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Queer Coding and Misrepresentation in Arab Media

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Architecture Major

Abstract

The film industry has failed at representing minorities in a neutral light. Instead, the industry continues to find creative methods through which they can ingrain patriarchal, sexist, and homophobic beliefs in their viewers. This is done through misrepresentation, under-representation, queerbaiting and more recently, an effect known as queer coding. Queer coding is when a character is given characteristics that make them appear as queer to viewers, without having to directly mention this character's queer identity. This is done through a set of actions, mannerisms, or physical traits (Greenhill, 2015). This paper will discuss how queer coding has had negative effects on the perception of the LGBTQ+ community, especially in the Arab region.

Keywords: queer coding; homophobia; queer; film; media; gender

Introduction

Historically, queer characters have been invisible in mainstream media. Their existence in fictional worlds was common, but unless they were being used for the purpose of entertaining a heterosexual audience in a humorous manner, their queerness was limited to subtle acts that were associated with their queer identity. Coupled with a societal culture in the Arab region, where homophobia and sexism are dominant parts of the social order, the misrepresentation of LGBTQ+ members in media and the film industry in particular has distorted the social perception

of this community. These inaccurate and distorted perceptions of queer people are at the foundation of a practice known as queerbaiting, which is when a film character is given characteristics that make them appear as queer to viewers, without ever directly mentioning the character's queer identity. This is achieved through a set of actions, mannerisms, behaviors, or physical traits stereotypically associated with queer people, which makes the character legible as queer even though their sexuality remains ambiguous throughout the program, show, or film (Greenhill, 2015). Queer coding was frequently used as a strategy to include LGBTQ+ characters in media without facing consequences from the state or even from religious extremists (Abdel Karim, 2020). This article aims to analyze the effects of queerbaiting and queer coding, and the misrepresentation or underrepresentation of queer characters in media, in the Arab region. The paper will do this through an intensive literature review of the topic of LGBTQ+ representation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the evolution of LGBTQ+ representation across various media platforms, and audience reception of queer characters over the years. It will also analyze the relationship between this representation and social understandings of queerness. By examining previous studies, we will see how different filmmakers have manipulated different regimes of visibility for the community and the agenda behind this representation. Building on the outcomes of the literature review, I will be discussing how queer coding has had negative effects on the perception of the LGBTQ+ community. I will argue that this misrepresentation has made being Arab and queer two mutually exclusive identities. Following this discussion, I will highlight possible policy solutions and other strategies for countering such negative media characterizations of the LGBTQ+ community.

History of Arab Media

Up until the 1970s, Egyptian cinema was synonymous with Arab cinema as it was the oldest and most prominent film industry in that region (Gaffney, 1987). In Egyptian cinema, the purpose of homoerotic and gender-queer representation in film shifted from its earlier utilization to spark social critique to its usages to depict monstrosity or mental illness. This shift took place after the Islamic shari'a was adopted as Egypt's primary source of legislation in 1971, and a strict censorship code was enforced (El Adl, 2014; Columbia Global Centers, 2019). Like the Hays Code that Hollywood studios adopted in the 1930s (Gilbert, 2013), the Egyptian censorship code created heavier surveillance of Arab media especially on issues related to sexuality and gender (Menicucci, 1998). In this context, queer coding was used to introduce queerness without the consequences that come with the direct representation and open labeling of characters as non-heterosexual (Abdel Karim, 2020). Using queer-coding, queerness was expressed through dress, behavior, or speech rather than plain-spoken description (Benshoff, 2005). For some filmmakers, queer-coding was a way for filmmakers to create loopholes for codes that restrict their artistic freedom. For others, it was a way to depict characters as villains, linking queerness to notions of evil and other negative social connotations. These practices, coupled with strict censorship laws, allowed Arab media to be very effective in reinforcing discriminatory views on these minorities.

