# Constructing and Consuming Gender through Media

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Gender is constructed, performed and consumed through media in multiple ways. In this special issue of CyberOrient, we aim to bring together research on a range of Middle Eastern and Muslim cultural media products. In addition, a couple of the articles and essays shed light on the ways in which gender and gender activism may be enacted online in a variety of ways. The overarching goal of this special issue is to examine how gender roles are constructed, transmitted, performed and negotiated, and at times put forward as part of lifestyle or ideological choices. At the same time, we are interested in how such media products are received, imagined, and consumed in the everyday lives of audiences. This special issue focuses both on media practices and media cultural production in the Middle East as well as products intended for consumption by Muslim and Middle Eastern diaspora. Examples of media products include TV-series, YouTube videos, social media, and Islamic branding online. Even if a multitude of media formats are produced primarily for entertainment, much of popular cultural production promotes particular worldviews, gender dynamics, political stances, consumerism patterns, and lifestyles. The worldviews and subjectivities of the individual media users, and the modes in which they engage with the media are therefore equally important to analyse, in order to understand the complex responses of media audiences. Guiding questions for the select articles include: To what extent are cultural media products embedded with an ideological agenda or a blueprint for 'ideal' gender relations? How do audiences respond to media products' prescriptions on gender and/or lifestyle? In what ways does consumer culture play into the media products?

In the recent Egyptian TV-series hit Nelly and Sherihan the multiple levels of intertextuality between media, consumerism, class, and gender is tangible. In fact the very name of the series is a reference to two of the most and iconic stars of the Ramadan-specials called fawazeer - renowned in the Arab world and devoured by eagerly by many Arab publics worldwide. Like many other Arabic language entertainment products, Nelly and Sherihan is available on YouTube, strengthening transnational links of Arab viewer-

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ship. The audience is invited to relish in the multiple references to the real Nelly and Sherihan since this unlikely combination of names causes many comic intricacies in the plot, adding a layer of entertainment for audiences familiar with the fawazeer. This multi-layered TV-series is an excellent example of how Egyptian TV-serials tend to incorporate all sorts of social - and current issues into the plot. The Arab spring, police inaptitude, lack of political change, are all deftly and seamlessly integrated into the scenes. Nelly and Sherihan's personae build on familiar female screen-characters and the ways their gender and class-affiliation has been depicted in Egyptian drama. Nelly is portrayed as a spoilt brat and incredibly selfish upper class woman who is always to be seen with coiffured hair and a perfect screen of makeup. Sherihan is a lower class girl, a kind and gentle soul who has to play it tough in order to survive. She is portrayed as an untamed beauty who will make eyes pop once she drops her rough mannerisms and gets a makeover. These gender types are not only typical of Egyptian drama but also represent global trends of drama and comedy that depict a rugged heroine as a rough diamond which can be polished into a jewel. In Nelly and Sherihan the two women struggle with each of their class-appropriate gender roles, and the main plot circles around their class differences and complete incompatibility in terms of worldview and background. One of the biggest breakthroughs in their relationship is when Turkish TV-soaps are on the TV and they are both drawn to the screen like moths to light. In this scene their differences are wiped out, and they are equal in their fandom and united in their shushing anyone who steers them away from the captivating content on the screen.

This serves as another excellent example of Nelly and Sherihan's intertextuality and self-parody. The ironic touch in this scene is that it is in the hugely popular Nelly and Sherihan. Here audiences see its two main characters (and stars) overcoming differences by watching the Turkish soaps that are said to have mesmerized Arab audiences, while simultaneously hinting at the parallel story of Nelly and Sherihan's enchanted audience. The fervent public debates following the Turkish soap operas, dubbed in the melodious Syrian accent, left the impression that these shows were so emotively powerful that they instilled unrealistic gender ideals, ruined marriages, and destroyed lives in the Arab world. The characters Nelly and Sherihan enact how such TV-series bring people together  - not only in the search for idealized gender relations - but also in their quest to be supremely entertained. Thus this message also functions as a promotion of the very entertainment

product viewers are watching. As Lila Abu-Lughod's iconic study, Dramas of Nationhood, on Egyptian TV-Serials demonstrates, media producers may at times have strong ideological messages, which they wish to convey to their audiences through their media output. However, audience responses may not always match the intentions and anticipations of the producers.

In this special issue, Anne Sofie Roald, discusses moral panic and the complex ways in which Jordanian youth consume satellite TV. Roald also demonstrates how various global TV products are consumed and understood at times in rather contradictory ways, and points to gender patterns, and the relevance of social and class background. In my own article on counselling sexuality on an Islamic website, I discuss attempts at moving sexuality from 'taboo' to 'talked about' in online spaces, and argue that the idealized image of the Prophet Mohammed as the 'ideal man' and the iconic screen character 'muhanad' of the Turkish soap-operas share many key characteristics. Kristin Peterson examines Islamic fashion YouTube videos, and delves into the rendition of the ideal Muslim woman as positive, smart, pious and trendy. She demonstrates how such videos entail the negotiating of boundaries of gender, Islamic identity, lifestyles and life choices. Olesya Venger unravels a highly gendered political attack and shaming of an Iranian human rights activist, and how this backfired through social media users' counter-narratives. She also relates her discussion to how one gender may be ideologically envisioned as a priori shameful, and used as political weapon for shaming. In addition to the abovementioned peer-reviewed articles, there are two essays in this special issue. Sahar Khamis provides a rich overview of - and reflects on online gender activism and women's achievements and obstacles in furthering a feminist agenda since the Arab Spring. Jon Nordenson draws on his recent Ph.D. research about online civic engagement in Kuwait and Egypt, including research on anti-harassment online campaigns. Nordenson calls for more context-sensitive and grounded analysis of online activities.

Together these articles and essays paint a rather broad picture of how gender is constructed, performed and consumed through media in the Middle East, and its diaspora.

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