore, an understanding of alternative ways people used to gather digital platforms is also portrayed. As VOD and formal digital platforms such as Netflix were restricted due to banking conflicts, people were provided with alternative means of digital media to consume new global media. Finally, I was privileged enough to visit a DVD store in Achrafieh two years after the lockdown restrictions were lifted. The shop owner provided great intel on how he could provide his clients with content during the stay-at-home rule and he also informed me about the post lockdown changes the industry has went through. The last section of the chapter will portray *why* people's media habits had to change and show a glimpse of the

post lockdown media practices of people especially after formal entities such as theaters reopened.

When the first COVID-19 cases reached Lebanon, it didn't take long before the government implemented a stay-at-home rule. During the first few weeks when the situation was still overwhelming to everyone, most places abided by the rules and closed their shops out of fear of catching the virus. The government also created a website that provided permits for people who wished to go out. Nonessential stores such as clothing shops and video stores, had to remain closed until further notice. While days passed, people, such as bloggers and influencers, started to post about a few "stay at home" things one could do. The main topic that kept appearing on my feed was new must-watch series Netflix released.

Two years since the pandemic began, my friends and I had a group chat on WhatsApp about the struggles they were facing to watch new movies especially with all the internet cuts happening in Keserwan. "If not online, how were you able to watch movies during lockdown?" I asked curiously. Pia, a group member, answered that she mostly exchanged DVDs with her sister every time she visited her. As time passed and lockdown restrictions were completely forgotten, Pia's response still stuck with me: With the high amount of electricity cuts, *how* were people consuming informal media during lockdown? Was consumer-to-consumer exchange a main substitute for digital piracy, or were there different alternative forms of media distribution?

To better understand media consumption during lockdown, interviews with DVD shops that belong in different areas of the countries were conducted. While the DVD shops mentioned in this section are in different areas of Lebanon surprisingly, most shop

owners explained that they were able to provide content to their customers regardless of the stay-at-home rule.

Joey, one shop owner in Adonis Lebanon, explained that although the lockdown obliged all nonessential stores to close, his shop remained opened. One of the methods used to avoid getting a police fine was closing the metal gate of the shop while keeping the lights on inside. Customers would leave their homes with a supermarket permit but use it to pass by Joey's shop. People stood in front of the metal door and knocked to inform Joey of their arrival. He then opened the glass door to take customer's orders and kept the metal gate closed before handing out the movies so that no one would suspect his shop was open. This undercover process lasted for a while before one of his customers informed the authorities about him, which ended with Joey getting a fine for keeping his shop open. Shockingly, the fine did not stop Joey from continuing his undercover process, and at some point, he even "felt like a spy". Why would a DVD shop owner liken himself to a secret agent? Joey then explained that he started delivering DVDs to the doorstep of his loyal customers through two different options: day and night deliveries.

In the first option, Joey took several orders from customers who wanted their movies delivered to them in day time. To achieve the deliveries, Joey collected a good number of DVDs and gave them to the delivery driver of the supermarket next door. Legally, supermarkets were allowed to deliver groceries before 5pm, and cops would not check what delivery guys were carrying. This distribution was more expensive for customers because Joey had to pay a fee for the transport, but it was also efficient because consumers could receive the content they wanted at a time where there were no alternative ways.

As for night deliveries, Joey went through the same process but with him delivering the content to his clients instead of a delivery guy. Since cops rarely roamed the streets at night, sneaking out and delivering content to consumers was an easier and cheaper process. The so-called spy, used to meet his customers at the entrance of their buildings and provide them with the movies they requested before moving to the next client.

Though DVD deliveries were one way for Joey to distribute content, he also worked on an application called “Flex” which would stream all types of informal content that are not found on Netflix. While Joey’s application was formally retrieved by consumers, all the content on the app were downloaded informally. The app was meant to provide consumers who were able to access internet servers with universal content that is found on different formal platforms. According to Joey, the distinctive feature of the app is that its content: “is taken from multiple platforms, so instead of paying different memberships for different platforms such as Netflix, Shahid, and HBO, people would pay one membership fee to Flex and access double the amount of content found on just one app”, stated Joey. When I asked him why he decided to create this app in the middle of lockdown, he replied that deliveries would only limit his work to nearby places while the application would help people access informal content from any area that has access to an internet connection.

The most important part of the interviews conducted with Joey is understanding that DVD shop owners were essential to the distribution of pirated DVDs during the 2020 lockdown in Lebanon. The lack of internet connectivity in the country has led its consumers to find alternative ways to consume media, and that is why DVDs played an undeniably important role of access to new movie content. It is no secret that countries

all over the world access informal media: “We know that around the globe, most people access cinema through informal means of distribution, including analog and digital video” (Atwood, 2021, p.11). Though Lebanon’s consumption of informal entertainment is not out of the ordinary, its distribution process and consumption tools during lockdown were different from what most scholars have discussed.

In brief, pirated DVDs were a main way for people to reach global media in Lebanon during the 2020 lockdown. However, what ruled out as informal during the stay-at-home rule was Joey’s undercover deliveries of these artefacts and not their global view as informal because although Joey’s shop sells informal copies of movies, this informality was never culturally perceived as an underground procedure. Unquestionably, his ways were informal, but they managed to deliver access to those that desired it. As Cubitt discusses in his theory on distribution “Bought, borrowed, bartered, stolen or given, the object must somehow arrive” (Cubitt, 2005, p.195). Scholarship on media and informality have circled around illegality and copyright laws (Lobato, 2008), and this lead the question of context to be neglected by lots of media scholars. “Distribution acquires new shades of meaning in different contexts” (Lobato, 2008, p.10). In the context of this chapter, Joey was able to distribute cultural media to people who might not have reached content otherwise. It would be wrong to focus on the illegality of the distribution process since formal alternative forms of circulation were practically unavailable in Lebanon.

