Satellitization of Arab Media: Perceptions of Changes in Gender Relations

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Abstract:

This article explores how students living in East Amman in Jordan perceive a link between global television entertainment and social changes, particularly changes in gender relations. The study relies on a questionnaire distributed among university students in Amman in 2009 and 2010 with 946 Muslim respondents, and focus group discussions and individual interviews with 44 Muslim students living in East Amman in 2013. The theoretical framework for the discussion is cultivation theory, moral panic, and audience reception. The main conclusion from this study is that many students believe that watching television makes viewers see 'reality' in view of TV programs. Another conclusion is that students seem to tailor their use of television according to their own needs. A third conclusion is that many students experience moral panic and see global television as an attack on cultural values. Other students, however, welcome global television's transmission of what they consider new liberal ideas. The students' experience is that television entertainment products such as Turkish and American films and series, have an actual impact on social changes linked to gender relations in the East Amman society. The impact of global TV on local society is envisioned as being either "good" or "bad".

Keywords:

Introduction

The satellitization of Arab-medium television, starting in the 1990s, has radically changed the supply of news and entertainment in the Middle East. Up to the 1990s, the population in the Arab world mainly had access to state controlled television, and news and entertainment were strictly regulated within national borders. The development of Arab-medium television into global satellitization

and the easy access to the Internet in the twenty-first century is one important area of social change in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa). The flow of global entertainment -- American sit-coms and films, as well as dubbed TV-series, such as Mexican and Brazilian telenovellas -- increased dramatically in 1991 as the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), one of the first private companies, began satellite broadcasting (MBC webpage). As regards regional media productions, Arabic-medium countries have different socio-cultural settings influencing production. Some countries are more and some are less liberal when it comes to gender relations and social relations in general (Ghannam 2013; Al-'Atum 2011; Droeber 2012; Jad 2008; Efrati 2012). The former Egyptian monopoly of cultural production in the Arabic language ended as Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, and the Gulf nations got involved in the huge Arab entertainment production industry (Salamandra 2011). The cultural exchange within the region has therefore recently become diversified (Sakr 2007; 2013).

Increased access to higher education for both genders, increased female presence in the labor market, and increased consumption in the last few decades play important roles in social development in the region. However, media might influence such developments. For instance, Lundby, a researcher of mediatization, states that modern media shapes "society and culture as well as the relationship that individual and institutional participants have to their environment and to each other" (2009, 4). Before the advent of the Arab Spring many researchers of Arab media expressed disappointment with how 'little' the satellitization of Arab media, particularly the outspoken approach of al-Jazeera, had brought about in matters of democratization of Arab society (Zayani 2005; Hafez 2008). Hafez, however, stated that despite the tardiness of political changes he believed that the inflow of new entertainment would most probably lead to social changes on the individual level which would, at a later stage, be manifested in society in general (Hafez 2008, 5). This study will not however, deal with actual social changes, rather it will explore Jordanian students' perceptions of possible effects of satellitization of Arab-medium television. The study relies on responses to open-ended questions in

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a media survey, focus group discussions, and individual interviews.[1] The theoretical framework for the discussion is cultivation theory, the moral panic paradigm, and television reception.

Cultivation theory

Researchers in cultural studies have focused on cultural analysis, where media is regarded as one part of the cultural totality. Media's importance is expressed by Servaes and Lie: Communication media are "the institutions by which the new meaning systems are transmitted in a ritual manner in a community" (2010, 14). Servaes and Lie's view of media indicates, however, a less globalized media context than that of the MENA region. What is particular for the globalization of media in this region is firstly the vast media production in the various Arab-medium countries. In a transnational manner this vast media content is mediated to the whole region and to the Arabic-speaking diaspora communities. Secondly, there is the enormous non-Arabic entertainment production(mainly American, Latin-American, and lately Turkish) which many of the most popular satellite TV-channels supply the Arab-media audiences with.

Cultivation theory is to a certain extent based on the notion that frequent television viewers regard the content of television programs to be an image of social reality (Perse 2001, 215-218; Yang and Oliver 2010). Perse's explanation of cultivation theory is that "the dominant effects of television violence are cognitive (beliefs about social reality) and affective (fear of crime)" (2001, 215).

Many cultivation theorists seem, though, to draw broader conclusions of media effects, not relating the effect only to violence and fear (Perse 2001, 216-217). In 2002, for instance, Gerbner et al. discussed cultivation theory in view of the relation between frequent television watching and the forming of beliefs, attitudes, and values (Gerbner et al. 2002). In their study they used the concept 'cultivation' "to describe the independent contributions television watching makes to viewers' conceptions of social reality" (Gerbner et al. 2002, 47). Yang and Oliver talk about cultivation theory in terms of television as a 'socialization agent' that "instills 'television reality' into individuals' minds"

(Yang and Oliver 2010, 119). Even Morgan and Shanahan's (1997) meta-study on media effects indicates that cultivation theory might explain social developments and social change.