After a while, filmmakers in the region and globally were no longer restricted by large studios as digital cinematography and distribution of film had given independent filmmakers "the opportunity to represent themselves rather than being represented" (Columbia Global

Centers, 2019). In practice, this meant that Egyptian cinema was no longer synonymous with Arab cinema. In current Arab media, queer representation has just begun to reach important milestones. Roles depicting queer characters were stagnant for the longest time, limited to sexual predators, mentally deranged characters, or feminized male characters used for comedic purposes. Today, however, members of the LGBTQ+ community have started to see media representation that is less one-dimensional. Tracking the evolution of LGBTQ+ characters in Arab media allows us to examine the political stances adopted by government and legislative authorities in the Arab region over time regarding sexual minorities and the ways that representation in media was used to both challenge and support these views.

Queer Coding and Queer Baiting

According to some sources, queer coding in Western media has become harmless. A lot of what is considered queer coding is understood as simple fan speculation about a fictional character's sexuality due to the absence of disclosure on the topic. This is not to be mistaken for queer baiting, which is when a character is made obviously queer, yet their sexuality is never confirmed. In other words, the character is written in this way to bait queer viewers (Keane, 2019). This understanding of queer coding versus queer baiting seems to ignore the serious history from which this concept originated. According to Radner and Lanser (1987), coding presumes that two types of audiences are on the receiving end, one of which is "monocultural"; the "monocultural" audience assumes that their interpretation of events is the only interpretation. In the case of sexuality in films, the "monocultural" audience is assumed to be heterosexual. The other audience, which is living in "two cultures," is the minority group that is

competent enough to decode the double message presented in the film, something that the majority group might miss. This does not mean that the decoding of these characters is meant primarily for queer audiences. What coding does assume, however, is that non-heterosexual persons are not considered part of the majority. This unfortunately contributes to the hegemonic power structure that works to marginalize sexual minorities, which is problematic for many reasons.

Whether or not the coding is consciously planned, it can enter a movie at almost any level (Greenhill, 2015). The director can be considered the most significant in terms of influence on how they wish their work to be perceived. However, queer coding can also enter at the writing stage, during the wardrobe fittings and trials, or even through acting. Therefore, even when characters are not intentionally queer coded, which they are most of the time, they can be interpreted as such when other associations with queerness are introduced to the character. These associations can appear in the form of queer-associated wardrobe or stylistic aspects that can make the character stand out from a heteronormative binary. It can also be part of the character's language or vocabulary. And at its most subtle it can be at the level of the character's storyline, which can symbolically speak to a queer audience more than it does to non-queers.

Queer Characters in Arab Media

When it comes to the gender and sexuality spectrum in the Arab region, Massad (2007) argues that "queer" and "lesbian" sexual identities are non-existent. The reason behind this is not due to their physical absence, but simply because the Arab world does not allow for the

same discourses around the topics of queerness and sexuality that the Western world does.

Georgis (2013), however, argues that these terminologies are Western-oriented and emerged in the West, a common argument in the Arab region. The problem with these “Western” terms is that they can be alienating to perceptions of queerness indigenous to the region.

Problematically, these ideas have been coopted by various anti-queer agendas, which claim that queer persons are “influenced” by the West in a negative sense. This is often reflected in the portrayal of queer film characters, who are frequently depicted as people that have been subject to Western influence and are trying to subvert public morals in the Arab world. This type of misrepresentation can be seen in movies such as *Eshaeit Hob* (A Rumor of Love, 1960) and *Al-Bahth an Fadiha* (The Search for a Scandal, 1973) where two characters, Lucy and Rico, played by Jamal Ramses and an unnamed actor, respectively, have been constructed as Western-influenced, upper-class individuals who act “un-manly” and are fans of Western artists like The Beatles or Elvis Presley. The characters were used as parts of the film’s comedy features and queerness was hinted at under a negative light, but it was never mentioned explicitly. But Georgis counters these claims and misrepresentations of queer Arabs as “Westernized” by stating that “same-sex Arab sexualities are neither homogenous nor sell-outs to Western hegemony” (2013, p. 237).