Additional to Joey, other shop owners were also able to provide content during the crisis. One of the stores I visited was almost two blocks away from Joey’s store, and while I wanted to interview the owner to see if he was also able to provide content during the stay-at-home rule, he was hesitant to answer my questions. Understandably, Joey was a friend of mine, and while I asked him my questions, I assured him that his shop and full

name would be left out of this paper. However, with Ralph, the shop owner of the second DVD store, I couldn't expect him to trust my discreetness since I was an occasional customer at his store. The only information I could get from Ralph was that he sometimes "delivered" content to customers nearby during quarantine. As both Joey and Ralph were competitors whose shops were just a block away from each other, I could only assume that by "delivered", Ralph meant he had undergone a similar process to Joey's.

Max, the owner of a well-known DVD shop in Achrafieh, was also capable of providing his customers with DVDs during lockdown. According to him, the distribution of DVDs through a delivery service is not something he initiated during the pandemic. Max has always seen delivery methods as a better way to assess his customer's need so he has always hired delivery guys throughout the twenty-five years he's been in business. Ultimately, many of the reviews found on Max's shop were also discussing his fondness of the field and this "special" service he has always provided. When I first visited him, I was excited to see that his choice of store esthetics was similar to that of Rami's shop. The wall that faces the main entrance door was stacked with DVDs with the word "ORIGINAL" hanging above them. This is quite interesting because it shows how the consideration of owning original copies is also portrayed as sort of trophy that deserves to be hung above the wall.

Contrarily to how other countries attend to the selling of pirated copies, in this shop, they were the main objects of the store. The whole surrounding of the store was stacked with DVD copies that were divided depending on their directors or the interest of Max's usual customers. I asked Max if his main audience had a specific type of movie genre that was considered as common interest in this area of Lebanon; like Rami's audiences, Max's customers were fond of old original movies and directors who would

mainly produce work related to historical events such as world wars I and II. What stood out to me, however, was that most of the DVDs that were placed on the shelves were in French. Though there is an old Lebanese saying that describes residents of Achrafieh as “Frenchie”, I haven’t quite thought of that saying as a general rule that might apply to movie preferences. Luckily, while I was in the shop, a customer walked in to ask if Max had prepared her order. The DVDs she requested were all French original movies that were produced in the 1980’s.

The only thing I could think of at that moment was how similar yet different are the tastes of Rami and Max’s customers even if their shops are around twenty minutes away from each other. This takes me back to the concept where geographical areas create a sort of public sphere in which its residents share common interests even in things that are usually considered as private taste such as the movie world. Even if both shops are considered to be a part of Beirut, the cultural similarities and differences in their customer’s movie choices resemble that of the citizens that belong in a specific region. Moreover, the fact that most customers have treated these shops as cultural spaces where they could discuss their likings of movies, even requesting specific content that might not be available globally and openly; for example, movies that are now considered historic and somewhat hard to find without having access to very large libraries such as those that are owned or reachable by these DVD owners, make an interesting point that reminds me of a similar experience that Tran (2015) discussed in his article on piracy in Vietnam. According to him, “pirate and grey-market practices have been vectors not only of ‘consumption’ in a narrow sense but also of cultural participation, education, and innovation” (Tran, 2015, p.51).

But were DVD shop owners the main channel distributors for pirated DVDs during lockdown or were consumers able to find new ways to reach data?

When I interviewed customers that entered the store, I was capable of understanding the different consumer access roads they chose to consume media. It is safe to say that some people relied on watching movies at the homes of people who could access internet servers or by exchanging DVDs with their neighbors.

Luckily, while I was in Ralph's store, three customers entered. One of them asked Ralph about new movie releases and he pointed his finger to a section that contains new pirated content Ralph created. "I'm glad we can start visiting stores again to pick up new movies; my friends and I really struggled to watch interesting new content when the lockdown restrictions were so strict because the internet in our homes was hell" I stated, hoping she might answer with a few insights on how she was able to consume movie entertainment during lockdown. "Tell me about it! I was mostly sleeping over at my cousin's house because in her area, we could easily watch Netflix without being interrupted by the slow internet connection", she answered. The woman also informed me that her cousin's building contained its own generator which made it easier for habitants to use internet servers because electricity cuts were not as frequent as they were elsewhere. I informed the woman that my friends and I used to meet at the supermarket and exchanged a few DVDs we owned from before the lockdown. Unexpectedly, another customer at the shop interrupted our conversation to tell us that her youngest daughter used to exchange DVDs with her neighbors when the electricity was back in their building.

What the mom stated was very true; it's amazing how consumers found new access roads to reach entertainment media. Like this woman's daughter, many of the

friends I chatted with were exchanging DVD content with their neighbors. Lisa, a friend of mine, told me how each block in her home town had its own electricity fate. Availability of electricity in Shaile, Keserwan was not the same in every household due to the different generator subscriptions provided in that area. While one subscriber was able to guarantee a good amount of fuel for his generators, his competitor couldn't. This division of generator subscriptions has led the informal media consumption of the area's habitants to vary depending on the block they lived in. On the other hand, Lisa's friends who lived in another block sometimes exchanged DVDs with their neighbors.