The general consensus among media researchers in the late twentieth century is that the media effect thesis was inaccurate. Thus the understanding of media's vast impact on society was modified and even Perse expressed that "media do have some impact on various dimensions of social life and structure" (2001, 6), but that that the media effect was limited, as well as varying from one society to another and from one individual to another (McGuire 1986; Perse 2001). One example of this individual decoding of media messages can been seen in Abu-Lughod's study on Egyptian mini TV-series (*musalsalat*) prior to the satellitization of the Arab-medium television (2005). Abu-Lughod looked into the particular aspects of the TV-series her informants tended to be absorbed in and conducted an analysis of how television is received, interpreted, and used in order to cope with specific life situations (2005, 36-40). Abu-Lughod's informant, Zainab, for instance, receives and decodes the encoded material of the TV-series by basing her interpretation of the message on her cultural background (a small village in Egypt) and her own life experience (as a mother of six with a husband who migrated to the city and rarely visits, making her almost a single parent). The meaning received from the TV-series is thus created in the intersection between the content and the viewer/receiver. Abu-Lughod's example shows that rather than a passive audience being influenced by media, individuals seem to select and use media according to their needs. To evaluate media impact is thus problematic and needs specific research where the direct link between media use and actual behavior is implicitly measured (Livingstone 1998, 249).

Gender relations in the MENA region

The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) from 2005 forms the underlying background of this study. The AHDR claims that the issue of women's rights is one of the three major "critical development 'deficits'… that have held back human development throughout the Arab region despite considerable natural wealth and great potential

for economic and social progress"(2005, 1). AHDR highlights in particular social structures built on patriarchal (collectivistic) organizations that: "Male control at the economic, social, cultural, legal, and political levels remains the abiding legacy of patriarchy" (AHDR 2005, 16). Furthermore, the report states that despite women being protected by law in some matters, the social environment nevertheless dominates women's minds and prevents them from demanding their rights through legal processes (AHDR 2005, 19).

A slightly different view of gender relations in the MENA region is portrayed by Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde (2016) in their analysis of the screen characters of two famous female actors in Egyptian films back in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In contrast to the stereotyped Arab women as 'tormented and oppressed' the two researchers indicate a more complex reading of gender roles in Arab-medium film production even back in the 1950s and 1960s by looking behind the stereotyped female portrayals. They confirm Abu-Lughod's conclusion that whereas Egyptian films and series portray women's daily lives they at the same time also anticipate modernity with new constructs of national selves (Abu-Lughod 2002, 116; see also Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016, 19).

Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde regard the films of the 1950s and 1960s as "marked by utopic visions of how societal ills could be rectified through the modernist project," whereas in films of the 1970s there was "a disenchantment with the modernist nationalist project" which seemed to have brought "more dystopia and thus realism into Egyptian melodrama" (Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016, 22). However, the two researchers see a paradox in the screen roles of women in these melodramas in the last half of the twentieth century. On the one hand they challenge patriarchal structures, but on the other they reproduce traditional structures of "controlling women's bodies and sexuality by upholding a strict moral matrix of suitable sexual conduct" (Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016, 24).

With both the AHDR report and Abdel-Fadil's and Van Eynde's reflections on twentieth century melodrama gender roles in mind, I will discuss students' perceptions of social change based on the respondents' views, the informants' discussions in the focus groups, and

the interviewees' responses.

Case study: East Amman, Jordan

The similarity of Arabic as the official language has made it too convenient to draw conclusions of the Arab region as one homogeneous region. However, countries in the Arab-speaking region are as heterogeneous as countries in other regions. Moreover, within each country and each town, various layers, such as class and ethnicity, create a more profound heterogeneity between families and individuals.

With such heterogeneity in mind I have selected East Amman as a case study. First and foremost, this was due to my frequent visits to the town and the various fieldworks I have conducted there. Secondly I have chosen East Amman as, heuristically speaking, patriarchal trends, as portrayed in the AHDR-report (2005), seem to be more prominent in this area than in other parts of Amman, as also noted by al-'Atum (2011). In West Amman, mainly a higher-middle-class to upper-class area, many young people tend to have free mobility and similar clothing, attitudes, and behavior to that of youth living in Europe or in the US. In East Amman, mainly a middle-and lower-class area, women's mobility is more often restricted, and male (and female) control of female relatives tends to be firm (al-'Atum 2011). My own observation is that East Amman seems to be more homogenous than West Amman with most women wearing headscarves, and some even face-veils. It is not very common to see women in the streets alone, and the social control of women's clothing is strict. In this sense, East Amman in general can be regarded as a community with 'tight' social structures (Triandis 2001, 911).

