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CONTEMPORARY ARAB MUSIC VIDEO CLIPS
Between Simulating MTV's Gender Stereotypes and Fostering New Ones

OUIDYANE ELOUARDAOUI

MTV was the first 24-hour cable network to continuously broadcast music videos in the 1980s, thus establishing the genre. Generally, Arab music video clips differ from Western-produced music videos, because artists are compelled to abide by the conservative cultural norms of Arab societies. However, most Arab music videos, particularly those produced in the last decade, reaffirm Western gender stereotypes intrinsic to those produced by MTV. Contemporary Arab music videos for the most part simulate an MTV aesthetic vocabulary of a gaze that features female sexuality and narratives of seduction. Some new Arab producers, nonetheless, have attempted to avoid reproducing MTV-based gender clichés, but have instead created new gender misconceptions. These productions emphasize depictions of women as untrustworthy and impetuous. Finally, I discuss how young Arab singers have constantly been confronted by the ire of regionally prominent religious figures who denounce the music videos' endorsement of "anti-Islamic" principles. I contend that Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel's early analysis of reactions against popular music styles among British youth as a form of cultural transgression remains relevant to understanding the cultural style of Arab youth as expressed through popular musical performance.

MTV est la première chaîne de télévision à diffuser en permanence des clips musicaux 24/24 dans les années 80, établissant ainsi le genre. Généralement, les clips musicaux arabes diffèrent des clips occidentaux parce que les artistes se sentent obligés de respecter les normes culturelles conservatives des sociétés arabes. Néanmoins, la plupart des clips musicaux arabes, surtout ceux produits dans la dernière décennie, réaffirment les stéréotypes occidentaux du sexe hérités de ceux produits par MTV. En général, les clips musicaux arabes contemporains imitent le vocabulaire esthétique de MTV en lien avec la sexualité féminine et l'art de séduction. Certains nouveaux réalisateurs ont essayé d'éviter les clichés sur le sexe crées par MTV, mais ils ont créé des idées falsifiées à leur place, à savoir, des représentations où la femme est impérieuse et n'est pas digne de confiance. Cet article montre que les artistes arabes doivent sans cesse défier les personnalités religieuses locales dénonçant l'approbation des principes « anti-islamiques » qu'ils voient dans ces clips musicaux. On emploie ici les stratégies d'analyse de Stuart Hall et de Paddy Whannel, développées l'origine pour démontrer que la musique populaire est une forme de transgression culturelle de la jeunesse britannique. Ces stratégies se avèrent fort utiles afin de comprendre le style culturel de la jeunesse arabe exprimé dans la musique populaire.

MTV was the first 24-hour cable network to continuously broadcast music videos in the 1980s thus establishing the genre. Music videos are typically short in duration, deploy cinematic camerawork and fast editing techniques as well as post-production computerized effects that have attracted viewers (Goodwin 60). MTV-style music videos are also characterized by the fragmented nature of their narration and characterization and do not usually embrace the classical Hollywood cause and effect-oriented narrative pattern. They also rarely feature full-fledged protagonists and villains because their focal point is the showcasing of the star. As a result of their lack of narrative coherence and motivational characters, the possible meaning that can usually be deduced from music videos is contingent on the juxtaposition of visual objects in relation to singers (Vernallis 138). Generally, Arab music video clips] differ from Western-produced music videos, primarily because artists are compelled to abide by the cultural norms of Arab societies. Arab television is usually censored for the depiction of sexuality, graphic violence and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, any reference to religion other than Sunni Islam (Rinnawi 29). In addition, contemporary Arab music clips have found inspiration in music sketches characteristic of Egyptian films of the 1950s and 1960s.

Most Arab music videos, however, particularly those produced in the last decade, reaffirm Western gender stereotypes intrinsic to those produced by MTV. Contemporary Arab music videos for the most part simulate an MTV aesthetic vocabulary of a gaze that features female sexuality and narratives of seduction. In this regard, relevant to Angela McRobbie's analysis of the concept of post-feminism that rationalizes the objectification of female bodies in different platforms of popular culture by the logic of personal choice, the stagnant sexualized images of Arab female singers have been often justified by the same rhetoric of "free will.. Some new Arab producers, however, have attempted to avoid reproducing MTV-based gender clichés, but have instead created new gender misconceptions. These productions emphasize depictions of women as untrustworthy and impetuous. In these clips, women typically take advantage of a kind, caring man, but in the end choose an abusive and heartless one. These new gender stereotypes generally refer to a female lack of personal integrity instead of perpetuating clichéd sexualized representations of women. In this context, I draw on McRobbie's analysis of "new sexualities" promoted by youth magazines, among other popular media outlets, that shun conventional prejudiced images of women on the one hand, while emphasizing women's sexually lustful tendencies on the other.

In the end, I examine public controversies through an analysis of the reactionary discourse of religious figures as well as a number of media experts and academics. Just as the depiction of gender and racial relations in music videos have evoked criticism in the Western media, Arab youth music

videos have been attacked for their focus on the physical and sexual attributes of female singers and models at the expense of promoting progressive social and cultural values. In addition, young Arab singers are constantly confronted by the ire of regionally prominent religious figures who denounce the music videos' endorsement of "anti-Islamic" principles. Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel's early analysis of reactions against popular music styles among British youth as a form of cultural transgression remains relevant to understanding the cultural style of Arab youth as expressed through popular musical performance.

The Classical Format of Music Clips in the Arab World

The modern prototype of Arab music video clips is partly inspired by the musical performances that dominated Arab films and theatrical performances of the 1950s. Media professional Moataz Abdel Aziz points out that staged performances or music sketches in early Egyptian films of the 1950s used to be the central attraction to audiences. They typically featured the most popular music artists, such as Abdel Halim Hafez, Mohamed Fawzy, Shadia and Najat Saghi(29). Moreover, due to the colorful political events of the 1960s and the 1970s, political and national songs were among the most successful audio records, specifically Abdel Halim Hafez's and Umm Kalthum's national songs such as *Hekayat Sha'b* (*Story of a People*), *Fidaii* (*Freedom-fighter*) and *Sawt Biladna* (*Our Country's Voice*).