It is not unfamiliar for people in Lebanon to be very close to their neighbors, so borrowing and lending neighbors a few things is somewhat part of the culture. However, in a situation in which social distancing and minor contact with others is fundamental, it's interesting to see that neighbors who exchanged DVDs between each other were willing to take that risk to reach cultural media.

The way consumers were exchanging content with their neighbors helps us think about how underestimated DVD items are. While DVD store owners were playing the role of channel distributors for people to reach informal media, consumer to consumer exchange was also a main point of access. The information gathered by the customers met at Ralph's shop and the evidence Lisa gave about her neighbors help us understand the importance of peer-to-peer exchange when alternative ways to reach informal media were limited.

In deduction, in the middle of a pandemic where contact between people was to be made for primary reasons, consumers were willing to exchange DVDs to access entertainment media. This shows the importance of accessing content even in cases where its exchange might be a risk for the parties involved. When the lady at Ralph's store talked

about the creativity people had undergone to reach media during lockdown, one could think about the risks people would take to feed their desires. This creativity comes from the desire to reach media regardless of its risks and difficulties. Also, sometimes “how people access movies is more important than what they actually see on screen” (Atwood, 2021, p.15). I believe that the role DVDs played during lockdown was not just related to access; it also gave people a sense of nostalgia for the life they had before the pandemic had changed most of their habits. Meeting a neighbor halfway to borrow a movie or visiting a friend to watch a series together has an emotional connection that places these people back to a time where physical contact and life was simpler.

In all the interviews I conducted, none of my interviewees mentioned the quality of the image these DVDs portrayed. This shows that for them, it was not just about reaching media, but also about *how* these media were reached. This tells us that though many scholars have believed that digital media has come to replace or at least exceed tangible media in ways such as providing consumers with facilitated access (Tryon, 2013), or even maybe in some cases better images, the fact that consumers would still prefer to consume DVDs even with the risk they had to take to reach them has shown the importance of consuming media through the disk regardless of its image.

Overall, this section has shown us that though one might think that the poor internet infrastructure was one of the main reasons people relied on DVDs during

lockdown, it is not the only one. The attachment of customers to the tangibility of the medium and the experiences that come with the whole consumption process of the artefact is an added value that could not be gained by other means of media objects. To presume that reaching DVDs is a facilitated process would be wrong, especially in a situation where a pandemic has obliged those who want to reach the object to go

through great effort to be able to grasp it, showing how worth it they believe DVDs to be.

C. An Ongoing Crisis

One of the main purposes of this chapter is to understand how people were consuming informal media during lockdown in Lebanon. While pirated DVDs were the essential means to global media, digital piracy was also available to some consumers. Some areas in Lebanon were able to access internet servers, and this led to the consumption of digital piracy as an alternative to formal entities that were closed. By now, the role DVDs played during lockdown is clear: They were an alternative way to consume informal media when other media channels seemed unreachable. Also, it is fundamental to recognize that the distribution process of the cultural artefact was a key element to how people were accessing cultural media; Joey's informal distribution process was an essential factor for the consumption of DVDs. Though the artefact itself is already informal, its circulation during lockdown was more perceived as informal than the artefact itself. More specifically, it is not the fact that DVD shop owners were providing pirated copies to their consumers that was considered informal, it is the distribution itself and the secretive ways these people used to deliver pirated copies that was seen as informal.

Like other countries, people who were able to access internet servers relied on informal digital websites to access their series. Maria, a friend of mine, told me that though her hometown was not really affected by electricity cuts, her online subscriptions stopped working because her card was being rejected. Maria substituted her formal media consumptions with more accessible content. She was able to watch video content from

informal websites that had free access to the series she likened. “Not only are these websites free, but they also have content Netflix hasn’t even uploaded yet.” Like Maria, many other people had to depend on informal websites because formal platforms were no longer accessible.

On the other hand, Maria’s brother could use Netflix because a DVD shop owner he usually rented from was offering Netflix accounts for a yearly Lebanese Lira fee. Providers offered their customers with different bundle deals at different prices. The providers would send an email to the customers with the user name and password they should use to access the account, and customers would pay their yearly fee at a money transfer company such as OMT and Western Union. A TikTok account named @Rodysargy is an example of people that provide access to different types of accounts such as ShahidVIP, Netflix, etc. for a specific fee. People who were able to consume formal digital platforms were either paying fresh dollars or accessing the platform through the subscription provided by DVD shop owners. Though the process of accessing a Netflix account was formal, how these accounts were created was not ethically formal. The people who subscribed to these accounts were paying a fee that is higher than the one they would have paid to Netflix if they had been able to do so. Thus, people who were able to access digital platforms to consume global media had to depend on informal websites because formal digital platforms were not easily accessible. This shows the importance of informality to consume media even with the use of none tangible media artefacts. Also, the fact that DVD shops were creating digital accounts to help people reach the content they needed even if it weren’t from a DVD artefact also shows that these distributors were also adapting to the difficult situation by considering digital piracy as an alternative instead of a replacement to DVDs.