Material

The present study builds on 946 responses (Muslim respondents- 38 Christian respondents' responses are left out in this study) from a media survey I conducted in May 2009 and May-June 2010 in two Jordanian universities. I handed out the questionnaire in four different faculties: Sharia, Humanities (*adab*), Social Science (*ijtima'iyyat*), and Engineering (*handasa*). As I had the permission from the head of the university, I could get a nearly 95 percent answer rate. I handed out the

questionnaire the last quarter of the class and collected the answers at the end of the class. The questionnaire had questions about topics such as religious belonging, religiosity, religious practice, living area, favorite television program, daily hours of television watching, and use of Internet. Many students wrote that they would watch series and films both on television and on the Internet. Whereas some students stated that they would follow entertainment programs and news on the Internet, most students used the Internet, in the following order, for (1) communicating with friends on Facebook, (2) watching music videos, and (3) reading the news. Respondents spent on average two hours a day watching television or entertainment programs on the Internet. Some students watched four to five hours daily, whereas a handful stated that they rarely or never watched television or entertainment programs on the Internet. The favorite programs were, in the following order. (1) Turkish TV-series (women much more than men), (2) the Syrian mini-series, mainly *Bab-al-Hara* (*The Neighborhood Gate*), which was aired at the time of the survey, (women and men alike) (3) various music programs (women and men alike), (4) American sit-coms and films (women and men alike), and (5) news and political and social discussion programs (men much more than women). Religious programs were less popular, even among Sharia students. Interestingly, the media habits of many Sharia students did not differ from the students at other faculties with regards to their overall preference for films, series and music programs. However, a small number of the Sharia students stated that they never watched entertainment on television or the Internet.

At the end of the questionnaire there were two open-ended questions on how the students perceive the relationship between television/Internet and social and personal changes. For the present study I have used the Muslim students' answers on these two open-ended questions.

I further conducted qualitative fieldwork in East Amman in October 2013. I arranged four focus groups: two gender mixed groups with six informants in one group (three women and three men) and ten in the other (six women and four men), and two gender segregated groups

with four male informants in one group and six women in the other. In addition, I conducted individual interviews with sixteen university students from various universities in Amman, both private and governmental. All in all, I met with forty-four students, all Muslims living in East Amman. Most of the informants regarded themselves as 'urban' (*madaniyyin*) and some had a peasant (*fallah*) background, but had lived all their lives in Amman. I asked six university students from various academic fields to gather students from East Amman for the focus groups and for the individual interviews. The age of the informants was between 18 and 25 years. In every focus group and interview, I informed the participants of the research project. In the group discussions I asked the informants about watching films and series and whether they watched them on television or on Internet. In the following discussion I will not distinguish between whether the informants and interviewees watch films and series on television or on the Internet, as the emphasis is on the consumption of global entertainment. All interviews were conducted by me in Arabic.

There is a possible methodological problem in surveys and to a certain extent also in interviews dealing with perceptions of social and individual changes. Whereas many research participants may see or experience changes (particularly negative changes) in other individuals and in society in general, they may rarely see similar changes in themselves. This became obvious in many of the respondents' answers, which reflected a negative portrayal of changes in society, and with statements that "I am the same as I always have been" in answer to the question about individual changes. Thus this study does not necessarily show how it 'really' is; rather it shows how students perceive the society and individuals around them. However, the qualitative discussions and focus groups give a further understanding of personal attitudes and values.

As this study mainly uses qualitative data (answers to the two open-ended questions in the questionnaire, and the discussions in the focus-groups and the answers of the interviewees),percentage in numbers will be avoided. Thus only general trends such as for instance "many informants stated..." and "others stated..." will be stated.

Perception of change in local traditions

The survey was conducted in the spring of 2009 and 2010, before the onset of the Arab Spring. In general, most respondents stated, without specifying, that the satellitization of television had both negative (*silbi*) and positive (*ijabi*) influences on Jordanian society. However, some students, particularly students from the Sharia Faculty, believed that media had no influence on society whatsoever. One female Sharia student stated for instance in a positive manner that Jordanian society is as it has always been, as "our society keeps strict to the traditions (*al-adat wa al-taqalid*)". Many respondents from all faculties mentioned the Turkish series as having an effect on society, be it 'bad' or 'good'.

It is interesting to note that mainly male respondents pointed out the influences of television on democratization and political liberal processes, whereas both men and women pointed at changes of local social traditions. One female respondent at the Faculty of Humanities stated:

> The television channels influence our traditions and our culture. They have changed our ways to gather the family and our ways of communicating with each other. They also negatively affect small children and their way of thinking. Some of the changes we see are positive as they are useful for our society, but the negative influences are greater.

Similarly, a female respondent at the technical department also regarded television influences in negative terms. She wrote:

> The global television affects a lot on local traditions and makes the Arab society more open-minded (*infitah*). We, the Eastern youth, rely on conservative (*muhafada*) social relations, whereas most television programs rely on an open-mindedness, which we do not want as it leads us to lose our identity (*dhiy'a shakhsiyyatina*).