While discussing the effects of political events during that period on the thematic qualities of songs, Mounir Alwassimi, the former head of the Egyptian Musicians' Union, affirms that songs "[were] very much influenced by the social, political and the economic order of the day. Production venues were aligned with the politics of the regime and worked within its directives in most case(92). By contrast, contemporary Arab music is seen as largely apolitical and based on the commercial success of songs (Hammo142). It should be noted that the apolitical nature of the lyrics in most contemporary Arab music videos is shored up by an emphasis and fascination with the iconography of the performer.

The emergence of Egyptian television in the 1960s initially diminished the popular role that Egyptian radio used to play as the source for Arab songs. In contrast to the radio age where listeners had to rely on their own imagination regarding the appearance of the singer and band, television facilitated the audience's visual recognition of the performer in relation to visual effects that include lighting and décor (Nassar 72-73). In fact, the period of classical Arab music identified as the "goldentaring lasting from the early fifties till the late seventies, was known for its main characteristic of being *tarab*. The most accurate English equivalent to *tarab* is "art music," which implies the intrinsic artistic value of music. The word *tarab*, as "art music," also refers to the strong effects of "enchantment" and "ecstasy" experienced by the audience (Racy 6).

Also, the singers or artists during that time period were seen as divinely gifted because of their unique vocal aptitudes and their ability to emotionally engage the audience. In addition, audiences were assumed to be musically informed or *sami'ah*, possessed of an intuitive knowledge of the auditory and technical features of "good" music and express their enchantment with the songs through their facial expressions and verbal exclamations (Racy 40-41). This, however, has completely changed today, given that the physical appeal of singers has become the most viable criterion for success. According to some local intellectuals and music professionals, this transformation from a primarily auditory genre to an increasingly visual one has led to the disappearance of "clean art" associated with classical singers such as Mohammed Abdel Wahab and Abdel Halim Hafez. By contrast, the contemporary approach to "singing with the body" by young Arab singers has become widely popular (Alwassimi 94).

The contemporary model of Arab music video clips began to emerge in the late 1980s on largely government-owned Arab television stations. This genre catered to the growing population of Arab youth, who demonstrated their interest in watching music concerts and entertainment TV shows. The national Egyptian television channel aired a music program that presented staged musical numbers of the famous classical Egyptian singers. Along with this traditional music style, a new Western-inspired music trend began to take shape

in the Arab media sphere. As Andrew Hammond explains, "The late 1990s saw a second wind for Arab pop. With the advent of Arabic satellite private stations, pop video culture has taken off and new sounds have developed that are much closer to Western pop but still distinctively Middle Eastern" (150-151). Arab music producers came to realize that the key point for the success of music performances is to introduce modern techniques while simultaneously adhering to local tastes in terms of music rhythms and lyrics (Abdel Aziz 85). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the older generation was less tolerant of the visual content of modern video clips that they considered violating essential cultural norms.

References to sex and religion in the Arab media were studiously avoided, particularly any criticism or negative portrayal of Islam. Despite the presence of a significant Arab Christian population, particularly in the Levant area, media productions typically emphasize the social and religious conditions of Arab Muslims. Further, positive representations of atheism, heresy and magic are generally forbidden. Moreover, scenes depicting explicit sex, nudity, revealing clothing for female characters as well as the use of obscene language are generally censored because they challenge Islamic practices that enhance traditional moral values and endorse modesty in clothing, speech and behaviors (Shafik 34-35). In more conservative Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, depiction of gender mixing and the presentation of unveiled women

are subject to censorship (Kraidy, "The Social and Political Dimensions of Global Television Formats" 295).

Thus, afraid of offending spectators, particularly considering that watching television is a collective family event in almost all Arab countries, the state-run television stations resisted airing music clips in order to avoid controversy in the public sphere. However, the liberal visual content of music videos found a niche in the private satellite television stations. Walid El Khashan alludes to this phenomenon in an ironic way as he says:

> There is a difference between what a "grounded" (terrestrial) national TV channel can broadcast and the greater freedom–of aesthetics and taboo-breaking–enjoyed by channels deterritorialized via satellite. Traditional "grounded" channels (for example Egypt's Channel 1 and Channel 2) show "safe" clips, while satellite channels show the hot stuff. (270)

I should also emphasize that during roughly the same period, Arab youth were exposed to international music channels, particularly the American music conglomerate MTV and the European music television channel VIVA. MTV has been able to reach 140 countries around the globe with the claim that it presents Western images with "local essence." In fact, the American music corporation asserts that its main slogan is "think globally, act locally" (Banks 266). Nonetheless,

Jack Banks points out that MTV's main goal is to increase its source revenues. Banks believes that MTV's commercial-based music video model has impacted local markets rather than adjusted its format to correspond to their cultural specifics (266).

Subsequent to their exposure to Western pop music styles, Arab youth rapidly became avid consumers of private Arab music TV channels that include Melody Arabia, Melody Hits, Mazzika, Rotana and Rotana Clip. Music TV channels in the Arab world only began to emerge in 1992 and by 2009 included some seventy channels (Kraidy amd Khalil 58). Techniques such as fetishism and exhibitionism, that MTV music videos have long been famous for, are easy to discern in the Arab music clips shown on these local music TV channels. On the other hand, a new group of Arab producers are now attempting to shun MTV's gender clichés. These music directors usually avoid framings that objectify the bodies of female singers. Instead, they rely on familiar narrative patterns and fashionable but relatively modest clothing of female singers to gain the highest possible viewership. In this respet, Marwan Kraidy and Joe Khalil state that "with their content clearly inspired by Western counterparts and with a transnational audience that spans Arab societies with various degrees of social liberalism and conservatism, music channels were from the beginning at the forefront of cultural translation between the global and the l" (60). However, while adjusting the iconography of the music video clips to

approximate the Arab cultural context, subtle new gender misconceptions have developed which tend to depict women as lacking an integral personal character thus being more susceptible to transgressive behavior.