In conclusion, consumer to consumer exchange and DVD copies were a main access gate for people to consume entertainment media, but digital pirated websites also played a role in delivering content. In the context of Lebanon, where formal digital accounts are not available due to economical purposes created by the formal institutions of the country, digital piracy is not informal; it is essential: “It is important to acknowledge the many gaps in the industry’s data sets, and to think about how these shapes our understanding of audiovisual circulation” (Lobato, 2008, p.13). If the banking sector in Lebanon had not limited the spending ability of people, would digital informal media consumption not have played a primary role in Lebanon? This question cannot be answered in this paper, but denying the financial gap banking sectors created as a probable cause for informal digital media surge would be irresponsible. “Distributors, formal and informal, make cinema texts available or unavailable to audiences” (Lobato, 2008, p.16). The DVD shop owners who offered website subscriptions played the role of channel distributors to the people who wanted access to formal digital websites but could not reach them because formal entities, such as the Lebanese banking sector, made it challenging. This ethical informality provided access to content when formal entities were not available. Also, people who could access formal entities were sometimes obliged to use informal alternatives because there was a content gap in the formal channels. Unfortunately, even if digital media was accessible to some consumers, its consideration as a primary gateway to global media in Lebanon during lockdown is not necessarily true. Most households in Lebanon suffered from electricity cuts, which still kept DVDs as the main access gate during that time.

Lebanon’s consumption habits during lockdown changed due to different factors, but some of the most important factors that influenced why people’s preferences shifted

were not caused by technological advancement nor new trends. On the contrary, most changes were inflicted upon the consumer because of the economic crisis that Lebanon has been going through since 2019. I believe that when informality is picked over formality due to inflicted circumstances, piracy should be seen as a primary access road for cultural media instead of an alternative media channel. Thus, when formal media channels are unreachable, alternatives are no longer substitutes; they become a requirement.

CHAPTER III

DVDS AND THE ONGOING FINANCIAL CRISIS

As the world started going back to normal after experiencing a hectic change due to the pandemic, Lebanon's "normality" was not quite reachable. The ongoing financial crisis that has started before the pandemic; unfortunately, continued to affect the media field and other sectors in Lebanon. As theaters and other forms of formal media re-opened, the dependency on pirated DVDs to reach global media remained essential. Moreover, through this chapter, it will become clear how after technological advancement, a pandemic, and an ongoing financial crisis, the role of DVDs is still important for people to reach their required content.

This section will discuss the major factors that lead to the media consumption shift of some consumers. Also, after conducting different interviews, it was clear that people still preferred consuming informal media after the lockdown restrictions were lifted and as formal media industries such as theaters re-opened.

Though it is clear that electricity cuts in most regions of Lebanon were a major setback in the consumption of digital video media, price inflation has also affected the fate of digital video. As discussed above, many households were capable of having more electricity because their local generator subscriber was able to secure fuel. However, due to the deterioration of the Lebanese Lira, the prices of most subscriptions were almost double the governmental price. During the lockdown, Lebanese banks decided that \$1 would be equivalent to 3900 LBP after it was originally set at 1500LBP. Even if the amount was still affordable at that rate, most industries in the country were changing their prices daily depending on the black-market rate which was almost three times higher than

the new bank rate. How does price inflation affect why people shifted their media preferences?

Because everything in the country became so expensive, paying for formal media content when it is found for free on pirated websites isn't logical. When Maria discussed her extreme usage of informal digital websites as an alternative to Netflix, she mentioned that these websites were free in addition to the fact that more content was available there than on Netflix. Most importantly, even if DVDs were part of the Lebanese media culture before the lockdown, relying on their access regardless of mobility difficulties shows their importance especially in areas that could not easily access digital servers.

According to finances online, 65% of Netflix worldwide users are millennials (Finances online, 2021). With the economic collapse in Lebanon, were Lebanese millennials able to afford formal digital subscriptions? As the economic situation in Lebanon deteriorated, "more than 55% of Lebanon's population is now trapped in poverty and struggling for bare necessities (Unesewa,2020). With the poverty rate getting higher and job opportunities getting lower, people that belong to the Netflix average age are probably no longer able to afford paying formal media subscriptions even if they were accessible. The unemployment of these youths is another probable reason why a higher rate of people depended on consuming informal media and most specifically, DVD artefacts, which remained affordable compared to other entities during lockdown.

In this final section, I will discuss how the prolonged financial crisis in Lebanon has affected the consumption of DVDs even after the decentering of the international health crisis. As my research revealed, people still preferred consuming informal media, and more specifically, pirated DVDs, after the lockdown restrictions were lifted and as formal media industries such as theaters re-opened. Shop owners carried on taking risks

and establishing new ways to continue their business as most businesses were trying to survive the crisis. I argue that even with the on-going financial crisis and most industries having to close, DVD shops are still surviving while even finding new ways to adapt to new trends such as the online selling of DVDs.

A. Weathering the Financial Crisis

Different scholars, such as Kavas (2021) and Awasya et al. (2021), discussed the negative post-pandemic fate of movie theaters caused by the high consumption of digital media usage during lockdown. This research suggests that Lebanese theaters might also witness negative consequences post pandemic but for reasons that are different from what scholars mentioned. While the effect of digital surge on theaters in developed countries is due to the comfort provided by watching a movie at home, Lebanon's theaters were affected by the highly priced movie tickets. Grand Cinemas theaters; for example, priced their tickets for a regular none-3D movie for 50.000 LBP after it was 15.000 LBP pre-pandemic. A few weeks later, the prices changed to 75.000 LBP. Though the changing prices are not surprising since the country has been experiencing inflation since 2019, pirated DVDs are being sold for 20.000 LBP after they were priced 8.000 LBP pre-covid. This shows that even though formal industries such as movie theaters re-opened, their post-lockdown prices make their consumption more difficult. Today, in 2022-2023, the prices of tickets are still getting higher. I called Grand Cinemas to check what the new prices are and surprisingly, regular tickets are now almost triple their original price. With the prices still getting higher, the dependency on formal entities such as movie theaters to consume global media diminishes. Though some people's preferences are not price dependent, people who are not loyal to formal entities might consider finding alternatives.