If not to make a heterosexual audience laugh, queer characters were painted as sexual offenders or deviants. In the movies *Rasha Garea* (Dare to Give, 2001) and *Romantica* (1996), the gay characters were sexual predators that assaulted the protagonist. In both films the fate of the homosexual characters ends with death, one through murder and the other because of

an “abnormal” lifestyle. In *Bedoon Raqabah* (No Supervision, 2009), movie producers faced a lawsuit after including a bisexual woman who seduces and exploits desperate younger women using her age and financial prowess.

Other portrayals come in the form of pity-inducing roles, where homosexuality is a result of childhood trauma, and the characters are presented as individuals who need help. These films follow the following logic: When characters are explicitly queer, there must be a reason for the audience to accept them, or at least to allow them to be screened. This reason is some type of childhood trauma that apparently “caused” the character to “become” queer. In *Imarat Yacoubian* (The Yacoubian Building, 2006) and *Hamam al-Malatily* (Malatily Bathhouse, 1973), both openly gay characters’ identities were a result of troubled childhoods. In this way, Arab homosexuality is “justified” for gay men. It is constructed as a consequence of various issues, including being raised in a “feminine environment” (i.e., without strong male role models), experiencing childhood neglect, and in the worst cases, experiencing childhood abuse.

Absence of Queer Women in Arab Media

The marginalization of queer Arab women is more pervasive. The intersection of their two identities, their gender and their sexuality, has led to far more underrepresentation in Arab media which in turn has led to the increasing invisibility of queer women in Arab societies (Bradbury-Rance, 2019). Intersectionality is a feminist concept that acknowledges the different oppressions facing women because of their race, their sexuality, and their gender, among other social identities (Davis, 2008). Thus, the intersectional realities of queer Arab women have resulted in queer Arab women’s double marginalization. According to some sources, lesbian

women have ironically benefited from this invisibility. Whitaker (2006) believes this invisibility allows lesbians more freedom in social interactions such as living together, which is not as feasible for gay men, at least not without raising some eyebrows. Most of the characteristics assigned to queer characters in Arab films are usually blurred between attributes associated with homosexual men or transgender women, which at some point merge into the same category for heterosexual audiences because of their limited knowledge about queer identities. As Abdel Karim's (2020) analysis shows, the representation of lesbian women in the three films that were analyzed varies from the subtle exchange of glances between two queer-coded women to a more explicitly showcased relationship between two characters.

Aside from these repetitive depictions, there was not much else that could help shape the understanding of the LGBTQ+ community in Arab media. As representation in Western media progresses, the Arab region remains static due to religious, political, social, and cultural reasons (Abdel Karim, 2020). With continuous efforts from Arab queer activists, representation has become a bit more common as cinema is used as a medium for activism. Some of the more lighthearted representations of queerness in Arab film are present in the works of Youssef Chahine, who showed LGBTQ+ characters in ways that heterosexual characters are usually portrayed. His works indirectly navigated through homoerotic love stories, without centering the characters' development around their sexuality.

Queer Misrepresentation and Sexism

Through the effeminate portrayal of gay men and the associated ridiculing of their feminine features, women have also been harmed. It is clear that homophobia has its roots in

sexism. Pharr (2002) claims that homophobia is an effective weapon for sexism. She explains this using the concept of heterosexism, which highlights the global assumption that most people are heterosexual, or that everyone should be heterosexual. This then leads to rampant homophobia, as non-heterosexual people are considered outliers, deviants, and abnormal. She goes on to explain how at puberty, boys start to taunt each other using homophobia to establish patriarchal power relations, as terms like “faggot” and “gay” strip boys of their power and rhetorically place them at the same level as women, who are conceived of as less privileged and lower than men in the hierarchy. The recurrent depiction of femininity as negative and weak, when associated with both women and queer men, reinforces the sexist views ingrained in an already heterosexist social environment. There is rarely any representation of femininity that is associated with strength, and if there is, this character is most probably being sexualized. When there is an attempt to portray women as powerful, they are usually assigned more “manly” features and associated with a masculine entourage, which is not necessarily negative until representation becomes exclusive to only this typology.