Simulating MTV's Gender Stereotypes

Several highly-acclaimed Arab singers, such as Asala, Hani Shaker, Angham, Latifa, Wael Jassar, Kadem Saher, and Fadil Shaker, present video clips that conform to the mainstream norms of the Arab culture. Clips by these singers are often shot outdoors, emphasize beautiful natural landscapes and employ intriguing storylines to catch the attention of young viewers. For instance, the songs of the Lebanese singer Wael Jassar are habitually characterized by nostalgia and melancholy. Two of his recent music videos, *Mchit Khalas (You Walked Away)* 2005 and *Youm Zifafik (On Your Wedding Day)* 2007 are about his break up with a woman he loves, but whose wedding to another man he later attends. Similarly, Asala relies on sensationalist stories in order to compensate for the frequent lack of young female dancers. In one of her latest music clips *Meta Shoufak (When Will I See You?)* 2004, she plays the role of an angel spreading love everywhere she goes while in *Feen Habibi (Where is My Beloved?)* 2005, she is portrayed as a loving mother travelling the world in search of her lost son and the story ends with her reuniting with him after he has become a successful young man. While lip-synching is not a frequent convention in these Arab music video

clips, directors tend to overuse close-ups of the singers' faces. For example, Asala's clips are punctuated by the close-ups of her face at the beginning and end of her videos. The same holds true for the well-known Egyptian female singer Angham in which her face, particularly her "expressive" eyes are featured in extreme close-ups in several of her music clips. This approach matches the romantic themes of the majority of Angham's songs, such as *Omry Maak* (*My Life with You*) 2003. Several of these singers, especially Asala and Kadem Saher, are famous for performing the long poetic lyrics of renowned Arab poets, particularly the regionally popular Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani.

Along with this relatively modern trend, there has been a growing movement of young singers headed by Haifa Wahbi, Aline Khalaf, Nicole Saba and Ruby who primarily rely on their physical attributes and glamorous image for success. In fact, even the relatively traditionalist singers such as Asala felt the need to change her looks to fit into the video age where the artist's image has become increasingly significant. Hammond explains that "Asala was once dumpy-looking singer of long poems by poet Nizar Qabbani. Now she's shaped for the video era, with good looks and well-crafted pop tunes for private Arab music channels" (151). An important number of the singers that belong to this new music trend are Lebanese, given that Lebanon is culturally more liberal than other Arab countries. It is also the fashion and

the most artistically creative capital of the Arab world. Hammond points out that "Lebanon has a recognized place in the Arab world as the testing ground for how the latest Western trends will be received in the on" (273). Lebanon has habitually been the Arab country that takes the initiative to produce and broadcast Western-inspired entertainment TV genres. For example, LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Center) has aired different seasons of *Star Academy*, the Arabic version of *American Idol,* which led to public debates though the show has been adjusted to fit the Arab cultural context. The regionally diverse participants, who live together in a mansion named "the Academy" where they take music, dancing and theatre classes, have separate gender rooms and are strictly forbidden to flirt or show a sexually provocative attitude.

Therefore, Lebanon could be seen as a site where Western visual prototypes are reproduced but in a more transcultural manner for the aim of making them culturally acceptable in the Arab milieu. In this regard, Marwan Kraidy pointed out the existence of creative adaptation that involves institutional and cultural agencies in his analysis of the way *Star Academy* has been adapted to appeal to local audiences in Lebanon and across the Arab world. Kraidy argues that the popularity of *Star Academy* cannot be separated from the political circumstances of the Arab world. He suggests that the enthusiastic voting participation from the Arab youth when nominations take

place in the academy reflects their thirst for effective participation in the public life where their voices would be truly counted rather than maligned as part of a fictionalized 90-98% majority. Kraidy suggests that *Star Academy* has created a hybrid context in which the traditional and the modern have been contested. Kraidy claims that this alternative modernity is seen as rival, given that it challenges the religious, social and political norms of Arab societies. He points out that reality TV shows in the Arab world "have spurred heated controversies about the role of Islam in public life, Western cultural influence, gender relations and political participation" (Kraidy, "Rethinking the Local-Global Nexus through Multiple Modernites," 31).

The same can be argued regarding the presence of the imported style of music videos on the private Arab TV channels. Despite the fact that Arab music videos have retained local elements in terms of technique and content such as the use of the *'ud* (the Arabic lute) and the frequent featuring of belly dancing, media critics and public figures, as I will discuss later, see them as incompatible with mainstream Arab social norms. In any case, Arab viewers, to a certain extent, accept the culturally divergent ideas initiated by young Lebanese artists for the reasons mentioned earlier. Accordingly, the Lebanese ex-model Haifa Wahbi, known only by her first name "Haifa" is one of the most significant pioneers of this new music trend. While most of the Arab singers that belong to this liberal current

are quite young, Haifa constitutes an exception since she started her singing career in her thirties and reached the peak of fame in her mid-thirties. The explanation might be her notable physical beauty as well as her ability to get big music production companies to produce and sponsor her CDs and later her music clips.