It is true that inflation has affected almost every sector in Lebanon, yet the prices of pirated DVDs remained affordable compared to formal entities. The consumption habits of a few colleagues and friends post pandemic show that pirated DVDs remained as an essential tool to consume global media even with the availability of formal platforms. Najwa, a mother of two, said that she'd "have to pay around 225.000 LBP for a movie and that's if she doesn't buy her kids any snacks", stated Najwa. She also added that she had always preferred buying DVDs because of their easy usage, good image, and low cost. My friend Pia; on the other hand, was excited to watch a movie at the theaters, but not as habitually as she did before the prices became so high. "I used to visit the movies every Thursday because that's when new movies are released. I'm excited to go back to movie theaters because the experience satisfies me, but I think I'll only go when a really good and interesting movie is released."

In brief, both interviewees' responses were very different from each other, but they commonly indicate the decrease of formal media consumption dependency post lockdown. Even if informal media consumption was an obligation due to the infrastructural electricity gap in the country, the financial situation that is still ongoing prevents Lebanese citizens from going back to their habitual formal media preferences. The responses not only indicated *why* consumer preferences shifted during lockdown, but also why their shifts remained after formal distribution entities such as theaters reopened.

On the other hand, when I asked Max if the re-opening of theaters post-lockdown might have affected his work in some way, he answered that customers who always bought from him were doing so because they preferred watching movies at home more than going to theaters. Therefore, could one say that theater customers will remain loyal to the cinemas they visit regardless of the situation of the country?

This discussion with Max led me back to a concept Herbert discussed in his book. The author talked about “specialty stores”, which are stores that are located in areas where there are universities or other sites of cultural activities. Though these stores appear to be part of the subcultural infrastructures of the areas, they “require a population that values more traditional forms of edification and cultural expression” (Herbert, 2014, p.114). Though this could also reinforce Rami’s points when he discussed that most of his clients have a cultural background that explains their media content choice, this can also back up the idea of why people who are able to reach and consume formal media entities such as movies in theaters would still prefer to rely on pirated DVD stores. The fact that most of these customers have a sort of attachment to DVDs could explain why the closing and re-opening of theaters does not affect their consumption habits.

One thing I did not expect was Max’s comment that some of the clients that visited his shop post-lockdown are Lebanese theater owners. “You would think that those who fight us will never join us, but in reality, I have theater owners buying pirated copies from me to see if the movies deserve to reach their theaters.”. This answer might be the strongest example on how important pirated DVDs are to the consumption of global media. While the point that pirated copies are an essential factor to the consumption of media in Lebanon has been discussed above, it is amazing to see that they are also used by formal institutions to help choose which movies should be formally accessible to consumers. Honestly, at that point, the line between formal and informal was barely visible to me.

Instead, many of the shop owners interviewed did not mention experiencing a big customer loss after lockdown restrictions were lifted. Whether this is due to the economic crisis, electricity cuts, or customer media preferences, this belief that “new media” have

surpassed “old media” does not apply to media culture in Lebanon. Many of the clients who visited the shops during my interviews were dressed in luxury items or driving new cars. Though I do not believe in judging a book by its cover, the esthetics of these people give us the impression that they are not buying pirated copies because formal entities are too expensive. Therefore, why DVDs even after formal entities became available? In the case of Max’s clients, the preference of owning a tangible copy of the media they seek is quite important to them. One of the clients I met while interviewing Max told me that the movies she asks him to prepare are meaningful to her. This shows us that there is emotional attachment to the tangible artefact due to its capacity of providing the client with a tangible object that can keep on reminding them of its meaning to them. As Barassi (2013) discussed, material objects and materiality lead to “the understanding that printed media in contrast to websites and social media platforms are fundamental in the construction of collective feelings of belonging because of their material nature” (Barassi, 2013, p.143). Though Barassi was discussing physical magazines in contrast to online magazines, his points can be adapted to DVDs and digital forms of media content. Similar to the interviews Barassi conducted, we can also conclude that those who are attached to the physicality of the object they choose to consume are doing so out of positive feelings that link them to the object regardless of the many none-tangible technologies that emerge.