The second way heterosexism manifests in society is through the use of homophobia to control or belittle women. When women enter puberty, misogyny leads to conformity that hinders girls from reaching their full potential as they are coerced into dependency on their male counterparts for financial and physical security (Pharr, 2002). The term “lesbian” is weaponized to strip women of the “privilege” of being protected by men that heterosexual women apparently benefit from. She is a woman who has been abandoned by society as she threatens patriarchal regimes and male dominance while homosexual men, although also a

threat, are portrayed as a betrayal to the patriarchy which incites more hatred from heterosexual men.

This characterization of lesbians as abandoned women, without the protection of men, resonates clearly in Arab media. As lesbians are victims of dual bias, they are absent from almost all parts of media. They face even more obstacles trying to be part of the media production phase, where they are underrepresented as directors, writers, and production specialists. They also have little to no control over media products, their messages, and their distribution. And finally, they are very rarely the audience that these media products target. This is where the difference between them and gay men comes to light: Gay men still have the privilege that comes with being a man even though they experience the disadvantages that come with being gay.

Queerness as a Threat to Arab Culture

Queer Arabs have started to question their sense of belonging, and individuals like Aya Labanieh (2021) have taken to the internet to share their sense of estrangement from Arab culture. Among queer communities, alienation is a common sentiment; queer communities frequently bond over these feelings of alienation and their lack of acceptance. This alienation is why queer communities have become so distanced not only from their heterosexual peers, but also from their own culture. Georgis (2013) shares this sentiment with most Arab queers, stating that her acceptance of her queerness was her “adieu to Arab culture,” as Arabs refused to create space for queerness in their culture. People who belong to the LGBTQ+ community have turned to Western culture for a sense of belonging and safety, which is why we can see clearer

Western influence on queer Arabs. This is also the reason why Western influence has been a huge character trait associated with queer fictional characters: It is partially because Arab culture has marginalized and censored the queer community, forcing it to look for belonging elsewhere. Western society has made room for queer discovery and expansive queer identities that Arab discourse chooses to negate or criticize (Abdel Karim, 2020).

In relation to my personal experience, most members of the LGBTQ+ in Lebanon do relate more to Western culture than they do to their own, as they have all been stripped of the right to express both their queerness and their Arabness. They have been exposed to this mutually exclusive logic of belonging since their childhood, which has taught them that there is a choice to be made. This choice between culture or queerness generally results in one of two ways: An acceptance of queer identity that comes with the sacrifice of culture and family, or a suppression of queerness for the sake of acceptance and belonging, even if it is not genuine.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that an Arab queer cinema movement has begun to emerge, with depictions of explicitly queer characters in many Arab media products. However, there is also no doubt that we are far behind when it comes to how much non-Arab societies can offer us in terms of understanding sexuality and gender and the freedom to express both. With the simultaneous rise of several LGBTQ+ Arab filmmakers and alternative streaming and distribution platforms, it is becoming harder to censor the voices that have been muted for so long. Through the positive depictions of queer characters, these minorities can start to carve out a space for themselves in Arab culture. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 allowed Arab

creators to reach an even wider audience, as the world turned to the internet for entertainment and connection during government-enforced lockdowns. This shift has made it even easier for Arab filmmakers to reach audiences outside of their region, something that will be beneficial for queer representation in Arab films. For queer filmmakers who have already achieved these milestones and have reached spaces that non-queer individuals reign, there is a responsibility to include fellow queer creatives in the process of making and producing media. It is a big burden to be responsible for such a huge societal change, especially when it has taken this long to even begin to shift toward acceptance. However, however no one else is going to initiate this change: The LGBTQ+ community must be at the forefront of this change to ensure long-term and sustainable shifts toward acceptance are happening in and across different media platforms.

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