In the focus groups most informants discussed global television's positive effects in terms of general development of knowledge and an

increased openness to individual freedom, whereas at the same time they pointed to negative side-effects in terms of a perceived breakdown in social relations. On the one hand the television content, such as American films and sit-coms and to a certain extent Turkish TV-series, tend to advocate individual freedom. The entertainment industry thus offers students a person-focused mind-set, and what might be considered an additional socialization process into an individualistic structure. On the other hand, family and the educational institutions primarily socialize the youth into traditional values such as family cohesion and self-sacrifice for the group, thus upholding patriarchal structures. These differences in approach might be one of the reasons why the same participants would praise individual freedom and at the same time denunciate media's influence on the "traditional Arab family system with close affinity between the family members", as one male informant stated. The youth's attraction towards the individual freedom pattern portrayed in the global entertainment and the fear of "bad" influences, often expressed in terms of excessive female freedom can be linked to Abdel-Fadil's and Van Eynde's notion of a paradox between female screen roles with challenging of patriarchal structures, and at the same time reproduction of traditional structures of strict control of women's sexuality (Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016: 24). The participants' answers indicate hybridity in the cultural complexity of the MENA region.

The participants" statements concerning the negative influences of media on Arab society have to be regarded in view of Buccianti (2010) and Salamandra's (2012) discussions of how the new global entertainment, particularly the Turkish TV-series, has triggered moral panic expressed by the religious leaders as 'cultural invasion' (*al-ghazw al-thaqafi*) and 'attack on Arab tradition and values' (Salamandra 2012, 53). Some conservative religious scholars Islamists even demanded the death penalty for those responsible for broadcasting the programs (Buccianti 2010, 6). The moral panic is also obvious in the statement of a female respondent at the Sharia Faculty who never watched television. She stated:

There is a media war going on. Through the films and the series

they [e.g. 'the West'] want to damage the youths' mind, and they rarely make good and useful programs. The Jordanian society has become a blind imitating society. We only take the bad from the West, both in our thinking and in our behavior.

This view reflects the religiously conservative view that (Western) television can be equated to a 'cultural invasion' and an 'attack on Arab traditions and values'. However, not only sharia students, expressed ideas reflecting religious scholars' moral panic. This type of sentiment is expressed by respondents from other faculties too. For instance, a female respondent from the Faculty of Humanities stated that the effect of television was both positive and negative, but that the negative effects dominated. In her own words: "global television wants to change Arab tradition". It is interesting to note that in contrast to the respondent from the Sharia Faculty above who stayed clear of TV, this respondent from the Faculty of Humanities watched films and series, as well as music programs three to four hours every day. Furthermore, a male respondent in the engineer department pointed particularly at the influence of global television on sexual behavior. His answer points both at the moral panic the Turkish TV-series has raised (Buccianti 2010; Salamandra 2012) and to Abdel-Fadil's and Van Eynde's ´paradox´, with sexuality control. He wrote:

The dirty Turkish, Italian, and Spanish series affect our traditions ('adat) and values. The girls [*al-fatat*, i.e., unmarried women] start to imitate the actresses and will love other men than their husbands. They will become unfaithful and will have sexual intercourse outside marriage (*al-zina*). Even men will be unfaithful.

The respondent's view indicates how he perceives a change in sexual behavior, a change he considers in negative terms. Khalaf, in her discussions with university students at the American University of Beirut also discovered that students claimed to have a total different view of sex than their parents had, with more open discussions about sex and an acceptance of sex before marriage (Khalaf 2006, 178-182). However, in contrast to the statement above, the students in her study regarded this change of sexual behavior in positive terms.

The idea of Jordan as an 'imitating society' was expressed by many respondents: by looking at global entertainment 'we' imitate without thinking, many respondents wrote, voicing the conspiracy theory of the religious scholars. The notion that 'the West', and particularly the US, deliberately wants to destroy 'Islam' and Muslims' affiliation to their religion and traditions is widespread and has penetrated many countries with Muslim majority populations (Sardar and Wyn Davies 2003; Friedman 2002). In the survey many Sharia students, but also students from other faculties, as indicated above, referred to this conspiracy theory, reflecting the moral panic response of the religious scholars to the first Turkish soap opera, Noor, aired in 2008 on MBC (Buccianti 2010; Salamandra 2012).

Still, many respondents, mostly females, from the faculties of Humanities, Engineering and Social Sciences, voiced a positive attitude towards the global influences, and particularly their effect on women's rights. One female respondent from the Faculty of Engineering expressed that "the individual's thoughts and attitudes develop and the many satellite channels with their various ideas give a woman the possibility to choose her own way of life". One female respondent who regarded television influences in positive terms nevertheless expressed a disheartened statement, saying:

> The Jordanian society, despite its openness, is still a traditional (*taqlidi*) society with strong traditions. We will never manage to free ourselves from these traditions and this is the reason why I believe that global television does not have an influence at all on our society.

It is possible to see the respondents' view above of media and change towards a more modernist pattern with individual freedom by relating to Abdel-Fadil's and Eynde's study on gender dynamics portrayed in Egyptian melodramas back in the 1950s and 1960s, which relied, at least to a certain extent, on modernist gender roles. As many participants expressed that media gives potential for change, one female respondent seems to aspire to such a change, but is pessimistic of whether this is possible or not. This respondent's pessimistic statement reflects how media is understood in the intersection between

the media message and the personal lives of the informants, as discussed by Abu-Lughod (2005).