Even as the world seems like it’s somewhat going back to normal, the consumption of informal media in Lebanon has remained prevalent after lockdown restrictions were lifted. The gap found in most scholarly articles is their focus on digital media consumption as a primary access tool to entertainment media and their negligence of informal media distribution as an alternative media tool especially in countries going

through exceptional situations. Moreover, digital media might be the future of media artefacts, but it would be untrue to consider it as the only main gate for media consumption. While informality might be judged or possibly understudied by scholars, its existence and importance in delivering media to those that desire it remains essential. DVD consumptions, although less popular than digital video media for scholars, remained as a primary access point for people in Lebanon to reach entertainment media before the pandemic, during lockdown, and after formal entities were re-accessible. “The very presence of an underground world of video signaled the failure of state policy to regulate media more than its successes” (Atwood, 2021, p.15). Due to high electricity cuts that were happening during lockdown, consumers were obliged to find alternative means of media consumption. Since all formal entities such as movie theaters were not easily accessible, pirated DVDs were a primary distribution tool for people to consume video media. Though some people were able to access digital platforms, DVDs were more accessible than digital pirated content. Moreover, people who could access digital content were also obliged to use informal digital media channels because formal channels such as Netflix were no longer easily accessible in the country. Finally, after lockdown restrictions were lifted and consumers were able to access movie theaters and other formal entities, DVDs are still a primary consumption of entertainment media because the effects of the ongoing financial crisis, which include high prices of formal media, are still a major issue. Also, since electricity cuts are getting worse, the reliance on internet media was also very challenging. When informality is applied to access media entertainment that could not have been accessed otherwise, it is formal institutions that failed and not informality that overstepped. Moreover, we can finally conclude that many of the consumers who continued to consume DVDs during the ongoing financial crisis were

doing so because of their likening of the object and not because they could not access other media forms. The physical attachment many consumers have for the artefact has been one of the key factors that has ensured its survival.

B. The Importance of Movies on DVD

On March 1, 2023, I found out that Oscar, from “Oscar and Friends” DVD store, has decided to permanently close his physical store. After contacting the store, I was informed that his Instagram page will remain active and online DVD orders through the page will remain accessible. It is no surprise that stores in different domains such as clothing and other sort of tangible items have shifted their presence to purely online retail. With rents raising and the economic situation in Lebanon continuing to deteriorate, it is understandable that many would shift online than risk no longer being able to sell their products. This concept is interesting in the case of the DVDs because one could perceive this process as a sort of alliance between digital and traditional media: The use of internet apps to sell traditional media discs. Oscar was always a bit more modern than other stores I visited because he used to try to integrate his store in modern trends in different ways. For example, he would create competitions on Instagram that would reward his customers with a free DVD or a discount on a series of their liking. This sort of integration is also seen as an adaptation of traditional and new media in the same environment which reinforces the idea that both are meant to co-exist with each other and not replace one another.

Can one perceive the shift from physical to online stores as the future of DVD shops? While some might believe that DVDs all together will no longer be essential and possibly be extinct when it comes to the consumption of global media and with internet

media getting stronger every day, one cannot ignore that this shift might be exactly what the future of the artefact entails.

As I was scrolling my Instagram feed, I came across a DVD shop called @dvdfactorylb. The concept of the store is to deliver content purely through their online platforms. This store did not have a physical store to begin with, which reinforces the idea that this concept might as well be the future of DVDs in Lebanon. This specific shop has a link in its page's biography that takes you directly to the movie gallery he already produced. So, one would surf a link called "libid" and choose from around 400 movies, which the customer would like to acquire. The concept of the store is to provide a virtual gallery where people could search in to find what they are looking for. Similar to some of the physical stores I visited, "libid's" movies are divided by alphabetical order to make the search for movies easier. Other than the name of the movies, the division also includes the producer of movies, the date of its release, and its season (if the customer is searching for a series). This concept is amazing in how it was capable to retransform the experience of having to look in a huge pile of DVDs, to surfing a page which in a way, might provide those who could not visit physical stores with a similar experience. Of course, the experience one would gain from both the physical and the online stores are in no way similar to one another. But the fact that one of the arguments scholars used when identifying the benefits of online media vs traditional media was related to choosing and watching a movie purely from the comfort of one's home, this process could change the very core of this idea. Scholars such as Aksin (2017) believed that digitalization that is happening in almost every sector "challenges the very existence of traditional business models" (Aksin, 2017). However, as Aksin stated, "there are still exciting opportunities in which businesses can harness new technology and rethink existing business models to

create value and be more sustainable” (Askin, 2017). Could the shifting of DVD stores to purely online locations be a way for them to maintain the traditional features that entails its physical attributes while adapting to new digital ways that involve e-commerce? It is interesting to perceive this process as such, especially since e-commerce’s main target is to provide content from the comfort of the consumer’s home.

Other than [dvdfactorylb](#), I also found different stores such as [@lebanon_DVD](#) and [@beirut_dvd_by_alaanet](#) that also provide a purely online delivery service for their DVDs. I haven’t met another shop with an online library that one could choose movies from, but the other shops were forming a sort of DVD gallery through their story highlights on Instagram. [@beirut_dvd_by_alaanet](#)’s highlights, for example, are divided into different sections such as new releases, new Arabic series, new Arabic movies...etc. This also forms a sort of movie library for customers to shift through when looking for something specific. It is important to note that all stores include their phone number and have the ability to provide customers with a movie that is not featured on their page. This factor itself is more practical than digital media in the sense that many online platforms do not contain all the series in one place, meaning that one might have to register to different online platforms if they wish to access different type of content. With DVD stores providing an online service where one could choose whatever they want and have them delivered to their home, one might find the usage of traditional media tools to be more practical than purely digital features. Also, as discussed above, DVDs are still priced in lower rates than formal digital and none digital entities, which may lead one to think of the reasons a person would rather use digital platforms as opposed to DVDs when all the comforts including price are now available.