The standards of female beauty in Arab mass media have been influenced by the European prototype of beauty in terms of clothing, hair style and skin color starting from the early twentieth century. Walter Armbrust examined the physical representation of women in popular Egyptian magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, such as *al-Fukaha* (*The Humor*) and *al-Sarih* (*The Sincere*). Armbrust remarks that the majority of the sexually attractive women depicted in the magazine covers embrace a European look, discerned in their liberal clothing (such as short dresses and décolleté), hair fashion and skin color, and such a depiction was commercially used to attract more readers. Armbrust builds an analogy between these representations of female Arab beauty to the physical attributes of the female singers and models in modern music videos, while also assuming that music videos have simply reproduced the same standards of female beauty of earlier decades. He provides the example of Maysam Nahas, a contemporary aspiring Lebanese singer that embodies the European look through her blond hair, revealing clothes and relatively fair skin color. According to Armbrust, modern Arab music videos have perpetuated

early "sexualized European looks" for similar reasons of maximizing pro(234-235).

Armbrust's analysis of the criteria for feminine beauty criteria that dominate Arab mass media is quite pertinent, as a large number of contemporary pop music figures such as Roula Saad, Razan, Madeline Mattar and Noura Rahal, are blond, have fair skin color and they wear color eye contacts to endorse their "European" look. All these singers are Lebanese. Lebanon is not only the primary site of fashion, as explained earlier, but it has also become known as one of the capitals for plastic surgery in the Arab world (Fattah 278). These Lebanese female singers represent what is currently known in the Arab media culture as the "Lebanese look," which is generally characterized by having a high small nose, full round lips, and high tattooed eyebrows.

However, in addition to this category of European-looking female singers, there has been a very recent move towards adopting a more "Arab look" by the most popular singers including the controversial Nancy Ajram, Haifa Wahbi and Ruby, as well as other prominent singers, such as Elissa, Cyrine Abdelnour, Maya Nasri and Dolly Shahine. These stars have assumed an Arab look exemplified in their long dark hair and their continuous use of culturally-specific make-up, particularly the *kohl*, black eye paint usually applied to the outside edges of the eyes, to enhance their sexual appeal. Nancy Ajram and Haifa Wehbi also had

silicone implants to endow their bodies with more curves, culturally a very sexually attractive physical attribute. In the same vein, Nancy Ajram dyed her natural blondish hair dark as part of her image transformation in the early 2000s. All of these stars have also been featured wearing the Arabic *jalabiya,* a long wide sleeved type of dress that comes in different fabrics and colors, in music videos such as *Ya Romoush* (*Oh Eyelashes*) 2008 and *Akhasmak Ah* (*I'll Taunt You*) 2003, though the type of *jalabiya* worn in these clips becomes tighter to draw attention to the singers' body curves. Hence, the present female beauty norms in the Arab music video realm are rather diverse and mixed, in which every female singer strives to have her own signature in terms of looks and music style in order to reach significant degree of fame. Nevertheless, the most popular female singers are those who embody the Arab look, including Haifa, Ruby, and Nancy Ajram, who are currently seen as the emblem of female beauty and femininity (Fattah 285).

The Western influence is more pronounced in the visual techniques used in modern Arab music videos. One can easily discern the technique of exhibitionism in all of Haifa's music video clips starting from early 2000s. In Haifa's music clips, camera angles and movements, such as the vertical pan shots, are used to highlight Haifa's physical charms. Her clip *Mosh Adra Astanna* (*I Cannot Wait Anymore*) 2008 begins with Haifa walking out of a swimming pool, the extreme close-ups and the slow depiction of her leaving

water highlights every part of her body. By the end of the clip, she adopts a savage look, exemplified in her heavy make-up, red dress and untidy hairstyle, which ultimately conveys the idea that she is wild and insatiable.

Correspondingly, Haifa is often taken in high-angle shots to call attention to her fragility and submissiveness. In Haifa's *Ma Toulch Li Had* (*Don't Tell Anyone*) 2008, she is shot lying down on the floor with her glimmering nightgown as she seductively touches parts of her body. Her music clip *Hassa Ma Benna Fi Haga* (*I Feel Something Is Going on Between Us*) 2008 embraces the same content. She is shot lying on the ground as she keeps twirling in a way that underlines her bodily charms. She also poses while walking on a sunny day as the camera draws attention to her sweaty naked body. I should indicate that Haifa relies on her physical attributes, fashionable clothing, and remarkably excessive (but seen as culturally specific) make-up to cover up for the fact that her vocal aptitude is considered very mediocre not only by music experts but by almost all categories of Arab audiences including her fans who see her more as a stage performer than a singer.

Haifa's spectacular music videos and stage shows have appealed to the taste of Arab youth who see her as the epitome of feminine beauty. Haifa's style and clips are equally reminiscent of Madonna's personal mode of dancing and staging. This detail is brought up by Y. Euny Hong who notes that "a few aspects of Arab pop music are

borrowed from Western pop. The songs of Haifa Wehbe (stage name: Haifa W), a top Lebanese pop star, have a breathy, gasping quality reminiscent of Madonna or the young David Cassiidy." On talk shows and interviews, Haifa confirms her "feminine" and simultaneously assertive image. She usually adopts a soft vocal intonation but looks confident, and calmly refuses to answer questions that she thinks are "inappropriate" or too personal. In fact, the way Haifa presents herself in different media outlets is emblematic of Angela McRobbie's observation about the post-feminist forms of communication across various platforms of popular culture. Post-feminism, she asserts, is the belief that women's rights have already been secured and that debates about female inequality or sexist media depictions have become obsolete.

McRobbie thus remarks that feminism is presently, in most cases, evoked by young women only to be repudiated. McRobbie analzses a TV ad that features Claudia Schiffer taking off her clothes as she walks down the stairs, arguing that "this is a self-consciously sexist ad" because it stresses that the behaviors of the well-known and highly paid supermodel are out of her free choice. McRobbie contends that "by means of the tropes of freedom and choice that are now inextricably connected with the category of 'young women,' feminism is decisively 'aged' and made to seem redundant" (Tasker and Negra 27). McRobbie concludes that sexist images in media are currently justified by what she refers to as "the ethic of freedom" where relations of power are being ideologically constructed and protected by the logics of female consent and freedom of choice. In other words, the focus on the sexual appeal of women in popular culture started to be seen liberating as long as women were free to make the choice of objectifying themselves.