Three of the four male informants (all students in social science departments) in the gender-segregated focus group had a negative view on global influences on society. They talked about how society was 'falling apart' (*taflit*). Walid spoke against global values, claiming that "in our society we need to keep to our traditions which we have inherited from our parents. We do not accept all this talk of free love in American films". Still he watched American films more than once a week. When I asked him which film had touched him the most, he mentioned an American romantic film "A Walk to Remember", a film many of the respondents and the interviewees also referred to. He exclaimed that he cried every time he watched this film. The film might, to a certain extent, be regarded as being within the context of Arab entertainment culture with an emphasis on sentimentality and no sexual promiscuity. The film deals with a young couple where the woman suffers from leukemia. As she dies in the end, the man changes his way of life by becoming more socially responsible. The lead character explains his development towards a responsible human being as a result of his wife's angel-like behavior and her way of handling her fatal illness. In view of Abu-Lughod's cultural interpretation of Zainab's response to specific elements in the Egyptian serials (2005, 36-40), it is possible to assess Walid as an active media user who attaches himself to the part of the global media which he can identify with and to that which is the most similar to his own value system, while at the same time decoding the media messages according to his own experiences.

Munir was the only man in this group who regarded influences of global television on society in positive terms. He was critical towards how the older generation dealt with recent social changes. He claimed that the youth in Jordan are in the midst of a personal crisis (*al-azma l-shakhsiyya*) due to the wide gap between what happens in the families and what they watch on television. "The youth", he said, "want to try everything they learn from the television and most of these things are totally different from what they have learnt and observed at home". He believed that his parents' generation should

adapt more to 'modern' ideas, as it is impossible to stop the development towards more individual freedom for the youth. However, at the same time, Munir stated that "we need some changes, but if these changes lead us to a society similar to America, we will be in big trouble". He explained, "In America, individuals have full freedom at the age of 18. They have to move out of the family home, and after that the family will not help them and they will be completely alone without anybody to support them." He further argued that in the US many people commit suicide, criminality is pervasive, public space is insecure for common people, and many people carry weapons. Munir's view of the US might be based on his consumption of American films and series, particularly as he said that he watched American films more than two times a week. His reaction can be regarded in view of Perse's idea of media effects, where she believes that "the dominant effects of television violence are cognitive (beliefs about social reality) and affective (fear of crime)" (Perse 2001, 215). By watching American-produced crime films and series, Munir imagines what he sees on television as 'the truth'. This is expressed in his statement that Jordan should never follow the American way and that "there should always be a punishment for carrying weapons", a common comment from informants on American 'reality'.

Munir continues: "There must be a limit for a person's freedom (*hudud al-hurriya*)". When I asked him which boundaries should be set, he focused on the family and on common security: "It is necessary to respect the father, as the best thing in Jordan is the strength of the family," he exclaimed. Thus even Munir, who in general had an accommodating attitude towards individual freedom, responded in an ambiguous manner towards the negative and the positive influences of media content, indicating an influence from the moral panic response to the satellitization of Arab media (Salamandra 2012, 59). It is also interesting how Munir cherishes both patriarchal structures and individual freedom, thus voicing what Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde see as the paradox of how female screen characters in Egyptian films in the mid-twentieth century both challenge patriarchal structures and at the same time reproduce them (2016, 24). A similar paradox can be found in the first Turkish series launched, which took the Arab

-medium world by storm in 2008. Despite its emphasis on individual freedom, it also strongly conveyed the patriarchal character of both Turkish and Arab society, a notion strongly emphasized by Munir. As Buccianti has noted, "the Turkish touch" of the Turkish soap operas is "the patriarchal model" (2010, 3). The portrayal of the wise head of the Turkish families in the series reflects the notion of the benevolent patriarch in Islamic legislation (Roald 2013).

In contrast to many male respondents and informants, Munir unequivocally expressed that he enjoyed watching the Turkish series. Other men admitted that they sometimes watch these TV serials too, particularly when women in their families watch them. However, Munir watched these series through the lens of 'life in Turkey' being so different from Jordanian society. He also believed that it is easier to identify with the Turkish than with the American series. "Turks are Muslims like us", he said, "however, they are not totally similar to us. They do not follow Islam as we do, but still, they are Muslims and they have some traditions which we should adapt to". When I asked him which traditions he referred to, he stated that individuals have more personal freedom, and that this freedom is within the accepted boundaries of Islam. "It is not like in America where sex outside marriage is common and accepted; the Turks keep within the boundaries (*hudud*) of Islam in this respect." Again Munir's statement anticipates the paradox pointed out by Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde (2016, 24).