Throughout the chapters, I believe that the ending of this piece might not have been expected. It was noticed in the first chapter that people's perception of DVDs has lowered over time, especially with all the new forms of digital media that keep on emerging. The fact that I chose this topic as my thesis project was ultimately confusing to most of my friends and family. This confusion was what drove me to prove how this topic has challenged this common belief that DVDs are mortal objects that are not far from being extinct. However, throughout the chapters, it has become clear that the artefact has played an undeniable role in the reaching of global media during the pandemic after lockdown restrictions were lifted and during the ongoing financial crisis Lebanon is still going through. What might have been seen as a limited solution to an extraordinary situation such as the pandemic, has proven to remain as a solution to the reaching of global media even after formal entities rebecame accessible. This chapter was able to prove that not only people who enjoy the tangibility of the artefact are interested in consuming media through it. The fact that DVD shops are adapting to technological advancement and common trends such as e-commerce shows that DVDs fate still remains survival as a media tool. The question of "why DVDs?" has remained essential in each chapter, but I believe it is now safe to answer "because they are essential". While technological advancement is important and part of the continuity of adaption to new trends, traditional media objects can find new ways to adapt to these trends and technologies. For more, with the ongoing financial crisis in Lebanon, it is safe to say that DVD stores were capable to find new ways of integrating their objects in the consumption of media in Lebanon even with the different technologies available. By trying to adapt to new trends, DVD stores are continuing to find new ways to remain existing as are different type of stores during these difficult times. I believe the most interesting factor

in this chapter is the focus on a traditional media tool and its role during times where even the most advanced technologies are lacking from the country making it seem as Lebanon is advancing to a more primitive outcome instead of advancing positively in most fields. As I continued to look for different DVD shops, I was amazed to see that this online delivery feature has been adapted by most of the stores. Regardless if this concept has begun during lockdown or before then, most stores have perceived this advancement as effective and essential to their survival. As the financial crisis remains, the prices of formal media entities such as theaters are getting higher. Even though different shop owners believe that those who were loyal to theaters will remain so even with the ongoing crisis, I believe this belief is starting to lack truthfulness. As new movie releases are fully booked in most theaters in the world most theaters in Lebanon are lacking the audiences they once had. During the on-going financial crisis, I have watched at least 3 movies in theaters, and in none of those times was booking essential. One of the interesting events that occurred with me at the theaters was when the employee responsible of movie ticketing recommended that one of the movies I asked about “has no need to be watched in theaters since its rating was not so high”. It is not bizarre to try and find cheaper alternatives when it comes to goods and services that are most likely perceived as a luxury instead of a necessity, but to arrive to the point where media objects such as movies become categorized in this way is ultimately new. Theaters have always been part of the culture, which is why viewing it in this new perspective is ultimately awkward and different. With the financial crisis affecting almost every sector in Lebanon, it is safe to finally conclude that the media industry is also being included. Most specifically, the DVD culture is being exceptionally affected especially since it has been fighting to survive in the media industry long before these crises occurred.

After enduring technological advancement, a pandemic and a current financial crisis, this chapter showed the durability of DVDs and their continued survival. While it is still unknown what type of new trends or adaptations will occur in the future, for the present time, the importance of DVD artefacts remains essential to the consumption of global media in Lebanon. As the crisis continues, it is safe to assume that the future of almost every sector whether media or other, is unpredictable. Finally, throughout this paper, it has remained clear that the assumptions and reactions people have when it comes to DVDs is a generalized stereotype that is believed by those who did not look into the artefact. To be honest, during the research and before every interview, I was not able to predict what type of information I might gather or if there will be a story behind this topic. It pleases me to conclude that even after all the new trends that may have diminished the artefacts' importance and the many issues that might have led to his extinction, DVDs are still capable to belong in the media consumption habits of many consumers in Lebanon.

CONCLUSION

As this thesis has reached its end, I would like to tell my readers about an interesting point Herbert (2014) discussed in the last chapter of his book, *Videoland*. The author writes about a specific scene that occurred in the movie *I Am Legend*. In the scene, Will Smith, who plays the main character, enters a video store and interacts with the mannequins as if they were real humans. As Herbert explains, Smith's character is the only remaining human living in the city, and though all the stores and their content were easily accessible by him, he chooses to act as though he was renting DVDs, taking a new one and returning the ones he finished. He even talked to the mannequin that was behind the counter as if he was the essential shop owner. Also, Smith's character asks about another female mannequin to this owner, while of course, no actual response happened, he was still interacting with the store and these mannequins as if they were real people. This shows the importance of DVD stores and their role as an interactional space. Will Smith's character could have easily taken the DVD he liked and left, but it seemed that the process of renting and communicating with others in the shop is what mattered to him, not just the consumption of the artefact. This scene reminds me of the consumers in chapter 2 that told me how their kids would risk meeting on the stairs just to exchange DVDs. The fact that people view the exchange of DVDs as a social interaction that creates this sort of community where people could share entertainment information and other commonalities with others amazes me. Will Smith relived this experience of exchange because these conversations that occur in DVD shops matter.

As the world and new technologies keep emerging, we can easily state that the experience one embarks on when visiting a physical store can never be experienced through online platforms. This was also seen in chapter two of this thesis when people

risked having physical contact with others during the pandemic just to exchange DVDs. Physical contact and interaction are inevitable when visiting physical stores, and whether the interaction entails consumer to consumer conversations or solely to the shop owners, it has become clear that tangibility and physical participation plays a main role in the experience one receives when consuming tangible media artefacts.