The image of Haifa fits very well with what McRobbie describes as "the ethic of freedom." Haifa invariably expresses her appreciation for Arab and Islamic cultural values while at the same time describing herself as a female artist who is proud of her beauty and femininity and who aspires to bring happiness to the audience through her unique singing style. Haifa enhances her assertive character by engaging in NGOs that promote social work in the region. Haifa served as ambassador for the Red Ribbon Commission that raises AIDS awareness in Africa and the Arab world in 2008. Likewise, the music clips of another Lebanese singer Nicole Saba point to their consciously culturally rebellious content, starting with the song titles. For instance, in the music clip *Ana Tabee Keda* (*This is The Way I am*) 2007, Saba dances in a very provocative manner in a nightclub amidst swaying young night-clubbers. The song's lyrics express the overall unruly mood of the visuals, she sings: "this is the way I am, this is the way I love, and I want to live this way, this is my own life, whatever happens, I will still be the way I am…" Saba's subsequent music clip *Brahti* (*As I Like*) 2008 conveys similar meaning. In this

one, she wears a revealing nightgown as she expresses her feelings of distress towards her nagging partner. As is the case with Haifa, Saba is presented as conscious of the culturally transgressive nature of her video clips manifested in the extreme sensuality of her attire and gestures. Drawing on the rhetoric of post-feminism tenets, Saba is depicted as simultaneously powerful and feminine. Thus, to criticize the sexist depiction of the female body in this clip would be inappropriate, precisely because it is all couched within the framework of sensuality as a form of conscious choice. However, the prejudiced depiction of female characters in popular culture whether in TV ads or music video clips are currently more than often concealed under the post-feminist "ethic of freedom."

In fact, modern Arab female singers such as Haifa and Nicole Saba have attained a level of freedom of expression in terms of body and language that their earlier counterparts could not have envisioned. During the classical period of Arab music, women's decision to pursue a career as a singer was strongly discouraged because it contradicts the moral code of *hasham* (propriety of conduct) upon which women gain respect from their social surroundings. For this reason, the classical diva of the Arab world, Umm Kalthum, solely sung religious texts at the beginning of her career while she was dressed in '*abaya,* a large flowing long-sleeved cloak that covers everything from head to toe (Racy 16-17). Umm Kalthum was thus considered as one of the most

"untouchable" female singers of her era due to her socially conservative background and her culturally appropriate attire (Racy 30).

The change that took place in the Arab music video realm in terms of gender depiction is the offshoot of both the exposure to Western style of pop music as well as the rapid transformation of modern technologies that resulted in the growing importance of the image. Yet, this more vigorously liberal female attitude in music videos is tied to the increasing social and political empowerment of women in the Arab world, in general. The well-know Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi founded one of the first prominent women's organizations called Arab Women's Solidarity Organization in 1982, which was composed of activists of both genders that called for the end of the long-standing social and cultural patriarchal system in the Arab world (El Saadawi 24). El Saadawi remarks that though the development of women's movement in the Arab world has been slow, the women's political groups have, with some success, advanced their agenda within the Arab nationalist movements. The main challenge for the women's groups remains the exclusion that they occasionally face from male-dominated mainstream political movements because they have been unable to form a large feminist force. Arab women have also me a significant progress in the socially more conservative gulf countries, as they have successfully entered previously male-designated domains, such as politics

and the workplace. For example, Nada Haffadh became the first cabinet minister in Bahrain and was later appointed Minister of Health in 2004.

In addition, the conventional appropriate gender behaviors are progressively changing. In Qatar, couples increasingly walk side by side and even hold hands in public in contrast to the previous decade where men used to walk a few steps ahead of their wives (Torstrick and Faier 114). Also, the gulf's traditional values that center on the cherishing of family relations displayed in integrity, structured nature of family relationships as well as submission to **patriarchal** authority are constantly in flux. The younger generations are increasingly more in favor of choosing partners from their educational and professional backgrounds than showing interest in arranged marriages, and thus the parents' role has changed from command to consultation (Torstrick and Faier).

What is also interesting is the escalating financial power of contemporary Lebanese female singers who are mostly fthe middle and working class families. For instance, Haifa and Nancy Ajram have rapidly ascended in social and economic status, after their remarkable popular success, which drove big companies such as Pepsi and Coca-Cola to designate them as the official representatives of their local advertising campaigns during the early 2000s. However, the image that most of these female singers represents in their music videos is very stagnant as it concentrates on their sexual and physical attributes. Hence, apart from the music videos that underline women's yearning to exhibit their bodies, there are other Arab music clips that emphasize women's own sexual desires. For example, Aline Khalaf's video clip *Baadak Albal* (*I am Still Thinking of You*) 2008 portrays her abandonment by her lover when he learns that she is pregnant. In the clip, she changes her clothes in front of the camera and exposes her naked back before her whole nude body is shown in soft focus. Then, the Lebanese singer drives her car and begins throwing her lover's ties and belts out of the car while also begging him to return to her.

Ruby's music clips are equally controversial. In clips such as *Enta Aref Leih* (*You Know Why?*) 2003, *Leh Beydary Keda* (*Why is He keeping it to Himself?*) 2004 and *Kol Ma A'ollo Ah* (*Whenever I say Yes*) 2004, *Leeh Ghawi* (*Why Do You Like it This Way?*) 2005, *Omry Mastaneit Had* (*I Never Waited for Anyone*) 2005 and *Eb'a Abelny* (*Keep Meeting Me*) one would might wonder about the true nature of these clips since she performs dancing sketches in all of them and throughout the clips. Interestingly, her clips invariably consist of her dancing starting from her very first clip *Enta Aref Leih* (*You Already Know Why*) 2003 in which she playfully dances, wearing a belly dancing costume, while walking in the streets of Prague. Despite Ruby's acclaimed vocal talent, she supports her music clips by performing outstanding stage dancing.