Khalid, in the same focus group, claimed that it is mainly women who watch the Turkish series. This is also my impression, reflected by both the survey and the statements of the informants and interviewees. According to Buccianti, however, many men did watch the first Turkish series on MBC, *Noor* (2010, 2). "Women want a life like the actresses in the series have," Khalid stated. Munir then stated that even he wants Jordanian society to be more similar to Turkish society. "The Turks have sound and open social relations," he exclaimed, "they emphasize family relations, just like us." Khalid's answer to Munir was that Jordan is much better than both Turkey and the US. "If we start to open up, it will continue to change". He explained his position:

> If we think that we want Jordan to be like Turkey we will eventually end up as America. Just look at how the youth today have boyfriends and girlfriends. Our parents did not have this and if we tolerate such behavior it will never stop.

Khalid ends by saying that the youth today believe that what they watch on television is the 'truth' (*al-haqiqa*). "They imitate, but do not understand that what they watch is only a fantasy world (a*l-hayat al-khayali*)", thus reflecting Perse's view of media reception.

The discussions in the focus groups and in many of the individual interviews indicated a complexity of media reception, where every participant attached themselves to elements in media which they could relate to according to individual experiences, as also observed by Abu-Lughod (2005).

Gender relations

Many respondents, informants, and interviewees described the 'bad' influences of global television in terms of changes in women's dress and their behaviour in the public sphere; one example given was that of women going out in the evenings without a chaperon. But also male ways of dressing were commented on. The answer from a male Sharia respondent, who wrote about the youth in general, can illustrate this view: "Television influences the youth (*shabab*) in their clothing, their looks and their movements and the reality out there is the evidence of this." Some informants stated that there are obvious influences both from Turkey - the Turkish female headscarves and clothes - and from the West: tight tops and tight jeans. These opinions reflect the moral panic pattern presented by Islamic scholars.

Many of the interviewees and informants talked about the new wave of gender mixing (*ikhtilat*). Khalid exclaimed that in his father's generation men and women never mixed outside the family as they do now. He stated: "Women and men are mixing in schools, universities, and at work. Now women get more money and therefore they are more self-confident". He continued: "Women start to smoke, to dress immorally, and they do not show respect for their elders (*la yahtarimu l-kibar*). "The women of today", he said, "go to the malls and

they date men. Television is mainly responsible for this new, inappropriate behavior". Khalid's statement reflects the moral panic expressed by the religious scholars. Salamandra describes, for instance, how women's cinema-going raised such moral panic, with women as the "crux of concern" in the early twentieth century Damascus (2012, 59). A similar expression of moral panic was expressed by a female Sharia respondent who wrote that television is the reason for increases in divorces. This was a notion I met in nearly all the discussions in focus groups and in the individual interviews. There is a common idea that Turkish television series have had an immense impact on marriages and gender relations in general, and that it has increased the divorce rates in Jordan (Buccianti 2010, 5; Salamandra 2012, 46).2

In one of the focus groups, I asked which reasons they saw for the popularity of the Turkish TV-series, and which effect they consider these series have had on Jordanians in general. Malika jokingly narrated how her whole family watched the Turkish TV-series every evening. "My mother cries and my father makes ironic comments, and we, the young girls are looking at the beautiful blonde Turkish hero, wishing that such a person would turn up on our doorsteps asking for our hands in marriage". She pointed out what she perceives as the discrepancy between the Jordanian reality with husbands who nag their wives and treat them harshly and 'the blonde beautiful Turks' who deal with their wives in a nice caring way and bring them flowers. Malika stated: "Anyone would exchange this harsh Arab behavior and treatment with decent Turkish behavior. This is the reason for the high frequency of divorces in our society." Salamandra argues that the moral panic, or what she calls "media panic", raised by the conservatives over the Turkish series is a result of what she calls 'the Muhannad effect' (2012, 60), named after the 'Nordic-looking Turk', the hero in *Noor*. Muhannad, she claims, is regarded by conservatives to "threaten to smuggle in a sexually ambiguous Western secularism like a beautiful Trojan horse" (Salamandra 2012, 62). However, this perception of patriarchal control, misogyny, and brutal men versus "soft, kind, honourable, and romantic" men is not a new phenomenon in the MENA media context (Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016, 24). Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde observed a similar discrepancy between

various types of male archetypes in Egyptian melodrama in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, with the female screen characters falling in love with the soft and kind type of men (2016, 24).

One of the interviewees, Wafa, an unmarried student at the Faculty of Humanities, had the opposite view of the Turkish 'ideal'. She said:

> I often look at Turkish series, but I do not like their social reality. The Turks' relationships between men and women are too open, and the men are too gentle and weak. I want a real man, a man with Arabic behavior. I want a man to be harsh and strong, not gentle and weak like the Americans and the Turks.

Malika's and Wafa's opposite view of male ideals above points at the cultural complexity as well as how media consumption and the perception of the media content varies between individuals, according to personal experience and life situation.