In the first chapter, it became clear that DVD stores in Lebanon have always been a major part of the media consumption in the country. While most countries in the world have treated pirated copies as a serious issue that can lead to severe legal problems, the distribution of the artefact in Lebanon has never been perceived or treated in that sense. One can easily enter a store and buy a pirated copy, making it seem as though the underground world DVDs belong to are more likely to be experienced as an overground process in Lebanon. The chapter also gives great understanding of the role the esthetics of the stores play in the consumers and distributors' minds. Stores, such as Rami's, display tangible media as part of the main decoration showing how the historical precedents of DVDs were part of the legend and the journey of what DVDs have become. Finally, the effort most of these stores have put into ensuring the survival of the artefact has become obvious on so many levels other than seeing the object as a financial gain. Rami, for example, stressed on the fact that the shop does not contribute to great financial profits but the cultural effect behind the object and the satisfaction he gets when participating in this sector and distribution process makes it worth it. So why DVDs? Because they are worth it.

In the second chapter, we can notice how this overground yet underground process of DVD distribution and consumption in Lebanon has been treated as a purely underground process during the pandemic. Due to the closing of formal entities, people

had to rely on new ways to reach entertainment media. Against the backdrop of popular discourse, it became clear that DVD consumption in Lebanon was one of the essential ways for people to reach global media during a time where formal entities were unavailable. While many scholars have focused their thoughts on the consumption of internet media, they neglected the fact that countries which were not able to access internet servers easily such as Lebanon, were not able to maintain internet media as the main source of access to entertainment media. Also, to be able to reach DVDs when lockdown restrictions were implemented, DVD shop owners were illegally opening their stores to provide content to their customers. Likewise, it became clear that people were not focused on DVDs just for the content they provided, but the ability of having even minor physical contact in times where face to face meetings were forbidden. This has shown that the social experiences the artefact has provided over the years is just as special to consumers as the content they are providing. Finally, with the on-going crisis Lebanon has been enduring since 2019, accessing formal internet servers from those who could reach access was not possible due the bank restrictions that limited international transactions. This shows that even if one wanted to rely on formal entities, informal media was a necessity. When formality is not available, informality becomes a requirement and not an alternative. So why DVDs? Because they were a necessity and not an alternative.

In the third chapter, it was clear that with the ongoing financial crisis in Lebanon, the usage of DVDs as a primary media tool to reach global media remained essential. Throughout the chapter, different interviews have shown that the attachment to the artefact was not due to the pandemic nor just the poor electricity. The artefact has proven to have emotional meaning to many of the consumers who consume it and this has maintained its survival throughout the different difficulties the sector was exposed to.

After a revolution, a pandemic, technological advancement, and an ongoing financial crisis, people still chose DVDs as a main gateway to entertainment. Also, the chapter has shown that DVD shops in Lebanon are adapting to new trends such as using online platforms and online trends. This adaptation has shown how the DVD field, though believed to becoming extinct or considered as “old media” is doing all it can to remain part of the entertainment chain. So why DVDs? Because they are still essential.

I have used the question “why DVDs?” at the end of each chapter’s brief in the conclusion because I believe each section has stressed on a different factor of the role and importance of DVDs. Worth, necessity, and ongoing essentiality are what makes DVDs inevitable to the consumption of global media in Lebanon. While I do believe that the many situations in Lebanon have led to this dependency of the artefact, DVDs have proven to be important not just because of the content they provide, but the experiences one would gain by interacting with the object throughout its process. If this underground yet overground process was treated the same in other countries, would people depend on DVDs more? In other words, if the illegality of the transaction and its process were not as strict as they are in most countries, would people depend on DVDs as a main source to reach media? In my opinion, yes, they would, especially after understanding that the artefact provides a lot more than just content to those who use it. Also, according to Atwood (2020)’s book, many of the people who participated in the DVD chain in Iran were actually risking their lives to do so. This also shows that the possibility of depending on pirated copies if they were reachable in the same way they are in Lebanon, is in high favor.

I would like to dedicate the last part of this thesis to discussing audiences. It is important to highlight the concept of difference in audiences that was experienced

throughout this whole process and their effect on DVDs because while it is clear that the cultural background and the general cultural similarities seen in different areas have played a main role in audience preferences, I would like to note that many of those who depend on their local DVD shop owner do so not just because of their likings, access difficulties, and love for the artefact but because shop owners not only play the role of channel distributors, they also facilitate the process itself. In many instances, people who wanted to reach specific media content could not do so due to the fact that they could not find what they were looking for or do not want to take the time to try and find the content themselves. In that perspective, shop owners are doing the work for their clients and making their media consumption journey easier and smoother. While audience likings were proven to depend a lot on the area they live in, this concept of facilitation that is offered by shop owners is seen in many shops regardless of the areas they are located in.

This thesis was capable of showing the great importance of DVD artefacts in the entertainment world, specifically in Lebanon. When I first chose my topic, I was worried and unaware of the information I will find. It is amazing to see how a tangible artefact that most scholars now neglect to acknowledge plays such an important role in a country where technological evolution is not as easily accessible as it is elsewhere. To understudy DVDs would have led to a misconception of the consumption of media during the revolution, a worldwide pandemic, and an ongoing financial crisis. Throughout the different chapters, a great understanding of the role the artefact plays in these exceptional situations was portrayed. The only thing that I would like to leave my readers with is the thought of the importance the artefact could be playing even in countries that are not experiencing technological advancement. I have elaborated on Humphrey's article about

DVD consumption in Cuba, but are Lebanon and Cuba the only ones to understand and appreciate the artefact?

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