The music clips of Khalaf and Ruby also exemplify the trend that governs post-feminism, discussed earlier. Martin Roberts in his study of the economic and social implications of the BBC fashion TV show *What Not to Wear* (2001) points out that the show fosters a model of gender identity inseparable from sexual appeal, which is primarily gained through the consumption of cosmetics and "fashionable" clothing. He claims that the show endorses "one of the central tenets of post-feminist ideology: that sexual attractiveness is a source of power over patriarchy rather than the subject to it" (Tasker and Negra 233). Robin Roberts has also argued that women's ability to articulate their sexual desires through their bodies and song lyrics is an empowering feminist tool as it reverses the old tradition of reducing them to sexual ots (68). This applies to the image that Khalaf and Ruby attempt ject about of themselves, as they both consciously draw attention to their sexual desires and physical attractiveness. Additionally, in the case of Ruby, she has consistently expressed her love for dancing, an aspiration to famous Egyptian dancers, and desire to achieve a high level of professionalism in dancing. However, as McRobbie and Martin Roberts have noted, stereotypical images of women in which their physical and sexual attributes are the focal point have been justified by the rhetoric of free choice or searching for a new model of female empowerment.

Generating New Gender Misceptions

Both female and male attitudes in these music clips have been challenged by local media critics and the public. The depiction of young women who do not object the advances of male strangers is a source of local debate. Many media critics and religious clerics are worried about the transfer of these problematic behaviors to the Arab street. Their concern centers on how images that strongly conflict with the cultural norms of Arab societies get legitimized in these clips and might affect the actual attitudes and behaviors of Arab youth. In this respect, Hammond mentions the concerned statement of the Egyptian academic Ashraf Galal who contends after having looked at the modern style of Arab videos that there is an "absence of Arab identity and positive values, and there is no presence for the Arab environment, and there is a complete cancellation of higher meanings and va" (151).

A similar controversy came about with the advent of pop music videos in the West that were seen as predominantly apolitical and detached from lived reality. Hip Hop and country music among other genres have been criticized for their traditional representation of women who are mainly featured as sex objects (Railton andson 18). The images of female performers and models, considered conflicting with how women look and behave in real life, were also denounced because of their ability to spread negative social values. However, Diane Railton argues that music videos

should not be studied merely from the perspective of how they manifest representations of reality because she refutes the idea that music videos can actually either convey negative or positive images of women. For instance, Railton states that though Pink's *Stupid Girls* (2006) criticizes the traditional concept of femininity as contingent on consumer culture, particularly cosmetic surgery and fashion, it also conveys the contested idea that adopting a masculine identity embodied in showing interest in contact sports is a viable means to avoid becoming a "stupid girl (34-35). Another irony, according to Railton, is the fact that this criticism of "commodified femininity" is articulated by a sexually attractive star persona (Pink) who is already entrenched in popular consumerist culture. Hence, music videos can yield different and complex feminist messages that do not necessarily fit the binary opposition of positive or negative.

To skirt grueling debates regarding the representation of gender roles in Arab music clips, some Arab directors determinably evade the focus on women's sexualized bodies. Ziad Borji's clip *Aal Eih* (*What Did She Say?*) 2007, for example, does not focus on the model's physical beauty. In fact, the model wears casual tops and pants and she is generally portrayed as an adorable fragile girl. The gender stereotype in this video clip does not pertain to the model's physical charms as much as to her unscrupulous personal code of conduct: she runs away with a man she barely knows (the

Lebanese singer) and stays with him for a few days in an isolated placter hehad rescued her from her abusive boyfriend. Unlike her previous boyfriend, he has been tremendously caring and kind. However, instead of rewarding him, she leaves him in the end and reconciles with the abusive boyfriend. The young woman, though modestly dressed, is depicted as insensitive: she dispenses with men easily and is attracted to the abusive one.

Saber Elrebai's *Daet Beek* (*Did You Give Up?*) 2008 transmits the same type of misconception about women. The clip features a young woman who attracts the compassionate Tunisian singer only to soothe her pains, as she eventually reunites with her previous uncaring boyfriend. Ghady's *Redda Alay* (*Answer Me*) 2009 carries an even more misogynist message about women's unfaithfulness: the Lebanese singer showers his girlfriend with gifts and proposes to her while the remarkably attractive girl has been planning to kill him as part of a conspiracy. Elmajdoub's music clip *Ana Aamal Eiih* (*What Should I Do?*) 2010 is centered on the same message: the Syrian singer's girlfriend let him down and starts dating one of their classmates despite the singer's extreme kindness. Similarly, Rachid Elmajid's *Minek Minkeher* (*I am So Disappointed in You*) 2010 depicts a heartbroken man who finds out that his fiancée has been cheating on him and is so hurt that he deserts her without a word. As it can be inferred, this category of clips presents a different type of gender misrepresentation. There

is effectively no objectification of female bodies in the majority of these clips but rather an emphasis on the depravity of the personal conduct of the female characters. Women in these clips make use of gentle and caring men but choose the ones who mistreat them. As is the case with classical gender misconceptions represented in the first part of the essay, this particular depiction of women being characteristically untrustworthy and impetuous is equally problematic.

McRobbie has pointed out that a feminist critique of popular girls' magazines, such as *More!, Sugar, 19 and Just Seventeen*, that address gender and sexuality as their man focus, hasd gone through different stages. The first is the "angry repudiation" classical stage in which feminists criticize the objectified representation of women before more recently shifting their attention to "women's pleasure" that foregrounds women's sexual and emotional concerns. This generated a "return to the reader" for more inclusive analysis. McRobbie points out that popular youth magazines have advanced "new sexualities" by moving away from stories about romance and love to topics about safe sex and sexual pleasure. She argues that the images and articles in these magazines "break decisively with the conventions of feminine behavior by representing girls as crudely lustful young women" (50).