Khalid's statement that "women do not understand that the television images are only ideals, whereas the reality is something completely different" is reinforced by a female interviewee, Lina. She spoke of the discrepancy between 'the world of television' and 'the reality'. She enjoyed the Turkish TV-series as she could identify with 'the Turks'. Lina stated that she often compared Turkish society as it appears in series with Jordanian society, and she wished that "we were more like the Turkish". She stated: "The Turks have better relations between people in general and particularly between men and women. Their men are nicer and more caring than our men: The Arab men are very difficult." Even in this statement, as in the statements of Malika and Wafa above, the perception of two total opposite male archetypes is expressed; the rough versus the soft male identity.

Lina claimed that the problem today is that many young women believe that what they see in foreign films and series is also true for Arab society. She said:

> The changes in our society are only on the surface. Arab women feel cheated because we believed that Arab societies had changed. We believe that as the women have changed, the Arab

men have changed too, and have implemented the behaviour we witness in films and series. But they have not! Men take only the bad things from the television and not the good things. Men only deceive women, pretending to be open-minded, but in reality they are as conservative and traditional as men in our society always have been. We, the Arab women, are the losers. We have opened up for a new lifestyle: We want to have more freedom and less control and boundaries. Men, however, play with women who are open-minded, but they only want to marry women who keep to the old-fashioned way: The women who dress decently with long jalbabs (coats) and who do not date or even talk to men.

This statement reflects Perse's view of how television is perceived as an image of social reality (2001, 215). It is interesting that in my discussion with a lecturer in Sharia Faculty at Jordan University in May 2009, during my distribution of the questionnaire, he expressed a similar idea. He stated:

The liberation of women promoted by the satellite television deceives Jordanian girls [unmarried women] to believing that Jordanian society has changed into a liberal society, which it most certainly has not. The girls are the losers as they behave liberally, whereas men still want the traditional women.

In our further discussion Lina admitted that she used to have a boyfriend whom she thought would marry her, but after she had accepted his sexual advances he left her. In Jordan, she explains, she is thus marked as a 'used' woman, who will have little prospect of getting married. As she told me, she would not even dare to accept a marriage as it will be discovered that she is not a virgin and this will create problems for her and for her family.[3]

The consequences of this new openness in sexual relations, also observed by Khalaf (2006), is still not thoroughly investigated. There seems to be a general perception that honour crimes are extensive in the MENA region as well as in South Asia among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. NGOs and independent lawyers in the area, such

as Asma Khader in Jordan (see for instance Human Rights Watch 2004) and Fatma Khafagi (2005) in Egypt, have been working against honor crimes and violence against women. However, statistics of possible honor crimes are difficult to establish (Chesler 2010) and there is a lack of research in the field. In contrast, activist reports as well as media reports on the theme flourish (Chesler 2010; see also Human Rights Watch 2004). What is obvious, however, is that Lina perceives that sexual activity outside matrimony might lead to heavy repercussions for women, a perception which I have observed in many young women in the region.

In all the focus groups the informants spoke of how even the Arabic-produced entertainment, such as the Egyptian films and mini TV-series (*musalsalat*), have changed radically within the last five to ten years concerning the roles of men and women and the relations between them. Entertainment has become much more licentious than it used to be, they claimed. When I asked how they could estimate the changes, they referred to their parents' view of changes in the content of Arab-medium entertainment. They pointed at how they believe that Egyptian films and series have become 'dirty' (*wasakh*) and contain sex scenes, which according to their parents were very uncommon in their own youth. They referred particularly to the Egyptian films *Yakobian House*, with an explicit sex-scene between a man and a woman, and *Messages from the Sea* with a lesbian sex-scene.

The informants and interviewees were well aware that as most satellite television channels control and censor global entertainment, the same programs on the Internet have fewer restrictions. They thus further perceived the difference of how it used to be and how it is now, in terms of the difference between the censored films on television, which their parents watch, and the lack of restrictions on the same entertainment programs on the TV-channels' webpages. One male interviewee, Hasan, stated: "With the Internet, parents have become less aware of what we, the youth, actually consume as entertainment, and this indicates a great change of social attitudes from when they were young. Our parents were not, and are still not, exposed to the same television content as we are." Hasan links the exposure of sex

in the media to a more open attitude towards sexual relation in the youth compared to their parents. His view of a change of social attitudes towards sex reflects Khalaf's observation of students showing greater acceptance of sex before marriage than their parents (Khalaf 2006, 178-182).

One of the interviewees, Muna, had just finished her university studies and she had been working for some weeks in a job relevant to her education. Her parents, however, forced her to quit her job as, Muna explained: "This job involved too much mixing with men (*ikhtilat*) and I had to work late shifts some days". She told me how her brother came to her work-place once and she showed him around. She narrated:

> We were walking around and I said hello, how are you, etcetera, to all my colleagues and men and women working in other work-places close by. My brother turned mad: Why do you greet all these men, he screamed. I told him, that I have to do that, they are my colleagues. He went home however and told my parents that they should have more control of me. And here I am now, out of work.

She continued:

> The youth have a conflicting personality (*tadarub fi-l-shakhsiyya*). In films and series everything is permissible, whereas in our real life everything is forbidden. This creates frustration. Moreover, in working life we, the women, are supposed to be responsible and have a strong character (*al-shakhsiyya l-qawiyya)*, but at home we have to be submissive, have a weak character and accept everything the parents and the brothers say. My parents consider that I am getting impudent by working. It is so frustrating with such different value-systems. The parents are so afraid of giving young women too much power.

Muna's statement reinforces Lina's view above that some women seem to adapt to a more liberal way of relating to the other gender. Thus for women, this is experienced as implying constant contestation and

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negotiation. As Muna's example indicates, she gets one picture of women's personal freedom and independency on television as well as in broader society, and another picture of how life should be lived as a young unmarried woman living with her parents. It is thus important to see both Lina's and Muna's reception of television shows in view of Abu-Lughod's discussion of how students' receive, decode and encode media content and how meaning is created in the intersection between the content and the individual viewer (2005, 36-40). Both Lina and Muna, in an audience context, are active television watchers. They seem to select and use media according to their own needs. Lina adapted to a liberal gender relation pattern with an intimate relationship before marriage, whereas Muna's concern was whether she would be able to continue her professional career, despite the fact that many working places in Jordan are gender-integrated and therefore not acceptable to her family. Both seemed to view their particular experience as women in a patriarchal society with what they perceived as individual freedom conveyed by the satellite television.

Many of the informants and interviewees talked about changes in society in terms of selection of marriage partners. In the focus group with the four male students all of them stated that they would choose their own wives. "As it is now", Munir said, "we get to know women at the university or at work and we want to choose for ourselves." But what if the parents object to their choices? Khalid believed that he would accept his parents' objections, whereas Munir stated that if he really loved the woman he would follow "his heart, as it is not my parents who will marry her, it is me". Munir did admit however, that, in Jordanian society, it would be a difficult life and full of conflict if he married against his parents' will. "The Arab family life demands a good relationship between all family members, as the extended family is the core of society", he said.

Reflections

The participants' perception of social changes related to changes in media content reflect media researchers', for instance Hafez' (2008), anticipation of a possible correlation between changes of Arab media (and entertainment) and social changes. However, as the students'

perceptions of social changes are the focus for this study, I have avoided possible anticipations of actual social changes in the study.

As the data in this study from East Amman indicates, television watching might make frequent viewers see 'reality' in view of television images. One example is Lina's story above where she previously believed that the liberal gender relations conveyed by television series and films was manifested in Jordanian society, until her own experience showed that it was not so. For women aspiring for liberal gender relations, a conflicting situation with a constant need for contestation and negotiation of boundaries seems to have arisen, as the examples of both Lina and Muna indicate. Another example of how television images are perceived as "reality" is how Munir depicts American society based on the content of American films. It might, however, be easier to judge a different society than ones' own in terms of television images as the individual has little pre-knowledge and thus might be lead to interpret the few images they are exposed to as "reality". Even many of the participants' perceptions of how media influence society in a "bad" way relate to Perse's notion of media portraying "real life". Whereas the statements of those students who wanted more changes towards a more liberal society, have to be regarded in view of Abu-Lughod's idea of how viewers tend to adapt to those aspects they sympathize with or recognize from their own life.

Abu-Lughod's notion of how the audience is active in selecting and creating meaning from the media content, according to personal life experience is also obvious in some informants' perceptions. Lina related to liberal gender relations in terms of an intimate relationship between men and women. Muna is more concerned with a liberal gender relation pattern in terms of gender-integration in workplaces in broader society. Walid's discussion of the film "A Walk to Remember" indicates how he attaches himself to media content which he can relate to in terms of morality and responsibility.

The moral panic approach is obvious in the informants' statements, as also discussed by Buccianti and Salamandra. The 'cultural invasion' and the 'attack on Arab tradition and values'(Salamandra 2012, 53), were frequently referred to both in many of the respondents',

informants', and interviewees' answers. This can be illustrated by the female Sharia respondent who expressed that "the Jordanian society has become a blind imitating society" and that "there is a media war going on".

Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde have observed similar ideas of gender relations to those I observed in the present material in their analysis of Egyptian films in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. It is interesting to note that the Egyptian national media production of classic films raised similar contrasting ideas about gender relations to those circulated by the new global media from the 1990s onwards. It is particularly fascinating to note the congruence with regards to the idea of the rough versus the soft male ideal referred to Malika above, and in the classical Egyptian films. The ideas about gender are quite similar, although the form and how expressive the opposing ideas are, might differ in the various national media production and in the global media production which the MENA region now is exposed to.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] In the discussion I will distinguish between respondents (participants in the survey), informants (participants in the focus group discussions), and interviewees (individual interviews). When I refer to all of them I will use the term "participants". Mostly, when I quote informants and interviewees I have named them. All names in this study are pseudonyms.

[2] Religious scholars see the rise in divorce in Jordan as a result of media influences (Jordan Times 2008).

[3] This new openness towards sexual relations before marriage is confirmed in a newspaper article on youth in Cairo (Sydsvenska Dagbladet).