She also argues that the approach of magazine editors is ambiguous and contradictory: while they attempt to advance confident and unconventional images of women, they simultaneously advocate the idea that seeking the perfect body for women is essential for a successful heterosexual relationship, thus generating body anxieties for girls to achieve the assumed perfect body image. Analogous to McRobbie's argument about how the "new sexualities" depicted in popular girls' magazines have been harmful, the music videos under discussion follow the same pattern. While shunning conventional sexist depiction of female characters, they perpetuate new gender misconceptions that judge women to be lacking an integral personal character. Thus, these popular media forms, instead of decisively spurning stereotypical images of women, simply replace them with other types of gender misrepresentations that are equally injurious.

Controversy in Public Life

As stated earlier, Arab conservative entities have expressed their concern that these controversial values might transcend the fictional world of the clips to influence the mainstream cultural mode of Arab societies. In this regard, Ruby's music clips are seen as the most culturally subversive types of contemporary Arab music videos. The well-known Egyptian intellectual Abdel-Alwahab Elmessiri condemns Ruby's type of music video clips of "killing" the notion of subtlety in songs that deal with romantic themes. Elmessiri is not concerned about the visual degradation of these clips as much as their lack of substantial aesthetic values

that he believes art should embrace including music videos (165-166). For this reason, he describes these clips as simply presenting a "flesh parade" and he contends that Ruby's risqué approach advocates that "girls are cute and cuddly, receptive and playful. Ruby's character is sexy, perhaps sweet, but not inspiring" (169).

These clips have also led the Arab youth to clash with an older generation that does not only disapprove of the music clips' culturally transgressive content but believes that they have no useful message. In this regard, Kraidy and Khalil point out that there is a significant gap between the young Arab generation and their parents in terms of exposure to new media genres, as they explain:

> While people who are currently eighteen years old or younger were born into the vibrant and diverse commercial satellite television era, their parents are likely to have grown up with one or two staid national channels. Elements of global media culture that are familiar to these children are completely alien to their parents (57).

Thus, this visual cultural discrepancy has put the youth in a real dilemma. Due to their strong familiarity with different types of new media, particularly the internet, Arab youth already know a great deal about the Western prototype of music videos that they cherish. For many of them, the Arab model of music video clips is catching up with the latest Western trends of music rhythms and clothing fashions rather than importing extraneous cultural values.

In a similar context, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel have discussed the prejudiced social attitude adopted by the older British generation toward the popular music styles of the youth. Hall and Whannel note that as a result of their preference of particular types of popular culture (songs, films, comic etc.) the youth can be argued to have formed their own subculture that is not necessarily reverent of the traditional values of the family, school and religious institutions (Storey 62-63). Hall and Whannel attribute this behavior of social non-conformity to the youth's desire to articulate "their adolescent emotional dilemma" (Storey 64). Further, the emphasis on teenage emotions is manifest in youth music through two forms. The first is the lyrics of the songs which are mostly about love (falling in love, longing for or suffering from love) and the delivery of these songs by typically young singers with whom the young audience can identify. They add that though the settings of the songs are usually not authentic, the feelings expressed are genuine and reflect the youth's emotional and social concerns. They also conclude that the youth's music, though different in character, is in kind similar to other entertainment music is in that it is "intended for dancing, singing, leisure and enjoyment" (Storey 66). They also contend that pop music plays a functional role that it is basically an emotional outlet for the youth, which

is the reason for its typical dismissal by adults.

Hall and Whannel's observations about the British youth pop music fit well into the social prejudice that Arab pop music has faced from both the older generation and the religious clerics. Regardless of the sexist image in a number of modern Arab music clips that depict highly debatable gender relations, many of these videos serve to voice the social and emotional dilemmas experienced by the Arab youth. Saba's videos, for instance, are especially rebellious. The lyrics of Saba's songs express a yearning for freedom from all social and cultural constrictions. In *Ana Tabee Keda* (*This is The Way I am*) 2007, Saba sings "this is my character and I like it this way, my life is all mine and I should live it the way I want, I live my age by singing and loving life and I do what I want and feel, I will enjoy my life second by second. I want to laugh, dance and be happy, it is only one life and I should live it up. And I turn a deaf ear to all those who keep blaming me..." Saba's subsequent song *Brahti* (*As I Like*) 2008 conveys the same defiant message. In this one, she sings "I will do as I like, no one will control me or pull me down. Why should I believe his made-up stories and be happy with his character? No I don't like it this way, I am a woman who loves freedom and I don't want a lover who will control me, frankly no one deserves that I go to bed upset because of him. Life is a game, we either lose or win and I want to be the winner at the end…"

Saba's two songs clearly express a desire for a social acceptance even if the person is rebellious in the sense of not conforming to mainstream social norms. This is also obvious in the visuals of the clips that include the singer's untidy clothing style, strange and even ugly make-up and the depiction of young people frantically swaying in nightclubs, in addition to the fast-paced music that reinforces the rebellious ambiance. Some of Ruby's clips also attempt to speak to the emotional sensibilities of the youth despite her consistent dependence on dancing sketches. For example, in her *Omry Mastaneit Had* (*I Never Waited for Anyone*) 2005, she expresses her nonchalant spirit and readiness to fall in love with only the man who would value her feelings. Thus, following Hall and Whannel, Arab pop songs are characteristically very analogous to other national pop music. Their focal point is also the desire for love fulfillment and the fear of falling in love with the wrong person. In addition, these Arab singers are also quite young which facilitates the youth's identification with their songs and help generate more feedback from them. In fact, Ruby more than often claimed that she always provides dancing shows in her music videos because she wants to share her passion for belly dancing with other Arab young girls who equally adore the art of Middle Eastern dancing. Thus, pop Arab music is also customarily entertaining, aiming at providing space for leisure and enjoyment for the Arab youth. Also, though the general settings of contemporary Arab music videos are not as authentic as claimed to be

given that they are detached from their cultural and geographical context, they serve to reflect the socially rebellious mood of the artists, as in the case with Saba and Ruby's clips.

What is also specific about the controversy surrounding Arab pop music is that Arab pop singers constantly face scrutiny from official religious clerics in the region. Conservative Arab communities in the gulf area have demanded the censorship of the modern style of Arab music clips. Their argument is that these music videos introduce "non-Islamic" values that might negatively impact the religious integrity of young Arabs. Patricia Kubala refers to the religious discourse that strongly condemns the dissemination and consumption of modern Arab music clips. She quotes the prominent Egyptian religious figure Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi who affirms:

> Of late there has appeared a kind of female dance that is more dangerous, provocative and effective in arousing the worldly instincts […] This has become famous on singing and amusement channels, and it has become a profitable business to those who deem permissible illicit earnings, even if [this money] is gained by dishonoring [*hatk*] inviolable things, and disdaining morals and degrading ethical virtues, and raising the logic of the body above that of the spirit, and treating the human as if he were an animal! (194).

Though this might be an austere statement, al-Qaradawi's concern, like that of the majority of religious authorities in the Arab world, is the assumed culturally invasive qualities of music videos that can cause the younger generation to be less reverent of their Islamic traditions. Similar *fatwas* have been issued regarding other types of Western-inspired TV shows, as was the case with *Star Academy*. Saudi religious clerics have urged Arab viewers of both sexes to stop watching *Star Academy* because it fosters gender mixing in the private sphere.[2] The harsh criticism was due to the fear that such Western-based TV shows "would teach women to 'display their charms' and 'lose their modesty' while leading men to succumb to their impulses and lose their status as guardians of familial honor."[3]

This type of allegation also targeted the content of contemporary Arab music videos, which religious clerics see as being culturally incompatible with the Arab-Islamic context. Nonetheless, despite the fact that Saudi and Egyptian sheikhs use religious references to substantiate their *fatwas* that presumably aim to protect the Arab society from "external" social ills, such as adultery and gender mixing, their statements are politically-motivated. Kraidy touches on this important point when discussing the opposing stand of the religious authority *Wahhabiya* (Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics* 14) that relentlessly promotes the strictest form of gender segregation in order to preserve the ideal Islamic characteristics of both genders,

particularly women that are seen as the bearers of national identity and family honor (Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics* 14). Kraidy attributes the fierce controversy that imported and Western-inspired media have evoked in Saudi Arabia to *Wahhabiya*'s fear of losing power and public legitimacy. He contends that the discourse of protecting the pure Islamic practices against the conflicting ones in imported media is a façade for the religious clerics to secure their power in the Arab public sphere.

Also, with the very recent thriving of Islamist groups in the Arab world, subsequent to the public uprisings, there has been a consistent demand for reviving an Arab identity where cultural and religious authenticity are seen as the most feasible means for social development. Egypt's current president, Mohamed Morsi Isa El-Ayyat, took office in June 2012. He has been a leading figure in the Muslim brotherhood, which used to be the fiercest opposing political group during Mubarak's regime. As a result of the increasing political power of religiously more conservative parties, **Arab TV channels, particularly the government-controlled ones, feel the need to abide by the socio-religious redlines set by those pressure entities and this applies to both locally produced and imported media.** Consequently, in addition to the frowned-upon attitude that the new Arab youth music style faces from the older generation and media critics, young Arab singers feel at odds regarding the Islamists who propagate conservative views that denounce the

visual content of contemporary Arab music videos.

Conclusion

Contemporary Arab music video styling has roots in the short sketches of Egyptian films produced in the 1950s and 1960s. While songs and staged musical performances of that era reflected upon contemporary political and social issues specific to the Arab context, contemporary Arab music videos emphasize the visual appeal of performers while integrating a Western prototype of pop music to the detriment of qualities that undergird national constructions of gender. In this way, several of the clips under discussion rely upon objectified images of women as part of a corporate address to commodification of the body. The sexualized female iconography presented exchanges sexism as the embodiment of the purported free will of the female performer to exhibit her sexuality. However, following McRobbie, this post-feminist address conceals the perpetuation of media stereotypes organized around gender and sexuality. Other Arab producers and singers have introduced images that generate novel gender misrepresentations that are more subtle forms of stereotyping in order to allay public controversy. As is the case with the number of American girls' magazines that shun conventional sexist images, on the one hand, and produce bigoted "new sexualities" that stress the social and sexual significance of embracing the "perfect" female body on the other, as McRobbie has

described, these video clips highlight the depraved personal code of conduct of women rather than present them as objects of pleasure. Finally, despite these stereotyped images, some of these clips can also be seen as an alternative forms of expression that allow Arab youth to interpret their concerns and emotions, analogous to other national popular musical forms.

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(Endnotes)

1 Music videos are known as video clips in the Arab world. I will be using both expressions interchangeably.

2 Gender mixing in the private sphere is forbidden from an Islamic point-of-view only when it takes place between men and women that are not mahrim to each other, that is they are not sisters and brothers or fathers and daughters and thus there is a possibility for them to develop a romantic or sexual relation that are considered haram (religiously forbidden) in Islam.

3 The Wahhabiya or Wahhabism is an Islamic movement that began in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth-century by a religious reformer named Muhammad ibn Abdal-Wahh b, who advocated the exclusive reliance on Qur'an and Sunna (the practices of the Prophet Muhammad). Today, Wahhabism is known as a zealous religious trend that strives to revive the prophetic tradition like Salafism but is more strict in its dictation of what is haram (religiously forbidden) and halal (religiously allowed) particularly in terms of gender issues, punishment laws and dress code.

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